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Narrating Enlargement: The European Commission and the Rise of a Geopolitical Narrative in EU Enlargement Policy towards the Western Balkans

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Abstract

The European Union (EU) recently revived its enlargement policy in light of the heightened geopolitical tensions in international relations. In view of the accelerated pace of decision-making and the progress of several enlargement countries on their European path, this work asks whether something fundamental has changed in the way the EU understands enlargement policy. Drawing on the theoretical framework of ontological security theory (OST), the narratives that the European Commission uses in the field of enlargement to sustain the EU's self-understanding are examined. The findings of the narrative analysis show that the EU's traditional peace narrative has lost salience in enlargement policy towards the Western Balkans (WB) in recent years, while a geopolitical narrative has grown increasingly prominent. These results have implications for the pace, inclusivity, and character with whom enlargement is expected to unfold in the future. This work contributes to a better understanding of EU narratives by being the first to look at narratives in enlargement policy specifically and by developing a detailed conception of the geopolitical narrative.

Abstract

Die Erweiterungspolitik der Europäischen Union (EU) hat kürzlich neues Momentum erfahren vor dem Hintergrund des angespannten geopolitischen Klimas in den internationalen Beziehungen. Im Anbetracht der erhöhten Geschwindigkeit der Entscheidungsfindung und den Fortschritten zahlreicher Erweiterungsländer auf ihrem Weg zur EU-Mitgliedschaft, fragt die vorliegende Arbeit, ob sich etwas Grundsätzliches verändert hat, in der Art und Weise wie die EU ihre Erweiterungspolitik versteht. Aufbauend auf den theoretischen Konzeptionen der Ontologischen Sicherheitstheorie (OST), untersucht diese Arbeit die Narrative, welche die EU-Kommission in der Erweiterungspolitik benutzt, um das Selbstverständnis der EU zu erhalten. Die Ergebnisse der narrativen Analyse zeigen, dass das traditionelle EU-Friedens-Narrativ in der Erweiterungspolitik gegenüber dem Westbalkan (WB) in den letzten Jahren an Einfluss verloren hat zugunsten des Aufstiegs eines geopolitischen Narrativs. Diese Erkenntnisse haben Implikationen für die Geschwindigkeit, Inklusivität und den Charakter der zukünftigen EU-Erweiterungspolitik. Die vorliegende Arbeit trägt zu einem besseren Verständnis der Narrative der EU bei, indem sie als erstes die Narrative im Bereich der Erweiterungspolitik betrachtet und zudem eine detaillierte Konzeption des geopolitischen Narrativs entwickelt.

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List of Abbreviations

AA	Association Agreement
AFET	European Parliament's Committee on Foreign Affairs
AL	Republic of Albania
BiH	Bosnia and Herzegovina
CAP	Common Agricultural Policy
CEE	Central and Eastern Europe
CEI	Central European Initiative
CFSP	Common Foreign and Security Policy
COM	European Commission
CSDP	Common Security and Defence Policy
DCFTA	Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreements
EaP	Eastern Partnership
EC	European Community
ECSC	European Coal and Steel Community
EEAS	European External Action Service
EIB	European Investment Bank
ENLARG COM	Commissioner for Enlargement Policy
ENP	European Neighbourhood Policy
ESS	European Security Strategy
EU	European Union
EUFOR Althea	European Union Force Bosnia and Herzegovina
EUGS	European Union Global Strategy
EULEX	European Union Rule of Law Mission in Kosovo
EUR	Euro
FIMI	Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference
GDP	Gross Domestic Product

GFC	Global Financial Crisis
HR/VP	High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy/Vice-President of the European Commission
ICTY	International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia
IPA	Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance
IR	International Relations
LGBTI	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Intersex
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
OSCE	Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe
OSS	Ontological Security Studies
OST	Ontological Security Theory
RS	Republic of Serbia
SAA	Stabilisation and Association Agreement
SOTEU	State of the Union
TEU	Treaty of the European Union
UK	United Kingdom
UN	United Nations
US	United States
VP	Vice-President
WB	Western Balkans
WW2	Second World War

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1. Introduction

'*Europe is still a peace project*'

(Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, interview in *Die Zeit*, 2025)

'*Enlargement is our geopolitical project for Europe*'

(Commissioner for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Olivér Várhelyi, nr. 46).

2022 was the year in which the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine marked the comeback of war in Europe. 2022 was also the year in which enlargement returned to the top of the agenda of the European Union (EU). Within two weeks of the start of the Russian war of aggression, Ukraine, the Republic of Moldova, and Georgia had applied for EU membership (Anghel & Džankić, 2023). In June 2022, the European Council, acting on the European Commission's recommendation, granted candidate status to Ukraine and Moldova, while Georgia received a 'European perspective' (Anghel & Džankić, 2023; Scicluna & Auer, 2023). In July 2022, accession negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia were officially launched. Finally, in December 2022, with candidate status being granted to Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), another Western Balkans (WB) country advanced on the EU accession path. The war had not only 'put enlargement back on the table' (Scicluna & Auer, 2023, p. 45) but also led to a new 'speed of the EU's decision-making process [which] was unprecedented' (Anghel & Džankić, 2023, p. 487).

Since 2022, numerous other enlargement-related events have taken place. Ukraine and Moldova have meanwhile progressed to the accession negotiations stage, while Georgia has been named as candidate country on the understanding that a number of steps are taken. Most recently, in March 2024, the European Council has decided to follow the Commission's recommendation to open accession negotiations with BiH. EU scholars argue that 'none of these decisions would have been made in the absence of the security threat brought about by the Russia-Ukraine war' (Anghel & Džankić, 2023, p. 487). The present work takes note of these events that show that enlargement policy has regained momentum and asks whether this accelerated pace of decision-making indicates that something fundamental has changed in the way that the EU understands enlargement.

It does so by drawing on insights from ontological security theory (OST). At the core of OST is the assumption that political actors need *ontological* security alongside *physical* security to

be able to act (Subotić, 2016). Ontological security refers to 'security as being' that is knowing who one is, why one exists, and how one is supposed to act (Kinnvall & Mitzen, 2017). In short, OST argues that all political actors need a stable and consistent sense of self to develop a capacity for action (Mitzen, 2006a). One way to gain this stable sense of self is relying on narratives (Mitzen, 2018a). Narratives are 'stories that tell [political actors] why they came together, what holds them together and where they want to go' (Della Sala, 2023, p. 363). By telling political actors who they are and what their purpose is, narratives function as 'cognitive and normative maps' (Della Sala, 2018, p. 266), which support political actors to uphold a consistent 'sense of self' (Giddens, 1991).

Traditionally, the EU's sense of self was sustained by its so-called 'peace narrative'. The basic premise of the peace narrative is that the EU was born out of the ashes of the Second World War (WW2) with the purpose to overcome narrow nationalist interests that repeatedly resulted in violent conflict on the European soil (Della Sala, 2023). According to the peace narrative, the *raison d'être* of the EU was 'making war among member states unthinkable' (Mitzen, 2006a, p. 271). The EU of the peace narrative is a fundamentally value-based actor which is committed to promoting peace and liberal values through cooperation, interdependence, and multilateralism. Importantly, the peace narrative does not leave any space for geopolitics, geostrategic considerations or material power (Akchurina & Della Sala, 2018; Della Sala, 2018). Yet, the start of the Russian war of aggression also meant that precisely these aspects matter once again (Crombois, 2023). As Lehne (2020) argues, the 'new language of power, strategy, and geopolitics is jarring to many Europeans' ears because it runs counter to the EU's long-held understanding of its place in the world' with European integration having been 'conceived to overcome the legacy of power politics that had brought war and conflict to Europe'.

The context in which the present work is set then is one where 'Putin's Russia and how to relate to it raised fundamental questions that have forced the EU to examine whether the cognitive and normative cues provided by [the peace narrative] continued to be useful to understand the international order and the EU's place in it' (Della Sala, 2023, p. 368). It argues that the accelerated pace of decision-making in enlargement might hint that something fundamental has shifted in the way the EU understands this policy. More concretely, it is interested in whether the increasing at oddness of the peace narrative with the reality of the international order has given way to a new narrative in the realm of enlargement in recent years. Specifically, it expects to observe a rise of a geopolitical narrative in enlargement over the course of the last decade.

Given that the peace and a geopolitical narrative would be diametrically opposed in many aspects of understanding enlargement, the increased speed could point towards a geopolitical narrative now predominantly informing enlargement-related decision-making. That is because 'enlargement takes on quite a different character when viewed through the prism of geopolitics' (Lehne, 2020), with a geopolitical narrative's cognitive and normative maps being a potential explanation for the renewed momentum in the EU accession process.

Against this backdrop, the present work seeks to answer the following research question: *How have the narratives that the European Commission promotes in enlargement policy and their respective salience changed over the course of the last decade?*

For reasons of feasibility, the Commission is chosen as the actor within the wider set of EU institutions whose narratives in enlargement are being analysed, since the Commission has repeatedly been found to be an active narrative entrepreneur (Hakansson, 2024; Subotić, 2016). The expectation is that we will observe a rise in salience of the geopolitical narrative over time and that this increase in salience comes at the expense of the peace narrative, which is expected to grow less prominent as time goes on. In the context of the present work, salience refers to the prominence of a given narrative in relation to other narratives present in a given policy field. Thus, salience means the relative prominence of a narrative and is being assessed by examining how present and pronounced the individual characteristics of a given narrative are.

To assess how the narratives promoted by the Commission in enlargement policy have changed over time, this work relies on narrative analysis based on the model by Czarniawska (2004). Using this model, Commission documents related to the opening of accession negotiations at three distinct time periods are being analysed. This temporal narrative analysis allows for comparing how the narratives present in enlargement have evolved across time. The three periods analysed are a time before the EU entered its so-called 'polycrisis' (Della Sala, 2023), for which we expect the traditional peace narrative to still be the dominant narrative in enlargement policy (t_1). Secondly, a time after the publication of the European Union Global Strategy (EUGS) in June 2016 and the start of the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine in February 2022 is being analysed (t_2). Here, the idea is that the sentiment of the EUGS, characterised by a more sober, pragmatic outlook towards international relations (Lehne, 2020), could have also materialised in the narratives in the field of enlargement. Therefore, the expectation for t_2 is that the geopolitical narrative will be more present than in t_1 at the expense of the peace narrative, whose salience is expected to have diminished. Finally, for the third

period (t_3) we look at a time after the start of the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine. We expect the geopolitical narrative to be even more pronounced in t_3 than in the previous two periods analysed. Consequently, the peace narrative's salience is expected to have decreased further.

This work examines Commission documents such as communications, press statements or speeches related to the opening of accession negotiations with a different candidate country for each of the three periods of analysis. The reason why the opening of accession negotiations is the chosen enlargement-related event whose documents are being analysed is that for each of the three periods of analysis, there is a case of a candidate country being recommended by the Commission to enter accession negotiations. These cases are Serbia for t_1, Albania for t_2, and BiH for t_3. By opting for three times the same type of enlargement-related event (recommendation to open accession negotiations) and three countries from the same enlargement region (WB), better comparability is being ensured.

By analysing if and how the narratives of the Commission in the field of enlargement have changed over time this work contributes to overcoming the criticism that EU scholars too often consider 'the EU to be a fixed actor in the context of enlargement' (Anghel & Džankić, 2023, p. 495). Moreover, this work is one of the first (Crombois, 2017; Pastore, 2019) to define what a geopolitical narrative looks like in the case of the EU in general and in the field of enlargement specifically. In addition, this work is the first to dedicate itself entirely to analysing the narratives promoted by the EU in enlargement using OST as theoretical background, something no previous work has done. In doing so, this work contributes to a better understanding on how 'the return of armed claims over spheres of influence in Europe [has] impacted fundamental aspects of the EU foreign and security policy' (Costa & Barbé, 2023, p. 435).

Overall, the expectations of this work have been confirmed. We clearly observe the geopolitical narrative growing more salient when progressing from the Serbian documents analysed for t_1 towards the documents of BiH for t_3. While the geopolitical narrative was hardly present in t_1, it is more prominent than the EU's traditional peace narrative in t_3. Perhaps surprisingly, we also find that the peace narrative has been less present in enlargement policy than expected already in t_1. These findings are relevant because the geopolitical narrative growing dominant in enlargement policy means that the Commission is guided by a different set of cognitive and normative maps. This is not only consequential for the way the Commission narrates and

justifies its decisions in the realm of enlargement, but it also has direct consequences for the pace, openness, and character with whom accession is likely to play out in the future.

This work proceeds as follows. *Chapter 2* gives an overview on the state of literature regarding the narrative turn in EU studies in general and on EU enlargement policy in particular, whilst also assessing what is known in literature on the EU as geopolitical actor and on enlargement as geopolitical act. *Chapter 3* then introduces the basic concepts and assumptions of OST and the role that narratives play in it by offering ontological security to political actors. After having become familiar with the theoretical background that informs the present work, *Chapter 4* defines what both the peace and the geopolitical narrative look like in general and operationalises their expected characteristics when applied to enlargement policy. Moving towards the empirical side of the present work, *Chapter 5* introduces the method and data used. *Chapter 6* presents the results of the narrative analysis in detail. Finally, *Chapter 7* discusses the broader implications of the findings of this work, their contribution to the state of literature, whilst also pointing out their limitations, and concludes by suggesting directions for future research.

2. Literature Review

This chapter discusses the relevant literature for the present work. Given the fragmented nature of the literature, with no work existing to date that analyses the narratives promoted by the EU in the field of enlargement, this chapter is divided into rather standalone sections. It begins with Section 2. 1, which discusses literature related to the narrative turn in European Studies, pointing out shortcomings and open questions. Section 2. 2 presents general findings of the literature on enlargement, thereby providing important background for the present work. Finally, sections 2. 3 and 2. 4 look at the geopolitical side of the EU, by examining literature on the EU as geopolitical actor and enlargement as geopolitical act respectively. While these sections appear rather fragmented, they all inform the theoretical reflections in the next chapter and the operationalisation of the peace and the geopolitical narrative in Chapter 4.

2. 1 The Narrative Turn in European Studies

Multiple authors have noted a so-called 'narrative turn' in International Relations (IR) (Akchurina & Della Sala, 2018; Browning & Joenniemi, 2017; Cianciara, 2017; Miskimmon & O'Loughlin, 2019). This narrative turn is a spillover product of other disciplines including philosophy, psychology, and sociology, where the narrative turns already occurred in the last quarter of the 20th century (Andrews et al., 2015). The narrative turn in IR went hand in hand with a growing ontological security literature since the early 2000s, characterised by a move away from a narrow understanding of security as *physical* security towards a focus on security as *being* (Kinnvall & Mitzen, 2020; Rumelili, 2015; Subotić, 2016). In European Studies, the narrative turn is an even more recent phenomenon (Cianciara, 2017; Della Sala, 2013, 2017; Müller, 2019), despite Kinnvall et al. (2018) finding that 'ontological security is a particularly promising approach to the study of the EU' (p. 254). Manners and Murray (2016) even go so far as diagnosing a 'relative lack of narrative scholarship regarding the EU' (p. 185). Yet, their assessment merits some qualifications to be tenable. In fact, the EU's narratives have received ample scholarly attention in recent years, with many of these works, however, having concentrated on the same few policy fields.

On the one hand, Ontological Security Studies (OSS) adopting narrative analysis have concentrated on policy areas in which a 'crisis diagnosis' has recently been issued for the EU (Kinnvall et al., 2018; Mitzen, 2018a, 2018b). One such area is migration, which is frequently cited as being part of the EU's 'polycrisis' (Della Sala, 2023). In two separate works, Mitzen (2018a, 2018b) analyses how the increase of migrants at the EU's borders puts a strain on the

EU's narrative of being an open, inclusive, post-Westphalian entity. These works contribute to the ongoing debate on whether political actors adapt and change their existing narratives in times of crisis (Della Sala, 2023; Johansson-Nogués, 2018) or whether they keep them the same to provide continuity and to mitigate the unsettling effects of crisis (Subotić, 2016). The pitfall of analysing policy areas in crisis is that these studies feed into the criticism, voiced by Kinnvall and Mitzen (2020), that OSS works too often choose research subjects characterised by crisis, conflict, and instability. Hence, one could argue that this strand of research would be more appropriately named if referred to as 'ontological *in*security studies'. The risk of focusing on exceptional circumstances of crisis and conflict is that researchers might unconsciously introduce a status quo bias, in which adaptation and narrative change are seen as undesirable (Kinnvall & Mitzen, 2020). By opting for enlargement, a policy field which, in contrary to being in crisis, is regarded as having grown more important on the EU's agenda recently (Orenstein, 2023), this work contributes to the diversification of literature on EU narratives.

The second cluster, in which many of the studies using a narrative approach can be located, is EU foreign policy, whether it is foreign policy in general (Manners, 2010; Mitzen, 2006a; Niţoiu, 2013; Tonra, 2011), foreign policy towards a specific world region (Miskimmon & O'Loughlin, 2019; Müller, 2019) or neighbourhood (Cianciara, 2017; Crombois, 2017; Johansson-Nogués, 2018; Schumacher, 2015) or EU trade relations (Nessel & Verhaeghe, 2022). The common assumption of these works is that the way the EU presents and relates itself towards an *other* is deeply revealing about how the EU understands itself as an actor. This renders foreign policy a very attractive policy field to study EU narratives.

Among others, the narratives identified in these works include the 'ethical power Europe' and 'force for good' narratives (Nessel & Verhaeghe, 2022), as well as the 'promoter of peace', 'democratising force', 'good neighbourliness', 'security provider', and the 'well-being of the people' narratives (Cianciara, 2017; Niţoiu, 2013; Schumacher, 2015). Manners (2010) identifies six narratives that the EU uses when relating to third countries or the global stage, namely the 'bull myth', the 'civilian power myth', the 'gender myth', the 'normative power myth', the 'third force myth', and the 'multipolar myth'. The vast number of narratives identified does not necessarily mean that the narratives promoted by the EU in its external relations are this manifold. Rather, works applying a narrative approach to foreign policy seem to suffer from a tendency to merely list a large number of gleefully named, yet undertheorized and ill-defined narratives. For instance, many authors provide little to no detail on the method they have employed to identify narratives and on what qualifies a narrative as such (Manners,

2010; Niţoiu, 2013; Schumacher, 2015). Thus, while the number of EU foreign policy narratives may seem vast, this impression is due to duplications and sub-narratives caused by a sloppy use of theoretical conceptualisations and empirical methods.

Three works analysing the EU's foreign policy narratives are of particular value for our case of studying the EU's narratives in enlargement. Firstly, Cianciara (2017) shows how, in the context of the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), the EU successfully manages to incorporate both the pursuit of interests (stability and security) and values (democracy) into the same narrative, which guides the ENP and provides internal legitimacy to EU institutions. Assuming that the narrative of the ENP 'is produced by EU institutions and it is first and foremost reflected in the strategy papers produced by the European Commission or […] jointly by the Commission and the High Representative (and the European External Action Service - EEAS)' (p. 51), Cianciara chooses eight (joint) communications of the Commission and the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy (HR/VP) for the narrative analysis. Cianciara finds a shift within the same ENP narrative over time, with aspects related to stability, good governance, and prosperity taking centre stage between 2003 and 2010; values such as democracy and inclusion dominating during the events of the Arab Spring between 2011 and 2013; and stability and security being the main concerns from 2015 onwards, as the EU entered its era of multiple crises.

The article of Cianciara (2017) is relevant for this present work in at least three ways. On the one hand, by choosing to focus on the potential tension between interests vs. values in foreign policy, her research interest is closely related to this work's. Analysing the peace narrative, which, as we will see, is a value-driven narrative, and the geopolitical narrative, which centres around geostrategic interests instead, is equally situated at the interests vs. values crossroad. Moreover, a second similarity is the narrative analysis across time that both Cianciara and the present work conduct, which allows for identifying changes in narratives over time. Finally, the empirical material used by Cianciara is similar to what the present work uses in both quality and quantity, offering methodological validation to the research design.

A second article that has important implications for the present work is the one by Crombois (2017), in which the normative power narrative and the geopolitical narrative in the EU's Eastern Partnership (EaP) are analysed to show how these narratives increasingly contradict each other. Crombois (2017) defines the EU's normative power narrative as 'based on the assumption of a possible capacity for the EU to act as a transformative power vis-a-vis its

Eastern partners through norms expansion and legislative approximation' (p. 110) and as 'reluctance to use military power and its preference for the expansion of its norms and values' (p. 114). To avoid further narrative fragmentation, we can understand the normative power narrative as essentially the peace narrative. Viewing these two narratives as the same is further justified by Crombois (2017) writing that 'the normative power narrative is deeply embedded in the experience of EU enlargement' (p. 114). The geopolitical narrative, in turn, 'emphasises the EU interest in stressing the need to approach the Eastern partners as a buffer against a revisionist Russia' (p. 110), which 'gathered momentum in the aftermath of the Ukraine crisis of the autumn of 2013' (p. 121). The relevance of Crombois' article consists not only in the conceptual guidance it provides for the description of the peace and the geopolitical narrative, with the latter being rarely defined in European Studies, but also in the validation that it gives to the present work's research interest, namely that the emergence of a geopolitical narrative in EU enlargement policy is a reasonable expectation, that has yet to be demonstrated.

The third article focusing on narratives in foreign policy worth mentioning is the one by Akchurina and Della Sala (2018). Like Crombois (2017), their article focuses on the EaP, specifically on the narratives promoted by the EU and Russia about themselves as actors and about the territory they occupy. Referring to the EU's foundational narrative – the peace narrative – Akchurina and Della Sala characterise the EU as a value-driven actor whose values are rooted in liberal democracy. In the perspective of the EU, thus, enlargement to Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) was a 'natural development' where the 'EU was not extending its borders but promoting an idea and model' (Akchurina & Della Sala, 2018, p. 1642). The authors argue that since the EU is not prone to think in terms of spheres of influence, it views enlargement as merely an act to spread its values 'with the long-term aim of creating a new international order based on rules, not power' (p. 1642).

This self-understanding puts the EU fundamentally at odds with Russia, which gets frequently described by EU actors as a 'retrograde figure' (Akchurina & Della Sala, 2018, p. 1643), whose imperialist and revisionist ambitions make it an actor belonging to the 20th century, instead of the 21st. Akchurina and Della Sala's article offers valuable insights about the EU's relation to material power and territoriality as well as its understanding of the Eastern enlargement process. Both insights are highly relevant for conceptualising the EU's peace and geopolitical narrative in enlargement policy. Additionally, Akchurina and Della Sala's article (2018) provides the most direct link between the literature on EU narratives and enlargement. While other works sporadically mention enlargement (Cachia & DeBattista, 2023; Della Sala, 2017,

2023; Johansson-Nogués, 2018; Manners, 2010; Mitzen, 2018b; Tonra, 2011), Akchurina and Della Sala directly relate the EU's self-understanding as value-driven actor to enlargement.

Speaking about the peace narrative, several articles – most of them authored by Vincent Della Sala – look at the EU's narratives in broader terms, irrespective of the specific policy field concerned. Next to Della Sala's works (2010, 2013, 2016, 2018, 2023), Kaiser (2011, 2015), Biegoń (2013), Cachia and DeBattista (2023), and Manners and Murray (2016) study the EU's overarching narratives. Della Sala's findings offer relevant insights into the EU's peace narrative (2013, 2016, 2018, 2023), its exceptionalism (2010, 2013, 2016, 2023) and its 'united in diversity' narrative (2018). Della Sala's most recent article (2023), which explores the effect of the changed geopolitical situation since the start of the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine on the EU's self-understanding as an exceptional actor, is important for the present work. In it, Della Sala shows how the EU has previously incorporated crisis as a positive opportunity to proceed with integration into its self-conception, in what academia refers to as 'failing forward' (Jones et al., 2021). Yet, as Della Sala convincingly argues, the Ukraine war has not only created *physical* insecurity for the EU, but also *ontological* insecurity. What is at risk in the ontological sense is the EU's self-understanding as an exceptional actor who refrains from using material power. This self-understanding is increasingly at odds with a world order characterised by severe geopolitical tensions. The article is an important reference for the present work, especially for conceptualising the EU's geopolitical narrative.

Cachia and DeBattista (2023) also take the EU's multiple crises – from the war in Ukraine to United States (US) President Donald Trump's ambiguous commitment to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) – as occasion to analyse the EU's security narrative in detail. To do so, Cachia and DeBattista analyse the 'State of the Union' (SOTEU) speeches, given by the respective Commission President in the period between 2010-2021, regarding how the EU's security needs are represented. The authors find that the Commission Presidents often make use of the EU's peace narrative to justify the need for more security powers to preserve the EU's legacy. Interestingly, in her first speech as President of the self-proclaimed 'geopolitical Commission' (2019-2024), Ursula von der Leyen made little reference to the EU's security needs. Contrastingly, in 2021 her speech references a shift in the international order that demands new security powers for the EU.

By using Europe's past to justify its present needs, the peace narrative and the security narrative are being linked (Cachia & DeBattista, 2023). Rather than being contradictory narratives, more

security powers are needed precisely to protect peace. 'We can combine military and civilian, along with diplomacy and development – and we have a long history in building and protecting peace' (von der Leyen, 2021). As Cachia and DeBattista (2023) note 'the argument developed implies that if the EU is to stick to the commitments made by the founding fathers, it must develop further' (p. 714). Not only is Cachia's and DeBattista's article another instance of a narrative analysis conducted over a longer period like the present work intends to do, it also highlights the important possibility that the peace and geopolitical narrative in enlargement do not necessarily have to contradict each other, as previous articles (Akchurina & Della Sala, 2018; Della Sala, 2023) suggested. Hence, it is entirely possible that we will observe a rise of the geopolitical narrative in enlargement, but that this rise is presented in a way in which adopting a more geopolitical role is necessary for the EU to preserve its peace narrative and the values it contains.

A final, seminal article worth mentioning is the one by Manners and Murray (2016). While the article identifies several EU narratives in broad terms – from the peace narrative to the EU's economic, social, and green narratives – the work is a major pillar of this work's research interest. That is, on the one hand, because Manners and Murray deliver a detailed description of the peace narrative across time – from its beginnings after WW2 to its peak with the EU receiving the Nobel Peace Prize in 2012. Manners and Murray are also one of the first authors to predict a decline in the attraction of the peace narrative due to the EU entering its multiple crises era. Furthermore, the article is important for its conceptual insights, namely, that the narratives of any political actor are most likely manifold and that choosing which narratives to focus on is to a certain degree an arbitrary choice. While focusing on six narratives, Manners and Murray state that they 'remain aware that other past and current narratives could have been chosen' (p. 197). This is an important, reoccurring limitation of the present work as well: while the focus is on the peace and the geopolitical narrative due to the research interest, the existence of other, additional narratives in enlargement policy is not denied. Finally, Manners and Murray's article is yet another instance of a temporal narrative analysis.

In sum, the 'narrative turn' has produced ample literature about the EU's narratives. However, most of the literature is concentrated on either the EU's narratives in general terms or its narratives in a few specific policy fields, with most works focusing on foreign policy. Despite enlargement policy commonly being referred to as 'the most successful foreign policy of the European Union' (Schimmelfennig, 2008, p. 918), no article specifically analyses the narratives the EU promotes in this field. This is the gap that the present work intends to fill. While the

articles reviewed so far have offered valuable insights into the most common EU narratives – first and foremost the peace narrative – and the EU's self-understanding, the remainder of this chapter will review the literature on enlargement in general and on whether a geopolitical turn in enlargement policy and in the EU's self-understanding as an actor more broadly has been identified by scholars. Reviewing the existing literature on enlargement is crucial, since it provides important context for our research interest. By putting particular emphasis on the potential rise of a geopolitical connotation of enlargement and a potential geopolitical turn of the EU in general, important background is being provided for the expectation that a rise of a geopolitical narrative in enlargement can be observed in recent years.

2. 2 Literature on EU Enlargement

When starting to review the literature on EU enlargement policy it does not take long to notice that most works have been published after the 2004 so-called 'big bang' enlargement of the EU towards CEE, plus Cyprus and Malta. Indeed, as Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier (2002) note 'in the light of its political relevance, it is striking that EU enlargement has been a largely neglected issue' (p. 501). The authors continue by pointing out that the big EU theories like intergovernmentalism and supranationalism have almost exclusively been applied to integration issues, the so-called 'deepening' of the EU, but not to 'widening' alias enlargement. Moreover, while the number of studies focusing on enlargement has increased after the end of the Cold War and with the 2004 enlargement round, Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier (2002, pp. 501-502) still diagnose a series of weaknesses that this field suffers from including often too descriptive studies or works that focus on single cases only – either by analysing a single round of enlargement, a single member state or a single accession country – while important aspects of enlargement like the pre-accession process and the impact of enlargement on both the EU and the enlargement countries are often neglected.

Briefly skimming over the EU enlargement literature confirms that most works were indeed released after the 2004 enlargement round. As Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier (2005) point out, explanations of the Eastern enlargement can be subsumed into three categories. Liberal intergovernmentalism explains the EU's decision to grant membership to the countries of the CEE region with member states' preferences and bargaining power. Schimmelfennig (2001), for example, convincingly uses liberal intergovernmentalism to explain why certain member states were among the drivers vs. brakemen of enlargement and preferred only a limited number of selected candidate countries joining vs. a more inclusive enlargement in the accession

negotiations preceding the 2004 enlargement. According to Schimmelfennig, member states' cost-benefit calculations that shaped their preferences towards enlargement are influenced by their geographical position and by economic considerations on how additional member states will affect the EU budget as well as policies such as the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) or the structural cohesion policy. Member states that are close to candidate countries tend to be supportive of enlargement since it creates opportunities for economic gains, while mitigating the risk of crisis and conflict that would disproportionally affect them. Therefore, 'enlargement can be seen as an instrument to stabilize Central and Eastern Europe, to control the negative externalities of political and economic transformation in the East and to expand the borders of the EU zone of peace and prosperity' (Schimmelfennig, 2001, p. 50).

By also including geopolitical considerations in the factors that shaped member states' preferences towards the 2004 enlargement, Schimmelfennig's article (2001) bridges liberal intergovernmentalism with a second strand of works, which view security interests as the decisive drivers of enlargement decisions, rather than commercial or financial interests (Cirtautas & Schimmelfennig, 2010). While the works adopting a geopolitical lens on enlargement will be covered in detail below, at this stage, it is important to note that firstly, they are just one theoretical explanation for enlargement and outnumbered by the more 'traditional' liberal intergovernmentalism works. Secondly, it is crucial to know that 'no single factor explains member states' enlargement preferences' (Schimmelfennig, 2001, p. 53). This is as true for economic factors as it is for geopolitical considerations.

Finally, a third theoretical strand also has considerable relevance for the present work. Namely, ideational and constructivist explanations of enlargement which highlight how EU identity, values, and norms are constructed as part of enlargement decisions (Schimmelfennig & Cirtautas, 2010). These works share some similarities with how the EU's peace narrative understands enlargement. These similarities consist of the EU's commitment to inclusion and to supporting reforms in the CEE region during the Cold War (Fierke & Wiener, 1999), its self-proclaimed 'special responsibility' (Sedelmeier, 2000, 2005), its sense of 'kinship-based duty' (Sjursen, 2002), and the EU's self-understanding as open, inclusive, liberal-democratic community (Schimmelfennig, 2001). In his seminal article about the 'community trap' and 'rhetorical action', Schimmelfennig (2001) shows how the EU's rhetorical commitments to being a liberal-democratic community open to all European states that share its values and norms, eventually trapped the EU in pulling through with its Eastern accession to not damage its credibility and legitimacy.

'*The Central and Eastern European governments have based their claims to membership on the standard of legitimacy of the European international community: European identity and unity, liberal democracy, and multilateralism [...] They tried to demonstrate that these values and norms obliged the EU to admit them and that failing to do so would be an act of disloyalty to the ideational foundations of the European international community*' (Schimmelfennig, 2001, p. 68).

The fact that candidate countries were found repeatedly and strategically making appeals based on shared values and norms hints at the presence of the peace narrative in enlargement policy.

Another interesting aspect in this regard is the prominence of the political accession criteria within the wider set of the Copenhagen criteria. The political criteria cover with democracy, rule of law, human rights, and the respect for and protection of minorities, a set of values that are part of the fundamental values that the EU is founded upon according to Article 2 of the Treaty of the European Union (TEU) (EU, 2012). When compared to the economic and the *acquis* accession criteria, the political criteria are the most value-based ones. Interestingly, several scholars have chosen to assess the success of the EU's political conditionality specifically (Schimmelfennig, 2008; Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2004; Schimmelfennig & Scholtz, 2008, 2010; Schimmelfennig et al., 2003).

The main findings of these works are that the effectiveness of the political criteria depends on the perceived adaptation costs by the candidate countries' governments and the credibility of the membership perspective offered (Schimmelfennig, 2002; Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2004; Schimmelfennig & Scholtz, 2008, 2010); that the political criteria are applied in a consistent manner by the EU (Schimmelfennig, 2008), and that political criteria lose their influence once the EU has handed out the membership 'carrot' (Schimmelfennig, 2005; Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2004). While these findings themselves do not have major implications for this work's concern with the narratives promoted by the EU in enlargement, the fact that the political criteria have sparked the biggest research interest within the wider set of the Copenhagen criteria hints at a prevalence of this dimension of the accession criteria. And indeed, Schimmelfennig et al. (2003) refer to political criteria as the 'sine qua non political condition of EU accession' (p. 497).

2. 3 The EU as Geopolitical Actor

Before we turn to review the articles focusing on the geopolitical side of enlargement, it is worth to briefly look at articles that focus on the emergence of the EU as a geopolitical actor more generally. Such works have mushroomed since the start of the Russian war of aggression

against Ukraine. Many of these articles are concerned with assessing how the Ukraine war and the changed international environment impact the EU's power as foreign policy actor (Bialasiewicz, 2023; Blockmans, 2022; Colibășanu, 2022; Marinova, 2023). Blockmans (2022), for example, questions whether the Russian war of aggression has the potential to be a transformational moment for the EU. Building onto the idea that the EU is forged in crisis (Bergmann & Müller, 2021), Blockmans' article cites the EU's decisions to grant candidate status to Ukraine and Moldova as one hint that the EU of the future might have a more geopolitical component. Interestingly, Blockmans also indirectly refers to the peace narrative when arguing that member states' mobilising billions in lethal aid to support the Ukrainian military 'has changed perceptions about the EU, a Nobel Peace Prize laureate, forever' (Blockmans, 2022, p. 158). Blockmans further claims that former HR/VP Josep Borrell stating that the Ukraine war will be won on the battlefield is 'a far cry from the inception of the European peace project' (Blockmans, 2022, p. 158). The overall conclusion emerging from Blockmans' analysis is that 'one should […] acknowledge the growing ability of the EU to speak the language of true geopolitical power' (Blockmans, 2022, p. 157).

This finding is far from uncontested. Rather, the picture remains mixed as to whether the EU can become a genuine geopolitical player. On the one hand, Marinova (2023) sides with Blockmans (2022), by claiming that the EU is heading towards becoming a 'real geopolitical defense and security player' (Marinova, 2023, p. 128). Marinova argues that whether the EU's transformation into a genuine player on the power politics stage will be successful will depend largely on whether the EU can cease being a 'reactive actor on foreign policy matters' (p. 127), who relies on 'soft geopolitics' (p. 118) of exporting values, norms, and rules paired with trade and economic leverage, while turning into a more traditional military power. The EU's failure to recognise how Russian President Vladimir Putin thinks in classic geopolitical terms of 'interest spheres', while hoping to transform Russia through promoting liberal values, is deemed one of the biggest 'long-term failures of EU foreign policy' (Keukeleire & Delreux, 2022, p. 313). Developing into a genuine geopolitical player will also depend on whether the EU will be able to emancipate itself from NATO by putting a stop to the outsourcing of security and defence matters. Like Blockmans (2022), Marinova (2023) also refers to enlargement as one policy area which needs to be part of this geopolitical metamorphosis of the EU. While the EU has toned down its ambitions regarding the EaP following the annexation of the Crimean Peninsula in 2014 to not risk further provoking Russia (Bosse, 2022), granting candidate status to Ukraine and Moldova marked a comeback of the EU in the region. By also progressing with

enlargement in the WB, the EU takes measures towards cutting back the Russian influence there. Marinova's (2023) overall assessment is, thus, that we are currently witnessing 'the gradual transformation of the EU into a geopolitical actor, albeit in its early stages' (p. 130).

The verdict of Bialasiewicz (2023) points in the opposite direction. Recognising that the terminology of classic geopolitics has made a prominent return following the start of the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine, Bialasiewicz cautions against presenting 'Europe's geopolitical awakening' (p. 826) as only alternative to survive in the international system. 'Hearing High Representative Borrell refer to the EU repeatedly over the course of the past year as a 'sleeping beauty' that needs to 'wake up' and 'learn the language of power' also occludes Europe's longer imperial legacies' (Bialasiewicz, 2023, p. 827). By highlighting the problematic aspects that come with the EU re-imaging its place on the international stage and identity as foreign policy actor, Bialasiewicz (2023) makes an important contribution to not uncritically accept and reproduce such narratives, but rather to problematise their underlying assumptions.

Costa and Barbé (2023) are also critical of the assessment that the EU is currently turning into a more genuine geopolitical player. In contrast to Bialasiewicz (2023), however, they base their argument on empirical rather than normative grounds. The authors argue that we are currently witnessing a decline of the liberal international order, characterised by the return of thinking in terms of influence spheres, the perception of interdependence as a vulnerability, and the breach of international law prohibiting territorial conquests through the use of military force. Their argument is that through the decline of the liberal international order, the requirements for the EU to develop foreign policy actorness are moving 'into terrains that are more demanding for the EU' (Costa & Barbé, 2023, p. 431). The authors, thus, echo other findings such as the one by Bretherton and Vogler (2013), that instead of becoming a geopolitical player, the EU's foreign policy actorness is in retreat.

Costa and Barbé's (2023) argument is based on the observation that with the decline of the liberal international order and the return of power politics, the requirements for foreign policy actorness have shifted into areas where the EU traditionally has fewer competences, less capabilities or where more internal divisions exist among member states. For example, regarding security policy, Costa and Barbé argue that the requirements have shifted from crisis management towards military capabilities and territorial defence, a move that has 'wrong-footed European security policies as conceived of during the last three decades' (p. 434). The

EU's foreign policy approach so far has been concentrated on stabilising regions and less on developing defence capabilities, leading Duke (2019) to note that the 'EU has still not defined the 'D' in the CSDP' (p. 135).

The middle ground between the EU being an imminent geopolitical player (Blockmans, 2022; Marinova, 2023) and being a foreign policy actor, whose actorness is in decline (Costa & Barbé, 2023), is best covered by Colibășanu (2022). Interviewing several EU foreign policy and security experts, Colibășanu finds that the first von der Leyen Commission has strived for a more geopolitically flavoured EU since taking office. For instance, the self-proclaimed 'geopolitical Commission' with the Strategic Compass (EEAS, 2012), 'the first-ever common threats assessment between the EU27' (Blockmans, 2022, p. 159), has taken 'a meaningful step towards establishing the policymaking framework that would fall under the security and defence area of the EU – enhancing the military dimension of the Union' (Colibășanu, 2022, p. 29). Yet, Colibășanu is quick to note that 'the EU military power is currently non-existent' (p. 28), with the EU, as it stands, still heavily relying on NATO for its security provisions. This nuanced assessment on where the EU currently stands regarding its transformation into a geopolitical power is arguably the most appropriate one. Yet, the growing number of works that turn to assess the EU's geopolitical side in the aftermath of the start of the Ukraine war serves as indication that a debate on the future of the EU as foreign policy actor is underway.

Another strand of works looks at how the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine has worked as 'engine of integration' for various EU policy fields (Bosse, 2022; Crombois, 2023; Hakansson, 2024). Hakansson, for instance, shows that the Commission has successfully managed to increase its role in security policy in the light of the Ukraine war. Bosse (2022) uses a norm-based approach to explain why the EU was so quick to foster consensus on previously contested issues, such as sanction regimes or migration, following the start of the Ukraine war. Enlargement is mentioned as one policy field in which the EU unexpectedly managed to find common ground despite years of enlargement fatigue (Bosse, 2022).

Finally, Crombois (2023) assesses how the Ukraine war and the renewed impetus it gave to enlargement will impact the future of the EaP. According to Crombois (2023), the EaP served the EU to 'project itself as a new kind of power, that is, a normative power in the international relations vis-à-vis its Eastern neighbours and Russia' (p. 104). Yet, another core principle of the EaP was to function as a sort of surrogate for full-fledged EU membership by effectively closing the door on membership aspirations of the EaP countries while still granting them

access to preferential treatments in the form of Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreements (DCFTA). Crombois (2023) also notes that 'when launching the EaP in 2009, the EU did not view its relations with its six Eastern partners through a geopolitical lens but rather as a vehicle to expand its governance dynamics eastwards' (p. 104), echoing a similar finding by Akchurina and Della Sala (2018). Following the Russian annexation of the Crimean Peninsula, the geopolitical dimension of the EaP became evident. Crombois' conclusion on the future of the EaP and enlargement policy is somewhat ambiguous. While the *raison d'être* of the EaP is largely wiped out by the decision to grant candidate status to several EaP countries, the question whether Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia will ever join the EU is far from answered. In fact, Crombois (2023) regards the candidate status for Ukraine and Moldova as a decision that 'was more symbolic than anything else' (p. 107), leaning into the direction of the findings of Colibășanu (2022) and Anghel and Džankić (2023), who regard a further expansion of the EU as unlikely.

2. 4 The Geopolitical Dimension of Enlargement Policy

The final category of works presented in this chapter are those that explicitly study the geopolitical side of enlargement. Hence, the remainder of this literature review deals with the third category of works on enlargement as identified by Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier (2005), namely those that adopt a geopolitical lens on enlargement. As O'Brennan (2006) points out, academic literature on enlargement policy 'was mostly to the neglect of the geopolitical dimension of the process' (p. 155). Higashino (2004) makes a similar observation when noting that 'in essence, the literature on EU enlargement has shed light on the economic aspects of it, while the literature on European security has not seriously considered the connection with EU enlargement' (p. 348). Indeed, works highlighting the geopolitical side of enlargement can be traced back to two very specific periods. Unsurprisingly, the first period which saw several authors analysing the geopolitical aspect of widening is the 2004 'big bang' enlargement (Higashino, 2004; Hill, 2003; O'Brennan, 2006; Missiroli, 2003; Skålnes, 2005). Perhaps more unexpected and granting further justification to the idea that we might be witnessing the increasing relevance of a geopolitical narrative in enlargement, is the fact that the other works were written in the context of the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine (Anghel & Džankić, 2023; Anghel & Jones, 2023, 2024a, 2024b; Scicluna & Auer, 2023).

Christopher Hill's (2003) essay 'The geopolitical implications of enlargement' is a disturbingly accurate piece when it comes to predicting the future impact of CEE accession on EU-Russia

relations. Hill starts with the basic observation that 'enlargement, indeed, *is* foreign policy' (Hill, 2003, p. 95, emphasis in original) and that 'enlargement should be seen not simply from the perspective of resources and institutional consequences, but also from that of international relations and foreign policy' (Hill, 2003, p. 95). Since decision-making in enlargement determines which third countries get to join and which remain outside of the EU, enlargement not only influences the relation between the EU and these countries, it also influences the relation between neighbour countries admitted and left outside. Hill argues that any expansion of the EU has geopolitical implications in terms of size, resources, population proximity, and potential, with the question about the EU's future borders being 'the most important of all foreign policy implications of enlargement' (p. 97). What makes Hill's (2003) essay so intriguing are his observations that 'relations with Russia would become more sensitive and significant in direct proportion to this eastwards expansion' (p. 100). Hill already mentions how Russia may grow concerned about an EU accession of the Baltic states, yet alone about a potential EU membership for Moldova and Ukraine, which in 2003 – long before the EaP was created – was far from on the agenda. Passages like

'*The Visegrads may have coal and lignite but they lack oil and gas. This does not matter in a period of stability and free trade, but things might look very different in the event of foreign policy crises with Russia or in the Middle East. Even a rise in the price of energy for economic or ecological reasons might cause significant problems for an enlarged and more variegated EU*' (Hill, 2003, p. 106),

are an unsettlingly precise account of the foreign policy issues the EU is faced with in 2025. Hill argues that the more the EU manages to transform itself into a genuine security and defence player and the more the EU's final borders remain unclear, the more alarmed Russia will be. 'If […] the EU has acquired a significant defence capability, with or without supplanting of NATO, then we can be sure that Russia would be becoming concerned to the extreme' (p. 100). While from the perspective of 2025 the EU as genuine security and defence power is still a distant possibility that has not materialised yet, the question of the final shape of the EU's borders has certainly remained. If Hill's (2003) account that 'there will come a time when, for both internal and geopolitical reasons, the EU will have to abandon its current policy of creative ambiguity in favour of a blunt statement that 'enlargement stops here (or there)' (p. 103) is true, that time has not come yet. What is important to note in this regard, is that a link between becoming clear about the EU's final borders and a geopolitical understanding of enlargement is drawn by Hill, as I will argue the same when elaborating on the geopolitical narrative in enlargement later in Chapter 4.

Although Hill's (2003) observations have been accurate in many ways, his expectation that the EU will soon become clear on where enlargement will finally stop has not been realised yet. A second aspect on which Hill has been wrong is that the author ruled out a big bang enlargement, which sees many countries joining at the same time, precisely for geopolitical reasons. Having countries join in small groups over a time span of twenty years would in geopolitical terms 'have the advantage that the external border would change only slowly and predictably' (Hill, 2003, p. 99), giving third countries the time to adjust to the new, enlarged shape of the EU.

Missiroli (2003) backs Hill's (2003) assessment that the EU will have to soon address the question about its final borders to keep its foreign policy credible and effective. Moreover, Missiroli (2003) also agrees with Hill (2003) on the nature of enlargement, writing that 'enlargement […] has been for decades, and still is, a quintessential security policy: a security policy by other means, so to speak, and a security policy in its own right' (p. 1). According to the author, the first enlargement round, which saw the United Kingdom (UK), Ireland, and Denmark join, strengthened the transatlantic relations, while the Southern enlargement in the 1980s supported the democratic transition in the enlargement countries and reinforced the EU's presence in the Mediterranean. The 1995 enlargement in turn, with Austria, Finland, and Sweden becoming members, brought more stability to the Baltic 'rim' and strengthened the EU's cooperation sense with the United Nations (UN) and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE).

Higashino (2004) draws on insights of the Copenhagen School of security studies to show how the need for security has played a key role in the justification of enlargement decisions by EU actors. Arguing that 'the relationship between enlargement and security concerns is […] key to understanding the enlargement process' (Higashino, 2004, p. 348), the author examines 'securitising' moves made by EU actors to call for the advancement of enlargement. Similar to what the present work intends to do empirically, Higashino also chooses three periods in the build-up to the 2004 CEE enlargement to analyse which role security concerns played in each period. Starting with how enlargement was put onto the EU's agenda in the early 1990s, the author shows that it was mainly the Commission who carried out securitising moves by presenting the instabilities in the former Soviet Union and in the ex-Yugoslavian republics as threats to the European peace and security, arguing in favour of enlargement. Security arguments were again the prevailing factor when the Helsinki European Council in December 1999 decided to also open accession negotiations with Latvia, Lithuania, Slovakia, and Malta, who were excluded from the EU decision to open accession negotiations with the Czech

Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Poland, Slovenia, and Cyprus at the Luxembourg European Council two years prior. According to Higashino, security concerns related to the Kosovo conflict altered the EU's stance on enlargement with the 'second wavers'. Interestingly, she notes that 'arguably, with regard to the level of the fulfilment of the Copenhagen criteria, nothing changed substantially between 1998 and 1999' (p. 361) in the second waver countries. Rather, 'what had changed between 1998 and 1999 was […] not the level of the preparedness of the candidate countries, but the perception of the EU members of the necessity to reflect on the security aspects of enlargement' (p. 361). This has important implications for this work, since the change in the perceived security threat brought about by the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine arguably has led to the re-prioritisation of enlargement by EU leaders.

Other authors (Cecchini et al., 2001; Pridham, 2007) assume a similar stance on the prevalence of security considerations in the 2004 enlargement round. For instance, in Pridham's (2007) article we find the same argument that the decision of the Helsinki European Council in 1999 to include Bulgaria and Romania among the countries with whom accession negotiations would be opened was driven by security considerations related to the Kosovo conflict and that neither of these counties adequately fulfilled the Copenhagen criteria (Pridham, 2007; Veleva-Eftimova, 2023). Cecchini et al. (2001) show how the EU uses enlargement to mitigate the risk of having the instability in its immediate neighbourhood spilling over and causing a security threat for itself, but in doing so – especially when accepting ill-prepared candidate countries – creates internal risks for its unity.

The works of Skålnes (2005) and O'Brennan (2006) adopt a slightly more theoretical perspective on the 2004 enlargement. Both authors argue that a geopolitical perspective is the most appropriate for explaining why the EU decided to expand eastwards. Skålnes (2005) argues in favour of understanding the Eastern enlargement as 'a function of politico-military threat' (p. 214). The fact that EU decision-makers did not consider an expansion towards the East before the turbulences in the post-Soviet Union and the former Yugoslavian countries is used as case in point. Skålnes cites both the rise of protectionist pressures in the CEE region that risked these countries backtracking on reforms that brought them closer to the EU and strategic considerations related to the break-up of Yugoslavia as factors why enlargement was put onto the EU agenda in 1993. The decision of the 1999 Helsinki European Council to open accession negotiations also with the second waver countries is once again (Higashino, 2004; Pridham, 2007) seen as motivated by geopolitical reasons. Skålnes' (2005) main argument is that a geopolitical perspective is the most appropriate for explaining 'the geopolitical

considerations [which] have motivated important aspects of EC/EU policy towards Eastern Europe' (p. 230). The author goes so far as claiming that a geopolitical framework is more appropriate than the one provided by liberal intergovernmentalism or the rhetorical action approach developed by Schimmelfennig (2001). Skålnes cites other evidence for his claim that a geopolitical understanding of the CEE enlargement is most suited, namely the fact that EU and NATO enlargement went hand in hand and that foreign and defence ministers of the member states such as Kohl, Mitterrand, and Thatcher played a key role in shaping the EU's approach towards the CEE region. Like Higashino (2004), Skålnes (2005) also finds that a securitisation of enlargement took place when justifying the decisions made.

One noteworthy aspect of Skålnes' (2005) article is the link between security threat perceptions and the level of engagement that the EU seeks to establish with a third country. Contrasting EU membership with being an EU partner country in the framework of the EaP, Skålnes argues that it makes sense for the EU to strive for a deeper level of engagement, such as enlargement, with countries in its close geographical proximity which have important security implications for the EU. Following this logic, the EaP, as a more superficial engagement form, is designed for countries further removed from the EU. This is interesting when read from a 2025 perspective with the knowledge of how the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine has catapulted the EaP from being 'the burial ground of enlargement hopes' (Verdun & Chira, 2011, p. 448) to several of its members now being candidate countries. Therefore, the link between perceived security threats and seeking deeper forms of engagement holds true for the current developments and could be a potentially promising avenue for further research.

O'Brennan (2006) also argues that the 2004 Eastern enlargement is 'better understood as a specific geopolitical response to instability in CEE' (p. 168). Thus, his article sets out to examine the geopolitical implications of the EU's eastwards expansion. O'Brennan (2006) views the accession of the CEE countries as a move to expand the EU security community eastwards 'which brought into the Union eight new states in CEE, moved the EU border hundreds of miles east from berlin to Tallinn (within miles of St Petersburg), and added 80 million new citizens' (p. 158). Seen from this perspective, the Eastern expansion becomes an instrument for the EU's geopolitical advancement. O'Brennan's article is important, since it convincingly shows that the promotion of the EU's liberal norms can also be a tool for security promotion. The two threats that incentivised the EU to pursue an enlargement agenda in the East, according to O'Brennan, were the concern about rising instability in the CEE region and the fear of a deterioration in the relationship with Russia.

With the start of the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine, we are currently witnessing the second peak in enlargement-related articles that adopt a geopolitical perspective. Authors like Anghel and Jones (2024a) are clear about the fact that 'the new enthusiasm for enlargement stems from geopolitics' (p. 102) and that, hence, using a geopolitical perspective is theoretically appropriate. 'The receiving of candidate status by Ukraine and Moldova in the face of Russia's military aggression is an illustrative example of the reasonableness of this geopolitical argumentation' (Veleva-Eftimova, 2023, p. 64). Many of these recent works (Anghel & Džankić, 2023; Anghel & Jones, 2022, 2024a, 2024b; Veleva-Eftimova, 2023) draw comparisons between the current EU enlargement debates and the motives that guided the 2004 enlargement.

Anghel and Jones (2024b), writing on the twenty-year anniversary of the big bang enlargement, reflect on the lessons learned. Twenty years later the Eastern enlargement is 'widely regarded as a demonstration of the transformative power of Europe' (Anghel & Jones, 2024b, p. 3). Yet, the authors caution against a view that ignores the flexibility the EU has shown in pace and timing of the accession process, as well as in the application of membership criteria. Once again, the war in Kosovo is cited as having influenced the Commission to focus more on the strategic dimensions of enlargement, which in turn inspired a faster, and more inclusive enlargement. Moreover, Anghel and Jones (2024b) show that the EU demonstrated some leeway when it comes to the institutional reforms of candidate countries, particularly in the cases of Bulgaria and Romania. For the EU 'transformation was essential, but strategic considerations were imperative' (Anghel & Jones, 2024b, p. 3). Anghel and Jones (2024b) expect any further expansion of the EU to reflect 'the broader requirements for European security more than the transformation of the candidate countries' (p. 2).

Veleva-Eftimova (2023) takes a more detailed look at the case of the Bulgarian EU accession to show the discrepancy between the declared principles for obtaining EU membership and the lived reality, in which Bulgaria was able to join despite problems with rule of law and corruption persisting. According to the author, Bulgaria was admitted due to external threats that influenced the EU's approach towards enlargement and not because of fulfilment of the membership criteria. This has important implications also for the potential EU membership of Ukraine and Moldova, where the Copenhagen criteria might also be bypassed considering the 'huge external threat that is the Russian military invasion' (Veleva-Eftimova, 2023, p. 66), despite EU actors insisting on the 'merit-based' nature of enlargement.

A caveat is presented to the notion that enlargement policy is the EU's most successful foreign policy (Keukeleire & Delreux, 2022; Moravcsik & Vachudova, 2003; Vachudova, 2014) by Anghel and Jones (2022), who apply the 'failing forward' approach (Jones et al., 2016) to enlargement. In doing so, the authors show that instead of taking a proactive approach on expansion, the EU is deeply reactive to external events leading to enlargement outcomes that differ from the EU's and member states' original preferences. 'The principal actors in the European Union did not plan where they ended up in the enlargement story; rather, they made the best of a challenging set of influences and events' (Anghel & Jones, 2022, p. 1106). The same arguably happened after the start of the Russian aggression against Ukraine, when Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia swiftly applied to join the EU, despite membership aspirations for these EaP countries having been decisively off the cards (Verdun & Chira, 2011).

To end with the two most crucial articles for the present work, they are authored by Scicluna and Auer (2023) and by Anghel and Džankić (2023). Scicluna and Auer (2023) use Hill's (1993) concept of the 'capability-expectations gap' to demonstrate how 'the EU continues to over-promise and under-deliver' (p. 46) in the realm of enlargement and how this in turn affects the EU's credibility as foreign policy actor. Starting from the premise that 'Ukraine's 'European perspective', were it not for the war, […] would not have happened at all' (Scicluna & Auer, 2023, p. 45), the authors call EU actors out for increasing the membership hopes of candidate countries in a time where the EU's foreign policy actorness is lowered by external events (Costa & Barbé, 2023). Scicluna and Auer take issue with the EU's continuous 'constructive ambiguity' about its final borders, already criticised by Hill (2003) and Missiroli (2003) at the beginning of this century. By not becoming clear on where its final borders lay, and whether they will include Ukraine or not, the EU, in the opinion of Scicluna and Auer (2023), has re-affirmed Ukraine's status as 'in-between' nation. The EU's soft power was enough to trigger Ukraine's Maidan Revolution in 2014, while the EU's hard power was way too insignificant to protect the country's territorial integrity from Russia's imperialist ambitions. Therefore, Scicluna and Auer (2023) conclude that 'Europe's 'constructive ambiguity' in this area has proved destructive' and that 'a 'geopolitical' EU need not be a polity that supplies fighter jets to Ukraine, but it ought to be one that has clearly defined borders and a clear timeline for bringing current outsiders in' (p. 46).

Lastly, Anghel and Džankić (2023) deliver the article which provides perhaps the biggest piece of guidance for the present work. They agree with Scicluna and Auer (2023) that the recent revival of enlargement policy would have been unimaginable 'in the absence of the security

threat brought about by the Russia-Ukraine war' whilst understanding enlargement as 'part of the EU's risk management toolbox to maintain its security by stabilizing its Eastern borders' (Anghel & Džankić, 2023, p. 487). Presenting enlargement as stabilisation and security-building tool, the authors compare the membership ambitions of the new Eastern candidate countries with those of the WB countries, who have been in the waiting room of EU membership for over two decades. Their main argument is that EU enlargement policy has evolved since the 1990s to serve goals other than full membership and that geopolitical considerations play an important role in this evolution.

While viewing enlargement not as a predestined road for EU membership might initially appear counter-intuitive, understanding enlargement as stabilisation and security-building tool offers striking parallels between the EU making a U-turn in the 1990s by pursuing a fast, inclusive eastwards expansion and its reaction to Russian war of aggression against Ukraine. Granting candidate status to Ukraine and Moldova becomes a political symbol, while the accession negotiations that follow are characterised by a technical, bureaucratic logic with an unclear outcome. Anghel and Džankić (2023) argue that EU membership is a more uncertain outcome for both the WB and the EaP countries than it was for the CEE countries due to their respective situations and a hesitance of the EU to further enlarge despite rhetorical commitments. 'The EU is using the promise of membership as a peacebuilding and stabilization mechanism without a clear strategy or timeline. Hence, the promise of EU membership is disconnected from the viability of membership' (Anghel & Džankić, 2023, p. 497).

The EU's history of 'failing forward' in enlargement policy and landing somewhere else than originally intended (Anghel & Jones, 2022) and rhetorical commitments having the potential to pressure the EU into action by negatively impacting its credibility (Schimmelfennig, 2001), make it hard to predict where the final destination for the current candidate countries will be indeed. What we can assess, however, and what this work sets out to do, is analyse how the current push for a further expansion of the EU is being justified by EU actors. The insights from this literature review are the necessary backbone for identifying the peace and the geopolitical narrative in enlargement. Particularly, I will draw on these works when developing the expected characteristics of these narratives in the field of enlargement in Chapter 4. Before doing so, we will need to take a closer look at the theoretical foundations that guide the present work, namely OST and the role of narratives in it. Both will be dealt with in the next theoretical chapter in detail.

3. Theoretical Background - Ontological Security Theory

This work draws on insights from OST to analyse how the narratives promoted by the EU in enlargement policy have changed over time. As narratives are an integral part of OST, choosing OST as the theoretical backbone of this work is only consequential. OST has been developed in the 1960s against the backdrop of the realist dominance in IR. For realists, security meant exclusively *physical* security. OST puts its emphasis on a different variant of security, namely *ontological* security. 'The notion of ontological security challenges the exclusive association that conventional theories of IR make between security and survival, physical threat and defence' (Rumelili, 2015, p. 56). Instead, OST focuses on ontological security which can be best understood as 'security as being', that is the confidence of a given political actor in knowing who they are, why they came into being and how they are ought to act (Kinnvall & Mitzen, 2017). OST assumes that all social actors need a stable sense of self to develop capacity for action, set their objectives, and make choices (Mitzen, 2006a). Works in IR that apply OST are referred to as Ontological Security Studies (OSS). Importantly, OSS do not deny that states and other types of political entities have a need for physical security. Rather, OSS scholars argue that an additional need for a stable sense of self exists, which allows states and other types of political entities to position themselves on the international stage and act accordingly.

Before taking a closer look at the conceptual foundations of OST, it is worth mentioning that much of the OSS literature focuses on states. Seemingly, while OSS were developed in contrast to the narrow focus of realists on *physical* security, the state-centric perspective of realism also entered OSS. Therefore, much of the literature cited below will refer to states' need for a stable sense of self. Newer works, especially those emerging from the field of European Studies, recognise that not only states, but also other types of political entities, including the EU, will experience a need for ontological security. Hence, one should not be irritated by the use of the word 'state' in some quotes, while this work will refer to 'political entities' and their need for ontological security. With that in mind, the core assumptions of OST will be introduced, starting out at the individual level for which the concept was first developed before having been transferred to political actors. This chapter will then provide an overview of the main debates and shortcomings in OSS literature, before moving on to the main methods through which political entities can develop ontological security for themselves. Here, the focus will be almost exclusively on narratives, since they are at the heart of the research interest of this work.

3. 1 Conceptual Roots of OST: The Individual Level

Ontological security is a more than sixty years old concept with roots in disciplines such as psychoanalysis, literature, sociology, and political psychology (Delehanty & Steele, 2009; Kinnvall et al., 2018). While in the 1960s and 1970s ontological security was mainly studied in the fields of literature and psychoanalysis, the author that singlehandedly shaped OSS the most is sociologist Anthony Giddens. Giddens developed the concept of ontological security at the individual level through a series of books in the 1990s, most notably in 'The Consequences of Modernity' (1990) and 'Modernity and Self-Identity' (1991). For Giddens, ontological security 'refers to the confidence that most human beings have in the continuity of their self-identity and in the constancy of the surrounding social and material environments of action' (1990, p. 92). Simply put, Giddens believes that humans need to have a stable sense of who they are to be able to act. Only if humans experience themselves as whole, continuous beings they can make choices and act. If one's sense of self is constantly changing, having to choose from multiple options on how to act would lead to a gripping feeling of paralysation, undermining one's capacity for action. Therefore, 'agency requires a stable cognitive environment. Where an actor has no idea what to expect, she cannot systematically relate ends to means, and it becomes unclear how to pursue her ends' (Mitzen, 2006b, p. 342).

This gripping sensation of paralysation, commonly referred to by OSS literature as ontological anxiety or insecurity, is the opposite of ontological security. Where ontological security is absent or disturbed, ontological anxiety takes over. Anxiety is, thus, an equally fundamental concept in OST. While humans strive for a stable sense of self, ontological security can never be fully and permanently achieved. 'There is no perfect state of ontological security – anxiety always threatens to break through' (Kinnvall & Mitzen, 2020, p. 246). Hence, one could go as far as to suggest that not obtaining ontological security but 'managing existential anxiety is at the heart of ontological security-seeking' (Kinnvall & Mitzen, 2020, p. 245). Mitzen (2018b) elaborates further that all 'ontological security theorizing begins with the premise that human capacity for agency rests on response to existential anxiety, which leaves us vulnerable to a deep incapacitating fear of not knowing who we are or how to get by' (p. 1375). Therefore, while ontological security or the state in which the individual 'experiences a stable, certain, and consistent social existence' (Rumelili, 2015, p. 58) remains the goal, ontological security-seeking might be better captured as constant battle to avoid ontological insecurity. Given that an individual's sense of self is always a product in the making and a never a settled end state, ontological security-seeking is fundamentally about how to best avoid anxiety in daily life

(Browning & Joenniemi, 2017; Mitzen, 2018a). While the main methods to develop ontological security will be further expanded on below, it is important to note that while developing ontological security is an ongoing project, it is a subconscious one. Giddens (1990) uses the notion of 'basic trust' to account for the fact that humans will rarely think actively and intentionally about their need to achieve ontological security. Rather, they will feel this so-called basic trust in the stability and continuity of their social and material surroundings so that the need for ontological security is nothing that plays out consciously on their minds. As Mitzen (2018a) puts it 'ontological security is about strategies of avoiding anxiety, or holding it out of mind so we can go on with our daily lives' (p. 396).

3. 2 OST: Applied to the International Level

Taken together, the basic premise of Giddens (1990, 1991) is that humans need ontological security, that is a secure and stable feeling for who they are, to be able to act. Since ontological security is never fully secured, it is a constant quest to strive for it. This is the starting point for OSS scholars in IR, who take the conceptual offerings of Giddens and apply them to states and other types of political entities at the international level. As mentioned, this conceptual transfer occurred at a time when IR was dominated by realism, which meant that while security concerns were ubiquitous, the understanding of security was narrowed down to mean *physical* security. By introducing the concept of ontological security to IR, OSS scholars, thus, intended to broaden the understanding of security to show that political actors do not only need physical but also ontological security. Interestingly, Giddens himself already developed the concept of ontological security or 'security as being' in close contrast to 'security as body' or physical security. This dichotomy between 'being' and 'body' proved to be the ideal foundation to widen the security concept in IR by pushing back against the dominant realist understanding. The original dichotomy can still be found in some definitions of ontological security, for example when Mitzen (2006b) defines it as 'security not of the body but of the self, the subjective sense of who one is, which enables and motivates action and choice' (p. 344).

The intention of OSS scholars was never to deny or to downplay the importance of physical and material aspects of security. Rather, they aim to show that political entities are equally in need of maintaining other types of security, such as ontological security. OSS expect political entities to 'care as much about their ontological security, the security of a consistent self, as about material, physical security' (Subotić, 2016, p. 613). Therefore, ontological security should be seen as an additional need for political entities alongside its physical counterpart

(Della Sala, 2017). 'The premise is that states and other political actors seek to promote not only material and strategic interests but also some form of self-identity in their interactions with other actors in the international arena' (Della Sala, 2017, p. 548).

OSS assume that political entities are social actors and that they, just like individuals, strive for ontological security (Rumelili, 2015). But how do OSS scholars justify the transfer of the concept, developed by Giddens for the individual level, to political entities at the international level? In her seminal article (2006b), Mitzen makes a convincing case. Firstly, Mitzen points out that the common assumption of realism that political entities seek physical security is equally a transfer from the individual level since 'physical security-seeking assumes that states have something like 'bodies' that can die' (Mitzen, 2006b, p. 351). Mitzen then proceeds to justify the assumption that political entities need ontological security by starting out with the ontological security needs of individuals, as developed by Giddens (1990, 1991). Since individuals care about maintaining their sense of selves and given that these senses of selves most often will not exist in isolation but will be connected to collective self-understandings of groups, political entities can be perceived as a larger form of a collective sense of self. 'Grounding group needs for ontological security in individual needs in this way suggests that […] states project self-images to which their members will be attached' (Mitzen, 2006b, p. 352). Following this logic of argumentation, it is justified to view political entities as 'self-aware beings that like individuals are concerned with upkeeping a consistent notion of self to enhance their ontological security' (Kinnvall & Mitzen, 2017, p. 6).

Applying OST in IR has grown increasingly popular since the 2000s and especially in the recent decade. Della Sala (2018) as well as Kinnvall and Mitzen (2020) connect the upsurge in IR research that uses OST in recent years to the manifold crises that have occurred on the international level since – from the Global Financial Crisis (GFC), to the Russian annexation of the Crimea, and Brexit, to which one could add the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine and the most recent crisis in the Middle East. Each event induces significant anxiety into the international system and makes the questions, *who* a political entity is, and, therefore, *how* it is ought to (re-)act more pressing. In these moments of crippling anxiety and international insecurity there is a 'need for political and social actors to affirm and confirm who they are and why they exist as political community' (Akchurina & Della Sala, 2018, p. 1638). At times, this need for ontological security might even be so urgent that political entities will be willing to sacrifice parts of their physical security for it (Subotić, 2016). Arguments, like the one by Mitzen (2006b), who shows that in long-lasting conflicts, that have become deeply

engraved in a political entity's self-understanding, the need to maintain this self-understanding can function as incentive to continue the conflict and, thus, to compromise physical security; demonstrate why an ontological security perspective contributes to the explanatory potential in IR. While a conventional, realist understanding of IR with its focus on physical security-seeking would label such a decision to as irrational, the merit of OSS consists in explaining why continuing a conflict to maintain a consistent sense of self can be perfectly rational.

3. 3 Ongoing Debates in OST and Shortcomings

Considering both the explanatory power and the fact that the international system has grown more instable in recent years, thus, offering many research subjects, it is no surprise that in recent years 'IR research on ontological security in world politics has mushroomed' (Kinnvall & Mitzen, 2020, p. 241). Given the number of works using OST in IR published by various authors recently, it is also not surprising that some variation exists in how the ontological security concept is being understood. The two biggest debates that have emerged in the field centre around the questions of whether a political entity develops its sense of self autonomously or in relation to others and, secondly, on how fixed this sense of self is once developed.

Starting with the question whether political entities construct their sense of self in relation to others, two main positions exist, which are commonly referred to as the Steele vs. Mitzen debate. On the one side, Brent Steele (2005, 2008) is the main representative of the so-called 'reflexive', 'intra-group' or 'endogenous' approach (Kinnvall et al., 2018), which argues that political entities develop their senses of self primarily on their own in an inward-looking process without the need for another political entity to relate to and differ from. According to Steele, the sense of self is predominantly established by coming up with stories about oneself that 'are essentially reflexive, that is, rooted within the social collective and based on selected group experience and aspirations' (Johansson-Nogués, 2018, p. 530). While this understanding of ontological security does not deny that social actors interact and enter specific relations with one another, it argues that these are not necessary for political entities to develop their sense of self. Rather, political entities construct their self-understanding by sorting their collective experiences and aspirations into structures of meaning that allow for biographical continuity without referring to outside events or other actors (Steele, 2008). If anything, outside events and relations with others are experienced through the pre-established sense of self of a political entity. Simply put, 'reflexive arguments look how a political community generates a sense of

self by looking inwards, to its past, to guide its behaviour and future' (Akchurina & Della Sala, 2018, p. 1639).

In contrast, 'relational', 'inter-group' or 'exogeneous' stances believe that political entities develop their sense of self in close connection with other political entities. Most known for promoting a relational understanding of ontological security is Jennifer Mitzen. Mitzen argues that the sense of self of a political entity is 'constituted and sustained by social relationships rather than being intrinsic properties of the states themselves' (Mitzen, 2006b, p. 354). What follows from this understanding is that a political entity's sense of self is primarily conceived as relational, being 'the result of reiterative processes of interaction and performative practices with significant others' (Johansson-Nogués, 2018, p. 530). The relational understanding, hence, puts more emphasis on the social dimension of ontological security, recognising that political entities do not exist in isolation. Moreover, the relational understanding highlights Giddens' conception of ontological security-seeking as an ongoing process which includes 'having a consistent sense of self and having that sense affirmed by others' (Zarakol, 2010, p. 6).

In the relational understanding, political entities play 'recognition games' with one another by seeking to get their self-understanding re-affirmed by others (Della Sala, 2018; Ringmar, 2002). Notably, in this understanding, ontological security is situated much closer to practices of 'othering' (Diez, 2004). While ontological security and othering are two theoretically distinct concepts, in its relational variant OST shares with the theory of othering the assumption that political entities need to have their sense of self affirmed and confirmed by others. It renders the dichotomy between self vs. other more prominent, since the self-understanding of a political entity is thought to be constructed on what sets the given political entities apart from other(s) and makes it special (Rumelili, 2015). While the present work remains firmly grounded in OST, the conceptional linkages and complementarity to processes of 'othering' should be noted. Furthermore, this work is not concerned with making a case for which of the two conceptions of ontological security, reflexive or relational, is better. As with most subjects in social science, this is ultimately not a question of better or worse, but of appropriateness for a given research subject. Thus, while not addressing the Steele vs. Mitzen debate directly, this work recognises that a political entity's sense of self can be both – to varying degrees – reflexive *and* relational.

A second debate which has emerged among OSS scholars concerns the fixedness of the sense of self once developed. To some degree this debate is tautological: the purpose of ontological security is precisely providing social actors with a *stable, continuous* sense of self (Kinnvall &

Mitzen, 2020). As Mitzen (2006a) writes, political entities 'seek to secure their identity as a particular kind of actor. The assumption that states seek ontological security suggests a cognitive-affective source of resistance to identity change in world politics' (p. 272). This 'resistance' implies that at least to some degree the sense of self must be something fixed, otherwise the entire concept of ontological security would be obsolete.

However, this has led to the criticism that OSS suffer from a 'status quo bias' (Kinnvall & Mitzen, 2020, p. 241). This criticism is formulated most explicitly by Browning and Joenniemi (2017), who find that OSS have leaned 'too much towards identity-related stability' (p. 32). According to Browning and Joenniemi, the emphasis that OSS put on the importance of maintaining a stable and secure self-understanding has led to change having a negative connotation, with change being seen threatening and harmful. Consequently, the authors criticise that ontological security so far has been employed in a restricted context 'that narrows its focus in IR to questions of the preservation of extent identities' (Browning & Joenniemi, 2017, p. 32) instead of embracing and accounting for change. Mitzen (2018a) partly incorporates the criticism that OSS focus too much on 'being' alias the status quo, when arguing that 'ontological security is never merely about 'being' secure; it is fundamentally an approach through which we can better understand the coexistence of our need to both 'be' and 'become' […] during the course of our lives our sense of self grows and changes' (p. 398). By introducing the notion of 'becoming', Mitzen (2018a) manages to reunite the assumption that political entities need a continuous sense of self, while not denying that this self-understanding might evolve over time to dynamically 'become' another version of itself.

The present work contributes to overcoming the lack of OSS scholarship that focuses on policy change (Subotić, 2016). By choosing enlargement as research subject, a field is being analysed in which much has changed since the start of the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine. Indeed, this work assumes that if the accelerated speed of decision-making and the increased number of candidate countries are anything to go by, something profound has changed in the way that the EU understands itself as an actor in enlargement. Hence, this work can be regarded as a piece of OSS scholarship that focuses on and embraces change. In doing so, however, it does reproduce a second fault identified by Browning and Joenniemi (2017), namely, that the bulk of works of OSS focuses on cases where a political entity's sense of self might be disrupted or at risk. Nevertheless, this choice can be justified by providing two reasons. Firstly, Browning and Joenniemi (2017) criticise that OSS do not sufficiently concentrate on change, while paying too much attention to situations where a social actor's sense of self might have become

disrupted is somewhat inconsistent. That is because the anxiety that political entities experience in such moments of disruption is precisely what holds potential for change (Mitzen, 2018a). Hence, secondly, the choice made by many OSS scholars to focus on moments of uncertainty, in which the once stable 'sense of self' might be disrupted and no longer functions, is rooted in the desire to analyse change. The emancipatory potential of anxiety renders those moments of 'identity crisis' of political entities some of the most promising research subjects for OSS. These are the moments of cosmic birth so to say, when the old might give way to something new. The problem, then, is, not so much the overrepresentation in literature of cases in which an actor's sense of self is disrupted, as Browning and Joenniemi (2017) suggest. Instead, it would be problematic to claim that these moments of identity crisis are the norm and not the exception. But by stating clearly that by focusing on situations where a political entity's sense of self is disrupted, we are focusing on the exception, that is made interesting precisely because it is exceptional and might produce change, no fault is being committed.

3. 4 How Political Actors Produce Ontological Security

So far, this chapter has focused on the conceptual foundations of OST, the main debates in the field, and the shortcomings of OSS literature. What has not been addressed yet is how social actors establish a sense for who they are. Considering that ontological security is a variant of security just like physical security is, one should be cautious to assume that there will be a simple, overarching mechanism political entities use to provide themselves with a stable self-understanding. After all, the question 'what makes a political entity physically secure?' does not invite monosyllabic, one-dimensional answers either. OSS literature provides two main methods to achieve ontological security: routines and narratives (Mitzen, 2018a). Both methods were outlined by Giddens in his works for the individual level and later transferred by OSS scholars to the international one. Given that at the heart of the present work is the concept of narratives and its relation to the self-understanding of the EU in the field of enlargement across time, the remainder of this chapter will deal with narratives in the required depth. However, for reasons of completeness, I will beforehand briefly introduce the idea how routines help actors produce ontological security for themselves.

3. 5 Routines

Giddens (1991) argues that one way for social actors to develop ontological security is routinising their everyday life and everyday interactions. Since humans possess limited cognitive resources, they are unable to always deal with all questions of everyday life

simultaneously. Nevertheless, they need to know how to (re-)act when confronted with different stimuli. This is where routines come into play which can be defined as 'internally programmed cognitive and behavioural responses to information and stimuli' (Mitzen, 2006b, pp. 346-347). Through routinising their response to the same type of stimulus, individuals can (re-)act swiftly, without having to spend cognitive resources on figuring out who they are, and, hence, how they ought to respond. By responding in the same way to the same type of stimuli, social actors remain consistent in their actions. Thus, routines are habitual responses that occur automatically once triggered by a specific stimulus (Mitzen, 2006a). In their entirety, routines allow actors to navigate the sheer number of uncertainties with whom they are being confronted each day, without occupying many cognitive resources. Routines allow social actors to focus their cognitive resources on those stimuli that truly require attention, by making the dealing with others a habit. 'By systematically removing some questions from the table, routines help us to bring our threat environment under cognitive control' (Mitzen, 2006a, p. 273).

Applied to the international level, then, political entities also engage in routinised actions. Such a routine action, for example, is that most political entities will respect the international law despite leadership or regime changes (Mitzen, 2006b). Respecting international law has become a routine for most political entities and is not being questioned every day. Moreover, political entities frequently routinise their foreign policy relations with one another to re-produce their self-understanding (Delehanty & Steele, 2009). Importantly, while routinised behaviour happens automatically without overthinking, this does not mean that routines are established in a coincidental manner. As Delehanty and Steele (2009) argue, actors might not be aware of the reason why they carry out a certain action in a certain way, but an implicit reason, that ensures that this routinised behaviour is consistent with the actor's sense of self, will exist. Hence, routinised actions are still purposeful and can be accounted for 'in ways that are meaningful for the individual agent' (Delehanty & Steele, 2009, p. 525).

Routinising their everyday interaction with and relation to other actors is, thus, one way for political entities to produce ontological security about who they are. A second method, on which the present work focuses on, are narratives, to whom the rest of this chapter dedicated.

3. 6 Narratives

Narratives are another mean for social actors to achieve ontological security (Mitzen, 2018a). Once again, the OST scholarship starts from the individual level where narratives can be defined as 'the stories we tell about ourselves, especially stories of belonging to something

larger and more enduring, to communities and groups, whether national, religious, social or political' (Mitzen, 2018a, p. 396). These stories serve to anchor the individual in a broader community with a broader reason for existence that can act as guiding force, and like routines, mitigate existential anxiety. 'Narratives are the stories people construct to make sense of their reality. Narratives help us understand who we are, where we come from, and the implications for our current lives' (Andrews et al., 2015, p. 141). By telling social actors what their identity, place, and purpose in the world is, narratives are providers of ontological security. Functioning as a 'cognitive and normative map' (Della Sala, 2023, p. 363), they guide social actors on how they should act and which considerations and values they should follow in their actions. Analogous to routines, narratives have the potential to simplify the everyday life of social actors, by lowering their cognitive burden. Instead of having to constantly question oneself about who one is and why, narratives offer a simple storyline that delivers certainty. On a technical level, then, a narrative is nothing else than a 'spoken or written text giving an account of an event/action or series of events/actions, chronologically connected' (Czarniawska, 2004, p. 17). By sequencing events and actions, ordering them, and filling them with meaning, narratives ultimately help social actors to develop and maintain ontological security.

Like the concept of ontological security, narratives can be transferred to the international level. On the international level, narratives can be defined as 'means for political actors to construct a shared meaning of the past, present and future of international politics' (Miskimmon et al., 2014, p. 2). The term 'means' indicates that, again, narratives fulfil a purpose for political entities. First and foremost, the overarching purpose is providing them with *ontological security*, that is a secure sense for who they are, what their purpose in the international arena is, and why. Often, political entities will possess so-called 'foundational narratives' which tell a story about why a political community has chosen to come together (Della Sala, 2017). As Della Sala (2016) writes 'all nations have to be invented and narration plays an important role in this process' (p. 526). Narratives 'define and give meaning to a political community, helping to define who, more than what, it is' (Della Sala, 2017, p. 546). Therefore, through narratives the sense of self of a political entity can be established and maintained (Subotić, 2016).

3. 6. 1 Purpose of Narratives

Next to the overarching purpose of providing ontological security, a few more specialised functions of narratives can be identified. Firstly, narratives frequently *establish boundaries and borders* around those who are an integral part of a given political entity and those who are not

(Kinnvall et al., 2018). Narratives do not only weave a story about a political entity, they also often differentiate between who is part of the political entity and who is not. Between those that are being presented as being part of the political community, narratives can evoke sentiments of familiarity and solidarity (Subotić, 2016). For those who are excluded from the political community, claims of solidarity are being undermined.

Secondly, by providing political entities with their *raison d'être*, narratives are also *legitimacy claims*. The foundational narrative of a nation-state, for example, will tell its citizens why the nation-state was founded, why the institutional architecture, and power distribution are as they are, why a specific set of laws is needed and so on (Della Sala, 2018). Narratives are, thirdly, also helpful for political entities since they put actions and events into a *logical, understandable sequence.* By logically and temporally sequencing a series of actions and events, they become understandable, familiar, and relatable (Della Sala, 2017). This helps not only the members of a political entity in relating to it, but it also supports political entities themselves in interpreting and understanding their environment better, benefitting future decision-making processes. Finally, narratives give political entities *guidance on who they ought to be.* Narratives create expectations, interests, and opportunities for action (Subotić, 2016). As Berenskoetter (2014) argues, narratives of political entities will often not only be backward-looking (providing a founding reason) but will also contain a future-oriented element. Hence, the historical self will be intertwined with the promise of a future self, setting a vision for what the future of a political entity ought to look like.

Having learned which purpose narratives fulfil for political entities, we can now ask why analysing narratives is a worthwhile activity for IR scholarship. By studying narratives, scholars can develop an understanding for how political entities perceive the world around them, their purpose in it, and the way they think they should behave and act (Kinnvall et al., 2018). Analysing narratives, thus, helps OSS scholars capture the intentions of political entities in their socio-historical situatedness and in their attached meaning.

3. 6. 2 The Plurality of Narratives

The next question we must address is what makes a particular narrative successful so that it can survive the test of time and continue to provide political entities with ontological security. Here, we first need to reject the assumption that political entities will only have a single, overarching narrative at a given time. Rather, there will always be a plurality of narratives that co-exist. What changes over time is their respective salience, as a different narrative can grow

dominant as time progresses, while new narratives emerge, and older ones that no longer fit the socio-historical context may vanish. This plurality of narratives has long been overlooked in OSS, earning the field the criticism that it risks homogenising political entities by not paying enough attention to competing narratives that exist (Delehanty & Steele, 2009; Subotić, 2016).

More recently, consensus has emerged among OSS scholars that 'narratives come in varieties of form and depth and breadth of salience' (Subotić, 2016, p. 615). No narrative exists in isolation, all narratives of a given political entity exist in relation to one another. Andrews, Kinnvall, and Monroe (2015) follow Somers (1995) and refer to this plurality of narratives as 'narrative network'. Narratives should not be studied in isolation 'but must be viewed in intersubjective terms as related historical, conceptual, and cultural understandings of particular events and concepts' (Andrews et al., 2015, p. 142). Manners and Murray (2016) use the term 'polyphony' to describe the circumstance that many narratives will provide ontological security to a given political entity simultaneously. 'Polyphony' is a Greek term that signifies 'plurality of voices' and is commonly used in music theory. However, given the roots of storytelling as initially oral tales told around bonfires in the early days of humanity, it is a fitting term to capture narrative co-existence and competition also in OSS.

While the concept of polyphony might misleadingly suggest that the various co-existing narratives will be equally salient at a given time, the term 'master narrative' (Berenskoetter, 2014; Subotić, 2016) emphasises the fact that their salience will vary. Berenskoetter (2014) defines a master narrative as the one narrative that 'guides and legitimizes courses of action and provides ontological security' (p. 278). However, he continues by acknowledging that 'not all action is guided, or made meaningful, by one single narrative' (Berenskoetter, 2014, p. 278). Therefore, we can picture the master narrative as the one narrative that provides the strongest pillar to the ontological security of a political entity at a given time. Other, co-existing narratives will contribute by providing additional pillars on which the political entity's ontological security can rely on. Berenskoetter (2014) calls these other, co-existing narratives 'derivative narratives' (p. 278). A master narrative must be sufficiently vague to allow for these derivative narratives, which often will be more specific in character, to exist. Importantly, the master and the derivative narratives 'can be either layered or interwoven' (Berenskoetter, 2014, p. 278), so that they can reinforce each other without hurting the overall narrative coherence.

Manners and Murray (2016) point out a second possibility, namely, that the master narrative can also be undermined by one or several derivative narratives if their content contradicts the

one of the master narrative. While the master narrative always remains open to contestation and can be replaced by another narrative at any given time, the master narrative does become hegemonic by being the 'rhetorical commonplace' (Jackson, 2003). By being the rhetorical commonplace, the master narrative does have the power to stop other alternative narratives from making sense. 'Alternative narratives stop making sense; they do not sound coherent and are not compelling' (Subotić, 2016, p. 615). Master narratives, thus, can create 'lock-in effects' (Goddard, 2010) by making other derivative narratives lack credibility or sound incoherent. Consequently, while the replacement of an existent master narrative by another narrative is always a possibility, in practice, because of these lock-in effects, replacements of the master narrative will rarely occur with the master narrative being relatively stable across time.

Finally, one may argue that the fact that various derivative narratives manage to exist alongside the master narrative may be a source of ontological insecurity for political entities. While co-existing, contradicting narratives that undermine the credibility and coherence of the master narrative may of course be a source of ontological insecurity, the pure fact that polyphony occurs is not a concern from an ontological security perspective. As Della Sala (2018) convincingly argues 'the polyphony of narratives is not necessarily an obstacle to ontological security; indeed a plurality may be a sign of its reliance and adaptability' (p. 268). Hence, it may be beneficial for political entities to have not one, but several narratives on whom to rely on, since building their entire ontological security on a single narrative could pose a serious risk. 'A rigid attachment to a monolithic identity narrative is only one possibility, however, and a dangerous at that' (Kinnvall et al., 2018, p. 253).

3. 6. 3 What Makes Narratives Successful

Now that we have seen that for a narrative to be considered successful, it does not necessarily have to be the only narrative entertained by a political entity, we can move on to factors that determine whether a narrative can be regarded as successful or not. To be clear, being successful in this context means persistent across a long period of time while maintaining a high degree of salience. Despite there being growing literature that applies OST, there is still 'relatively little that helps us understand why some narratives are more successful than others' (Della Sala, 2017, p. 546). Most likely, the success of a narrative depends on several factors (Della Sala, 2016), of whom only the most frequently cited ones are mentioned here.

The first and most often mentioned factor may be labelled *utility.* The link between narratives and ontological security alone implies that for a narrative to be successful, it must provide

useful 'normative and cognitive maps that political communities can use to decide to act, why and in whose name' (Della Sala, 2018, p. 276). Successful narratives, thus, are useful since the provide reasons for actions and decisions. They contain the 'prevailing ideas, norms, practices of a given political community' (Della Sala, 2016, p. 529) so that their content is widely shared among said political community and can, therefore, function as guiding force. Moreover, for a narrative to be useful some degree of consistency and coherence is needed not only within the narrative itself, but also in the broader narrative network (Somers, 1995). Otherwise, as discussed above, if the storyline that the narrative transmits is incoherent and inconsistent in relation to the narrative network it exists in, it will cease to be useful and will even be counterproductive for the political actor's ontological security.

A second factor that successful narratives possess is *adaptability.* While, as Berenskoetter (2014) points out, it is crucial for a narrative to provide 'stable orientation across time and space' (p. 278), being flexible and adaptive to new external circumstances is a necessary condition for narratives to withstand the test of time. In doing so, narratives must be able to connect past, present, and future by establishing a sense of biographical continuity (Berenskoetter, 2014). Thus, to be successful, a narrative must continually and sensibly integrate new events into its narrative arc (Giddens, 1991), rendering the narrative a 'work in progress' that is never quite finished and must be updated periodically. A successful narrative is, thus, adaptive to changed circumstances. It can integrate all sorts of change into a consistent and coherent storyline, by creating a sensible link between the 'before' and the 'after', the 'old' and the 'new' (Berenskoetter, 2014). Importantly, as argued in the section above, the fact that a master narrative will often be rather vague so that it can co-exist next to other more specific, derivative narratives may benefit the master narrative's adaptability and, thus, contribute to re-producing its hegemonic position across time. By having a vaguer character, the master narrative may find it easier to integrate new events into its storyline and be adaptive. On the contrary, a single event or action could stop the more specific, derivative narratives from making sense, and, hence, cause them to cease existing. Therefore, the second success factor *adaptability* is expected to facilitate the hegemony of the master narrative over time.

Another success factor is *credibility.* According to Della Sala (2016), all successful narratives possess credibility. Ensuring that a narrative is credible, again, entails effort. Rather than loosely assembling a series of actions and events into a storyline, rendering a narrative credible requires processes such as mental pasting, editing, and bridging (Berenskoetter, 2014). Importantly, that being credible does not mean being true. Most narratives will be a mix of fact

and fiction (Della Sala, 2016). They are selective about which actions and events are incorporated, and which ones are deliberately left out. Narratives will be flexible in handling the truth at times, since their greater purpose is providing ontological security not truth.

So far, the success factors have focused on the nature of the content of a narrative, which must be useful, adaptive, and credible. But Della Sala (2017) is right in noting that 'it is not just the content but also the form that narratives take that helps determine the extent to which they can become effective normative and cognitive maps' (p. 547). Therefore, the fourth and final factor mentioned here is *form*. Several scholars have come up with claims which form a narrative ought to take to be successful. According to Della Sala (2016, 2017), various actors are involved in giving a narrative form to a series of actions and events. This form must be understandable, coherent, and consistent with pre-existing collective ideas, norms, and practices of a political community. In a second phase, then, the narrative enters the social life of the political community it concerns.

Successful narratives are, thus, easily understandable and comprehensible for their respective audience. Their resolution carries a clear normative message (Della Sala, 2017). As Bal (2009) argues, the success of a narrative depends on whether its audience recognises the form in which the narrative has been arranged. Similarly, Cachia and DeBattista (2023) also claim that the reception of a narrative by its target audience is the decisive moment for its success. Successful narratives will have a clear narrative arc and will be comprehensible and identifiable for their audience (Della Sala, 2016). To be identifiable, narratives will often contain a definition of the political community they focus on, sometimes by making references to a specific geographical territory. They may also contain an antagonist (Della Sala, 2016, 2017).

3. 6. 4 Open Questions Regarding Narratives

Several scholars have commented on the growing body of literature that focuses on narratives in IR, referring to it as the 'narrative turn' (Akchurina & Della Sala, 2018; Andrews et al., 2015; Della Sala, 2017; Subotić, 2016). The narrative turn can, equally to the growing literature that applies OST, be traced back to the fact that international order has become increasingly characterised by uncertainty, which turns ontological security and narratives, into a more interesting research subject. Despite the growing literature, two aspects remain fundamentally undertheorized, namely, how narrative change occurs, and which actors are involved in the creation and promotion of narratives.

Beginning with the underrepresentation of narrative change, Subotić (2016) criticises that 'most of the current narrative scholarship […] assumes a certain stasis to narratives' (p. 163). This is despite scholars recognising the fact that 'stories, by their very nature, are never static – their meaning changes over time, because we as individuals change and the world around us changes too' (Andrews et al., 2015, p. 147).

According to Subotić (2016), narrative scholarship has come a long way in explaining the link between how narratives provide political actors with their sense of self, telling them precisely who they are in this world and how they ought to act. Consequently, analysing narratives helps scholars understand who political actors think they are, and, hence, why they make the policy choices they make. Yet, narrative scholarship continues to fall short when it comes to understanding why political actors sometimes opt for policy change. Innes and Steele (2014) have claimed social actors will change their narratives in moments of crisis that require a policy change. On the contrary, Subotić (2016) has shown that social actors will cling to their existing narratives in moments of crisis that put their physical security at risk. Overhauling their narratives and potentially causing ontological insecurity would be like adding fuel to the fire, according to Subotić. Instead, Subotić (2016) argues that since all narratives contain 'inherent contradictions' and 'different elements and layers' (p. 611), it makes sense for social actors to selectively (de-)activate some elements of the existing narrative to adapt it to the new circumstances instead of overhauling it completely. Therefore, social actors will prefer to selectively emphasise specific elements of a narrative and to disregard others to make it suitable for the required policy change. By maintaining continuity by keeping the narrative the same but merely highlighting different aspects of it, political entities engage in 'ontological self-help' (Subotić, 2016). Thus, moments of crisis and policy change have an ambiguous effect on narratives: they might either contribute to the birth of new narratives, or, contrastingly, may contribute to reproducing existing narratives by merely shifting the emphasis on a different aspect (Innes & Steele, 2014; Subotić, 2016). Altogether, both accounts help us overcome an all too static understanding of narratives.

The other remaining open question regards the role of political agents. In this entire chapter so far, I have left the question *who* develops and promotes narratives unaddressed, instead focusing on *why* narratives are needed, *what* narratives are, and *how* they are being composed. Putting off the question who creates and promotes narratives is not a fault of the structure of this chapter, rather it is a systematic fault of OSS literature. In it, the question *who* comes up with narratives receives surprisingly little attention and is often answered only vaguely.

For instance, Della Sala (2016) mentions that a 'range of actors' (p. 530) are involved in the creation of a narrative. Yet, he fails to provide more detail on who these actors are precisely, apart from stating that they can be 'cultural elites, public intellectuals and academics' (p. 530). Johansson-Nogués (2018) remains similarly vague when writing that the main agents that construct and promote narratives 'are social and political leaders that consciously mobilise compelling stories about the collective self' (p. 530). Subotić (2016) refers to the act of narrative construction and promotion as 'narrative entrepreneurship'. According to her, narrative entrepreneurship is primarily a task of political and cultural elites. Political leaders and elite intellectuals can be political entrepreneurs, but so can the education establishment, the popular culture, the media, and everyday social practice (Subotić, 2016). Berenskoetter (2014) perceives narrative entrepreneurship as inherently political, writing that 'the formulation and maintenance of the narrative is a political process' (p. 278). Subotić's concept of narrative entrepreneurship is in alignment with Berenskoetter's, since Subotić too argues that 'political actors […] will strategically manipulate shared cognitive (narrative) frames for their own political ends' (Subotić, 2016, p. 612). Hence, consensus seems to exist in literature that narrative creation is an elite phenomenon, concerning political and other types of elites.

We can conclude this section by stating that while the literature overall remains rather vague about who the narrative entrepreneurs are. Consensus exists that narrative entrepreneurship is an *active* and *political* undertaking. The most useful conceptualisation of the actors involved in narrative entrepreneurship is delivered by Berenskoetter (2014). He argues that formulating and maintaining narratives is a complex process that requires both 1. agents who have the necessary expertise and legitimacy to develop and diffuse a narrative, and 2. agents who adopt and spread the narrative and 'who possess the resources to affirm it with tangible practices' (Berenskoetter, 2014, p. 278). Berenskoetter (2014) also directs attention to the role of institutions, which can either reinforce or silence a narrative.

The final question left to address in this chapter, then, is whether the EU can be understood to be part of those political entities that strive for ontological security by creating and maintaining narratives about itself. As mentioned in the beginning of this chapter, the OSS literature has a clear focus on states. This begs the question whether OST is applicable to the EU. A potential exemption of the EU from the need for ontological security is amplified by the fact that the EU is often called 'sui generis' or 'a different kind of actor'. For example, the EU is frequently being described as a supranational, post-Westphalian, post-national, and multilevel entity (Della Sala, 2016; Mitzen, 2018b; Rumelili, 2004). Hence, if the EU has moved past the narrow

fixation on state-form, the question how this affects the EU's own need for ontological security seems justified, given the close link between OSS literature and states. In addition, one could argue that the EU does not have to pursue ontological security for itself but rather benefits from the ontological security of its member states which could get aggregated to form the EU's own ontological security.

However, broad consensus exists in literature that the EU is not exempt from ontological security needs after all. As Della Sala (2018) puts it 'the European Union may be sui generis but it too needs stories to craft an autobiography, to help provide ontological security' (p. 266). 'As a social and collective actor, the EU may seek out ontological security; that is, practices, routines, and narratives that help define who it is and why it remains as a political community' (Della Sala, 2017, p. 547). The fact that member states possess their own narratives may in fact even be an obstacle for the EU to develop ontological security (Della Sala, 2016).

Having ensured the appropriateness of applying OST to the European level, this work now proceeds to introduce the traditionally most dominant narrative of the EU, the peace narrative, before describing what a more recent geopolitical narrative could look like.

4. Characteristics of the Peace and the Geopolitical Narrative

In this chapter, I outline the basic features of the two narratives the present work is concerned with, namely the peace and the geopolitical narrative. I describe the origins and basic features of both and define what they will look like when applied to enlargement, which is crucial for the empirical part of this work. Before doing so, the choice of focusing on these two narratives specifically demands some justification. As argued in the previous chapter, there is always a 'polyphony' of narratives at any given time. These narratives may at times complement or contradict each other, but the fact that several narratives co-exist in itself is an indication of the resilience of the ontological security of the EU (Browning & Joenniemi, 2017; Della Sala, 2018; Manners & Murray, 2016).

How to justify, then, that despite the plurality of EU narratives this work exclusively focuses on two? There are two main reasons for this choice. Firstly, the research interest of this work is assessing whether and how the narratives promoted by the Commission in the field of enlargement have changed over time. More specifically, this work is interested in analysing whether an emergence of a geopolitical narrative can be found in recent years and if so, how this geopolitical narrative relates to the peace narrative. Therefore, while tracing a potential rise of a geopolitical narrative in the EU's enlargement policy is the research interest of this work, I do recognise that such a rise would not occur in the void and that a plurality of narratives exists also in enlargement. While the potential rise in salience of the geopolitical narrative is my research interest in the narrow sense, by including the peace narrative I partly account for the fact that polyphony is the norm. Thus, instead of only analysing the geopolitical narrative over time, I follow the suggestion of OST, that when analysing narratives the focus should be on tracing the salience of a narrative across time in respect to other narratives. I opt for the peace narrative as second narrative, since it is widely regarded as the most prominent EU narrative and has been repeatedly shown to be present in enlargement policy (Della Sala, 2023; Manners & Murray, 2016). Therefore, the peace narrative is an appropriate narrative to relate the potential rise of the geopolitical narrative to and to study how these two narratives interact.

Secondly, the choice to *only* include the peace narrative next to the geopolitical narrative is a pragmatic one, taken out of reasons of feasibility. While I fully acknowledge that other narratives are present in enlargement and stress this fact as an important limitation of the findings of this work, including more than two narratives in the empirical analysis would go beyond the scope of this work. To assess how the salience of the peace and the geopolitical

narrative have changed over time, I already need multiple points in time for measuring their presence and salience. I am convinced that by including more than two narratives, the empirical analysis would be at risk of becoming superficial and sloppy. Hence, exclusively focusing on the peace and geopolitical narrative seems like a necessary choice. Nevertheless, it should be stated clearly that the fact that they are not being analysed does not mean that other narratives in enlargement policy do not exist.

A second point I would like to raise is the difference in the level of theorisation that exists between the two narratives. Arguably, the peace narrative is the most well researched EU narrative, being the subject of a wide array of academic research (Della Sala, 2023; Manners & Murray, 2016). Its prominence is precisely why I chose to include it alongside the geopolitical narrative. Consequently, the difference in the amount of related literature, however, could not be starker. Given that the geopolitical narrative is a narrative whose existence and rise in salience in recent years I *expect*, very little literature on it exists. This has consequences for the nature of the descriptions in this chapter: while I can refer to a vast amount of literature when introducing the peace narrative, the descriptions of the geopolitical narrative and what it might look like in the field of enlargement will be more based on my own reflections. Importantly, these reflections are made *before* conducting the empirical analysis. Therefore, any concern of this work suffering from tautology, by depicting the geopolitical narrative here in exactly the way in which I already know it will be found in the material, can be decisively rejected. With that in mind, I will now proceed to describe the basic features of the peace and the geopolitical narrative and operationalise them respectively for enlargement policy.

4. 1 The Peace Narrative

The peace narrative is widely regarded as the most prominent narrative that the EU has promoted about itself since its foundation (Della Sala, 2023; Manners & Murray, 2016). While consensus exists that the peace narrative acts as the EU's traditional master narrative, it has been referred to under several names. From the EU's 'foundational narrative' (Cachia & DeBattista, 2023; Della Sala, 2018) or even the EU's 'foundational myth' (Della Sala, 2016, 2017, 2023; Schimmelfennig, 2001), to the 'never again narrative' (Mitzen, 2018a) or the 'noble/Nobel narrative' (Manners & Murray, 2016). This work follows Mitzen (2018a) in calling it the 'peace narrative', which I regard to be the most fitting term.

While Della Sala (2016, 2017, 2018, 2023) is right in noting that the peace narrative fundamentally concerns the EU's foundation, I have three reservations against using the term

'foundational narrative' for it. Firstly, foundational narrative is an entire category of narratives 'that recount how and why the political community was formed' (Della Sala, 2016, p. 527). Using a categorical term to describe one specific narrative risks being misleading. Secondly, this confusion might be amplified by the fact that the EU entertains more than one narrative about its foundation (Manners, 2010). Referring to one specific narrative as *the* foundational narrative of the EU when others exist is inappropriate and presumes a supremacy which has yet to be shown. Thirdly, other political entities will have their own foundational narratives as well, which again risks confusion and renders the term 'foundational narrative' rather generic for a narration of how the EU as a self-proclaimed 'different type of entity' came into being. Additionally, I also have some reservations against names such as 'never again narrative' (Mitzen, 2018a) or 'noble/Nobel narrative' (Manners & Murray, 2016), since they single out one event in the EU's history as name-giving. While 'never again narrative' alludes to the horrors of the Holocaust, 'noble/Nobel narrative' refers to the EU winning the Nobel Peace Prize in 2012. Both are events that are part of the peace narrative, but not its core.

Apart from reasons against the other proposed names, there are also some reasons why I find the term 'peace narrative' convincing. Firstly, 'peace narrative' still manages to capture what is being narrated as the founding purpose of the EU: bringing peace to the European continent after the grievances of WW2. Secondly, as will be detailed on below, the peace narrative is fundamentally a narrative about the EU's values, about why the EU's values are what they are, and about why they set the EU apart from other political actors (Cachia & DeBattista, 2023; Della Sala, 2018, 2023). Peace has been identified by Manners (2002) as one of the EU's core values. Thus, it seems appropriate to lift one of the EU's core values, and – in the telling of the peace narrative – founding purpose, into the title of the narrative to indicate its value-driven nature.

4. 1. 1 Basic Features

The basic premise of the peace narrative is that the EU was founded to overcome nationalist tensions between its member states, which have rendered Europe historically a very violent continent (Berenskoetter, 2014; Rumelili, 2018). Overcoming war and creating long-term peace is identified as the EU's *raison d'être* by the peace narrative.

> '*The basic argument, found in EU texts, statements by political leaders and much of the histography of the EU, is that the European project was born from the ashes of the Second World War. European states, the argument claims, recognised that the pursuit of narrow national interests, especially fuelled*

by nationalism, brought war and instability to the continent. It was only the decision to begin to break down physical and imagined borders through closer cooperation that a new political order was born, giving rise to a peaceful and prosperous Europe' (Della Sala, 2023, pp. 365-366).

Essentially a tale about rehabilitation, the EU is presented like a phoenix that emerged from the ashes of WW2 to pacify Europe. Several scholars, which have studied EU narratives, found that peace is repeatedly being presented by EU actors as founding reason. For instance, Mitzen (2018a) writes that 'a founding goal of the EU was to make war unthinkable' (2018a, p. 395). Rumelili (2018) finds that the peace narrative claims that 'the founders of the European integration project identified the nationalist economic and political rivalries in Europe as the root cause of recurrent conflict and sought to institute a stable peace through economic and political integration' (p. 280). Similarly, Cachia and DeBattista (2023) also write that 'peace is particularly important […] to provide a rationale for the creation and the development of the European Union' (p. 710). According to Della Sala (2023), the peace narrative presents the EU as 'a polity born in the ruins of war and in response to the ravages of nationalism in the first half of the last century' (p. 363).

All these accounts of the peace narrative identify overcoming violent conflict as the EU's purpose. In the telling of the peace narrative, European leaders realised in the aftermath of WW2 that the narrow pursuit of national interests would only ever provoke conflict on the European soil (Della Sala, 2023; Nicolaïdis & Howse, 2002; Passerini, 2003). Della Sala (2018) provides a good summary of how the peace narrative narrates the origins of the EU:

'Its basic premise is that nationalism brought the continent to the point of ruin in the twentieth century, but it was in its darkest moment that the vision for a new order took root. The rise of fascism and the destruction of war were seen as the death knell of political power entrusted and enshrined in the sovereign nation state, with hard borders defining a territory and its population. We see a clear narrative structure in this morality tale that presents the reasons and the basis for the post-war construction of the EU' (p. 270).

One could add to Della Sala's quote that the peace narrative is not just a *morality* tale, but also a *mortality* tale in at least two ways. On the one hand, it is a mortality tale in the literal sense, starting its narration at the battlefields of WW2. On the other hand, the peace narrative is also a mortality tale in the figurative sense, namely the burial of the sovereign nation state as ideal form of governance. At the roots of the EU as peace project is the idea of consensually pooling sovereignty to break the vicious circle of nationalism and war (Akchurina & Della Sala, 2018; Manners, 2002; Manners & Whitman, 2003). Hence, the peace narrative is also a story about

the EU 'breaking with its past' (Rumelili, 2018, p. 1375) by creating a new post-national, post-sovereign entity (Della Sala, 2018). According to the peace narrative the reason why the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC) was founded in 1951, was to increase feelings of solidarity and trust between its members (Della Sala, 2023; Mitzen, 2018a; Schimmelfennig, 2001). The ECSC as the first international organisation of the European community paved the way for the EU, whose purpose, according to the peace narrative, is ensuring peace and prosperity for the Europe and its people (Schimmelfennig, 2001).

4. 1. 2 The EU as Value-Driven Actor

Values take the centre stage in the peace narrative. As already mentioned above, not only does the value 'peace' feature prominently in its name, but the peace narrative also claims that the founding purpose of the EU was to install and protect peace between its member states. The value of peace is, hence, identified as the EU's *raison d'être*. However, peace is not the only value that the EU is concerned with, according to the narrative. Rather, the EU has claimed from the beginning to be a 'value-based community' (Biegoń, 2013, p. 204), which embodies an entire set of values, which are at the root of the integration project (Della Sala, 2017; Johansson-Nogués, 2018; Schimmelfennig, 2001). Johansson-Nogués (2018) refers to the EU as 'liberal value community' (p. 533), for whom values are a prime concern, while Della Sala (2023) calls the EU a 'poetry of values' (p. 366). So which values are part of the EU's 'poetry'?

The famous Article 2 of the TEU provides a first hint, stating that:

'*The EU is founded on the values of respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities. These values are common to Member States in a society in which pluralism, non-discrimination, tolerance, justice, solidarity and equality between women and men prevail*' (EU, 2012).

The values mentioned in Article 2 of the TEU are also the ones that can be frequently found in academic literature. Most often mentioned are *democracy* (Akchurina & Della Sala, 2018; Biegoń, 2013; Della Sala, 2018, 2023; Johansson-Nogués, 2018; Niţoiu, 2013; Manners, 2010; Mitzen, 2006b; Schimmelfennig, 2001) and *human rights* (Biegoń, 2013; Della Sala, 2023; Niţoiu, 2013; Manners & Whitman, 2003; Manners, 2010; Mitzen, 2006b; Schimmelfennig, 2001), followed by *peace* (Akchurina & Della Sala, 2018; Della Sala, 2018; Manners, 2010), *respect for human dignity* (Akchurina & Della Sala, 2018; Della Sala, 2018; Johansson-Nogués, 2018), (*social*) *justice* (Akchurina & Della Sala, 2018; Della Sala, 2018; Mitzen, 2006b), and *tolerance* (Akchurina & Della Sala, 2018; Della Sala, 2018; Johansson-Nogués,

2018). Also sometimes mentioned are *rule of law* (Manners, 2010; Mitzen, 2006b; Schimmelfennig, 2001), *fundamental freedoms* (Johansson-Nogués, 2018; Manners, 2010), *solidarity* (Della Sala, 2023; Johansson-Nogués, 2018; Niţoiu, 2013), *pluralism* (Johansson-Nogués, 2018; Schimmelfennig, 2001), and *justice* (Biegoń, 2013).

To date, the relationship between the EU's self-understanding as value-driven actor and its actions has been best explored by Ian Manners in his seminal article (2002) in which he develops the concept of 'normative power Europe'. Manners shows that while the EU has developed a broad normative basis across various declarations, treaties, and policies, it is possible to identify some 'core norms'. These core norms consist of *peace, liberty, democracy, rule of law,* and *human rights and fundamental freedoms.* Together, these norms can be frequently found in the EU's official documents and are, therefore, believed to be the most influential for EU actions. Next to the five core norms, Manners also identifies four minor norms, which are less present in documents and far more contested. These four minor norms are *social solidarity, anti-discrimination*, *sustainable development,* and *good governance.*

While the norms identified by Manners (2002) are broadly in line with those mentioned in Article 2 of the TEU (EU, 2012) and the most frequently cited ones in the literature on the EU's peace narrative, the choice of which ones are the 'core norms' is somewhat arbitrary. What makes Manners' (2002) article so influential until this day, is not the choice of core norms, but rather the next step in his argumentation, which is that these norms are at the core of the EU's actions in relation to other political actors. Manners' (2002) argument in a nutshell is that because the EU places its values at the centre of its relationship with others, the EU is a fundamentally different actor. Manners (2002) develops this argument for the field of foreign policy and claims that the EU puts its values at the heart of its relations with third countries. In doing so, the EU is a different political actor than traditional political actors, which are primarily concerned with material power and security considerations (Manners, 2002; Manners & Whitman, 2003). The concept of 'normative power Europe', thus, not only avoids squeezing the EU into the narrow conceptual distinction of military vs. civilian power, it also implies that the EU is a different, *sui generis* type of actor.

From its value-driven nature, the EU derives its purpose on the international stage. In the words of former Commission President José Manuel Barroso 'having stumbled across such a successful formula for spreading peace and stability on our own continent, it is only natural to offer our know-how and experience to encourage peace and stability elsewhere in the world'

(Barroso, 2005). The EU, thus, perceives it as its 'sacred duty' (Niţoiu, 2013, p. 243) to project its experience and the related norms and values externally to promote peace regionally and globally (Müller, 2019; Schumacher, 2015). This objective is even explicitly set out in Article 3, Paragraph 1 of the TEU, which states that 'the Union's aim is to promote peace, its values, and the well-being of peoples' (EU, 2012).

This value-driven nature is a first aspect, which following the peace narrative, sets the EU apart from others. 'The EU is normatively different to other polities with its commitment to individual rights and principles' (Manners, 2002, p. 241). The conviction that the EU is a 'different kind of actor' (Della Sala, 2018, p. 270) is widespread in literature and is amplified by the EU itself, to the point that some authors regard it a separate narrative (Della Sala, 2016). Putting values at the core of its relationships with others makes the EU 'a sui generis political form' (Mitzen, 2018a, p. 394), a 'different polity' (Della Sala, 2016, p. 525) or a 'special international actor' (Sjursen, 2004, p. 122). Biscop (2016) even goes as far as calling the EU a 'positive power', since the EU intends to be a force for good by promoting and spreading liberal values. Moreover, the intention to spread values is seen by EU actors as detached from geopolitical considerations. 'The EU's sense of self requires it to project values that it perceives as unattached to geostrategic interests' (Akchurina & Della Sala, 2018, p. 1651).

The peace narrative explains the value-driven nature of the EU once again by its historical origins. According to the narration, the horrors of past experiences have predisposed the EU to turn into a 'force for good' (Della Sala, 2023, p. 367), adopting the role of international promoter of liberal values. Consequently, the peace narrative is essentially a morality tale in which countries that have been responsible for the WW2 horrors and other conflicts, have chosen to give up a part of their sovereignty to become members of a European project that seeks to promote peace and other liberal values (Akchurina & Della Sala, 2018; Della Sala, 2018). In doing so, the peace narrative is both *reflexive* and *relational*. It is reflexive by providing a reason for why the EU was born and by acting as normative guide for how the EU ought to act. At the same time, the peace narrative is relational since one of its key premises is that the EU is a different and exceptional kind of actor, setting the EU apart from others.

4. 1. 3 Rejecting Hard Power

A second aspect that makes the EU special, according to the peace narrative, is its renunciation of hard power. *Hard power* is a variant of power developed by Joseph Nye (2004, 2011) in close contrast with *soft power*. Hard power means a coercive, command-based type of power

that forces other actors do something they otherwise would not do. Most often, hard power will be based on authoritative and forceful resources, with the traditional hard power resource in international relations being military force. Soft power, on the other hand, is conceptualised by Nye as a more co-optive type of power, which works through attracting other actors towards a desired action. It can stem from various sources such as an actor's culture and values and is highly dependent on perceptions of credibility, legitimacy, and abilities to persuade.

In the telling of the peace narrative, the EU has little to do with hard power. Precisely because the EU's member states have burned their fingers already in the first half of the 20th century when playing the hard power politics game, in the understanding of the peace narrative, the EU wants and has little to do with hard power. Having been created to overcome war, nationalism, and violence caused the EU to reject hard power (Akchurina & Della Sala, 2018), with war being 'considered a stigmatised practice' which is 'deeply unacceptable' (Mitzen, 2018a, p. 406). 'Member states would forget how to war – making war would no longer be available or acceptable as a mode of conflict resolution' (Mitzen, 2018a, p. 403). Hence, in the eyes of the peace narrative, the EU is a political actor that 'is unlikely to engage in the antagonistic power politics characteristic of nation-states' (Rumelili, 2018, p. 290). Instead, the EU is presented as an actor that deeply 'rejects or is agnostic about material power as the basis for organizing political communities and governing' (Della Sala, 2018, p. 270). What makes the EU a special actor according to the peace narrative is, thus, that the 'expression of material power is not part of the […] narrative' (Akchurina & Della Sala, 2018, p. 270).

An EU fuelled by the desire to extend its influence by the means of hard power is the antithesis to the EU as it is narrated by the peace narrative. It would also stripe the EU of its status of being a special and different kind of actor and put it back into the realm of conventional actors that seek to increase their influence over others by making use of hard power resources. The EU of the peace narrative is a normative, value-driven actor, which is concerned about cooperation, multilateralism, and a 'democracy first' approach (Mitzen, 2006b). Its objective is creating a rule-based international order (Müller, 2019), with the means to establish this rule-based order being cooperation, dialogue, diplomacy, mutual interdependence, and multilateralism (Della Sala, 2013; Manners, 2002; Mitzen, 2006a; Müller, 2019).

When the EU acts, it acts based on its values and principles, not out of hard power considerations. As Akchurina and Della Sala (2018) argue the 'end of history' (Fukuyama, 1992), in the EU's telling, also compromised the end of geography, with then Commission

President Romano Prodi announcing in 2001 that ‘power politics have lost their influence’ (Prodi, 2001). In this vein, the peace narrative rejects ‘the EU as a ‘geopolitical’ actor while ignoring that the member states were at the centre of the Cold War and behaved very much in a strategic way with respect to territory and its borders’ (Della Sala, 2023, p. 366). The traditional geopolitical notion ‘of spheres of influence has never been part of the EU’s sense of self’ (Akchurina & Della Sala, 2018, p. 1642). In turn, the EU’s sense-giving peace narrative leaves no room for a geopolitical side of the EU (Della Sala, 2023).

Perhaps, the EU’s relation to hard power politics as described by the peace narrative can be best summarised in the words of former Commission President Barroso, who said that the EU’s motto could be ‘let reason prevail over force’ and ‘let wisdom prevail over power’ (Barroso, 2014, p. 350). Again, the power and distinctiveness of the EU is understood not to stem from the EU’s material, military capacities but from its normative power, which rests in the assumption that the EU is a different actor that rejects acting in a traditional geopolitical way. ‘Europe’s power stems not from its material capacities but from its very own experiences’ (Della Sala, 2013, p. 167).

4. 1. 4 Current State

To assess whether and why the peace narrative has been in crisis recently, we first need to understand how its salience has evolved. Manners and Murray (2016) provide a good overview on how the peace narrative has fared across time. They argue that the peace narrative primarily appealed to the six founding members of the EU, namely Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, Luxembourg, and the Netherlands. For these countries, the peace narrative was a promising tale about the importance of pooling sovereignty to achieve long-term peace. Therefore, the authors argue that the peace narrative was initially a tale by Western European member states for Western European member states.

Consequently, the heroic figures of the peace narrative are all Western European. Manners and Murray (2016) name Jean Monnet, Robert Schuman, Helmut Kohl, François Mitterrand, and Altiero Spinelli as important figures in the peace narrative; while Della Sala (2016) additionally mentions Konrad Adenauer, Alcide De Gasperi, and Winston Churchill. Taken together, this group is presented as the ‘fathers of Europe’ which paved the way to the EU as political peace project. The metaphor ‘fathers of Europe’ indicates that the peace narrative is not only a tale of old, Western Europe, but also a masculine narrative, with its heroes all being male. This relates

to the criticism of Delehanty and Steele (2009) that many narratives are gendered and contain a masculine gaze.

Manners and Murray (2016) analyse the salience of the peace narrative over time. They convincingly show that already in the 1950s other narratives existed, but that the peace narrative was dominating. Once other countries joined the EU, the peace narrative started to lose some traction. For Greece, Spain, and Portugal, which joined the EU in 1981 and 1986 respectively, the peace narrative with its emphasis on overcoming authoritarian forces and building lasting peace was appealing, while this aspect was less important for the UK, Ireland, and Denmark, who joined in 1973. Importantly, the different appeal the peace narrative had on the different countries joining in the 1970s and 1980s shows how different enlargement rounds have an impact on the salience of EU narratives.

Moving on, the peace narrative suffered another dent during the period of the Yugoslav Wars (1991 - 2001), which reintroduced war to Europe. It made the premises of the peace narrative less credible, but it also made its promise of peace more appealing to many post-communist societies in CEE. Finally, the peak of the peace narrative is widely regarded to be 2012, the year in which the EU was given the Nobel Peace Prize (Cachia & DeBattista, 2023; Della Sala, 2023; Manners & Murray, 2016; Rumelili, 2018) for 'over six decades contributed to the advancement of peace and reconciliation, democracy and human rights in Europe' (The Norwegian Nobel Committee, 2012). In the words of then Commission President Barroso, the 'Nobel Peace Prize reminded us of that historic achievement: that Europe is a project of peace' (Cachia & DeBattista, 2023, p. 712).

One could argue that the peace narrative is a big morality tale, that found its provisional happy ending in 2012. For decades, the peace narrative was able to offer a seemingly simple solution to the tensions and troubles of the past: integration (Rumelili, 2018). As Della Sala (2023) argues, the peace narrative establishes a special relationship between the EU and crisis. Whereas for other political actors a crisis might upset their ontological security, the EU has traditionally responded to crisis with a simple recipe: more integration.

'*The dominant narrative of the European Union is one of the onward march of integration, how the arc of history bent in favour of universal values that emphasised democracy, human rights and solidarity [...] paradoxically, these steps were often taken when Europe seemed to be in 'crisis' and at the crossroads. There is, indeed, a widespread argument that claims that whenever the European Union and its member states are faced with conditions that require decisions that will bring about*

major changes to the status quo, they will inevitably lead to a deepening of the integration process' (Della Sala, 2023, p. 361).

Since 2012, various authors have found that the peace narrative increasingly loses traction and becomes less compelling (Della Sala, 2016, 2023; Manners & Murray, 2016). Manners and Murray (2016) explain the peace narrative's loss of appeal with its elitist nature and the fact that many 'founding fathers' have long passed away. With the narrative's heroes gone, newer generations lack identification figures. The authors expect the peace narrative to persist, but 'with its reputation somewhat tarnished, as its central legitimizing role has effectively ended' (Manners & Murray, 2016, p. 188).

Della Sala (2023) provides an entirely different explanation, by arguing that the sheer number of crises that the EU was confronted with in recent years together managed to unsettle the EU's ontological security. These crises, commonly referred to in academia as the 'perma' or 'poly-' crisis of the EU, include the financial and euro crisis in the late 2000s, the annexation of the Crimean Peninsula in 2014, the rise in inflow of migrants in 2015, the Brexit referendum in 2016, the COVID-19 pandemic, the rise of illiberal and authoritarian parties across Europe, and recently, Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine (Della Sala, 2023). Together, these events have put the EU's sense of self as peace project under strain (Kinnvall et al., 2018), causing the peace narrative to lose relevance (Della Sala, 2016).

The Russian war of aggression, especially, is seen as single biggest critical juncture for the EU, since it couples severe physical security concerns with ontological insecurity about who the EU is as an international actor (Della Sala, 2023). With the start of the Ukraine war, hard power considerations have grown significantly more prominent again in the international system. On an ontological level, the war has left the EU questioning which place it can have in such an international system characterised by hard power calculations. As Della Sala (2023) notes, the peace narrative 'might not necessarily provide space for the kind of strategic and geopolitical calculations necessary with great power politics' (p. 367).

The peace narrative's crisis is, thus, inherently related with the crisis-prone, volatile nature of the international system lately. The EU as it gets depicted in the peace narrative is increasingly at odds with the realities of this international system. 'What is at stake is the kind of international order that is central to the EU's sense of self' (Della Sala, 2023, p. 369). While the peace narrative constructs the EU as an actor that rejects or is at least agnostic about military power, the growing instability of the international order calls for more hard power capabilities,

explaining why the peace narrative loses some of its appeal. It was easier for the EU to reject or be agnostic about material power whilst the international order was largely stable. Now that power politics seem to be back in full swing, the peace narrative is put to a severe test.

Physical security calls for material power, but developing it, would stripe the EU of its status as special and different kind of actor. A militarisation of the EU would hurt the EU's distinctive profile (Smith, 2005; Zielonka, 1998). It would put the EU back into the realm of conventional political actors and would mean sacrificing the ontological security provided by the peace narrative. Therefore, physical security comes at the cost of more ontological insecurity. This increasing at oddness can be exemplified by a statement of former HR/VP, Josep Borrell, who, in reaction to the start of the Ukraine war, declared 'the belated birth of a geopolitical EU' (Borrell, 2022), while affirming that the EU continues to be a different kind of actor.

There is seemingly no place in the peace narrative for a geopolitical EU. With the geopolitical dimension, however, being increasingly important the power of attraction of the peace narrative is seriously hampered. The peace narrative no longer holds the dominant sense-making power it once did (Manners & Murray, 2016, p. 190). At the same time, as Della Sala (2023) points out, the 'narrative that the [EU] is a different kind of actor keeps it from becoming the geopolitical player it aspires to be'. To mitigate the loss of appeal of the peace narrative and the emphasis on the EU's geopolitical side, as evident in the statement by HR/VP Borrell, this work expects to see the rise of a geopolitical narrative. Before introducing what such a geopolitical narrative could look like, we first need to apply the peace narrative to enlargement policy. How could the peace narrative possibly have manifested itself in enlargement?

4. 2 Peace Narrative in Enlargement Policy

For this work, it is crucial to understand what shape the peace narrative takes in enlargement policy. Establishing some of its main characteristics will later help us to identify it empirically. I again rely heavily on academic literature to describe each of the expected characteristics and complement these insights with my own theoretical reflections. Importantly, this section was written before the narrative analysis was conducted. Thereby, it is entirely plausible and likely that once we consider the empirical material, we will observe features that were not dealt with in this section or that we find that some parts of the narratives take a different shape than what we would have theoretically expected. Nevertheless, this section provides us with an important anchor that we can refer to when carrying out the analysis.

Table 1 provides an overview of the expected characteristics of the peace narrative in enlargement. The remainder of this section will discuss these characteristics one by one.

Table 1: Characteristics of the peace narrative in enlargement policy	
Purpose of enlargement	Pacifying the European continent
Reason for enlargement	Moral obligation
Accession based upon	Shared values
Relation to power	Enlargement as power neutral, natural process
Openness of EU membership	Principally open to all European states that share the EU's values
Criteria for enlargement	Fulfilment of Article 49 of the TEU and the Copenhagen criteria
Most important dimension of the Copenhagen criteria	Political criteria
Metaphors	- Belonging - (Re-)Unification/(re-)uniting - Returning/homecoming - Family - We-feeling

4. 2. 1 Purpose of Enlargement

Unsurprisingly, the peace narrative views the purpose of enlargement to be the pacification of the European continent. Enlargement occurs in the name of peace (Higashino, 2004). This is no different from the general variant of the peace narrative, which considers peace the *raison d'être* of the EU. Scholars like Crombois (2017) have indeed noted how the peace narrative is 'deeply embedded in the experience of EU enlargement' (p. 114).

Enlargement, as one specific policy field of the EU, thus, is devoted to the same bigger purpose of establishing peaceful relations between European states. Like European integration (the so-

called deepening of the EU), enlargement as 'widening' process of the EU serves the same purpose of creating a peaceful Europe. Through establishing behavioural norms for what it means to be granted EU membership and with member states having dependable expectations of peaceful change and being governed by a unique set of institutions and a common legal framework, enlargement intends to put traditional power rivalries on halt (Anghel & Jones, 2024a; O'Brennan, 2006). As 'transformative power' (Crombois, 2019), the EU turns former enemies into members of the same community. In the telling of the peace narrative, the purpose of enlargement can be seen as trying to create 'a community of values, an extended zone of peaceable inter-state relations, where problem-solving through institutionalised cooperation would be the norm' (O'Brennan 2006, p. 158). Enlargement is seen as tool to ensure lasting peace in Europe (Higashino, 2004). Through each successive enlargement round, peace and stability become more institutionalised, paving the way for peaceful relations and prosperity.

The EU receiving the Nobel Peace Prize in 2012, as argued above, a major milestone in the logic of the peace narrative, is also partly attributed to the EU's enlargement policy, which is sometimes regarded as the EU's most successful foreign policy (Crombois, 2017; Moravcsik & Vachudova, 2003; Vachudova, 2014). Indeed, enlargement is frequently credited with having fulfilled its purpose by having contributed to European peace, stability, and democratisation (Schimmelfennig & Scholtz, 2010). In the narration of the peace narrative, however, bringing about peace is not an add-on of accession, but rather arises out of a deep sense of moral duty, bringing us to the second characteristic.

4. 2. 2 Reason for Enlargement

One core conviction of the peace narrative is that the EU has discovered a unique formula for how to pacify relations between former enemies (Niţoiu, 2013). This formula is derived from its experience of 'overcoming the scourge of war and the hazardous national interests and tendencies that often led to it, Europe is presented [as] having a new mode of Kantian interaction between its member states' (Niţoiu, 2013, p. 243). Applied to enlargement, not passing on the peace formula would be deeply blameworthy. 'The European Union has thus a duty to share the lessons learned in maintaining peace on the continent and convince other states to relinquish behaviours that could lead to confrontation or war' (Niţoiu, 2013, p. 243). This 'duty' becomes a 'moral imperative' (Scicluna & Auer, 2023), a 'moral obligation' (Higashino, 2004), or a 'political obligation' (Cecchini et al., 2001) to enlarge.

The peace narrative, therefore, considers the reason of widening processes to be 'the moral imperative of fulfilling the promise inherent in the concept of a 'European' union (sic)' (Scicluna & Auer, 2023, p. 46). 'European enlargement is a political obligation written into the treaty that founded the European Community in 1957. At that time, the founders of the Community called upon all states that shared in their ideals to join in the process of integration' (Cecchini et al., 2001, p. 155). One important caveat, however, exists with Article 49 of the TEU (EU, 2012) stipulating that countries joining the EU must be 'European'. While this is a somewhat ambiguous provision, apart from this criterion, a moral duty to enlarge in the name of peace is expected to create openness and support towards enlarging the Union.

Thus, in the 'idealist logic of European enlargement' (Cecchini et al., 2001, p. 155), the decision not to enlarge is notoriously hard to justify. That is because closing the door on EU membership risks falling back to old patterns of fragmentation, nationalism, and ultimately, war (Higashino, 2004; O' Brennan, 2006). In stark contrast, widening the EU creates a win-win scenario, where peace and prosperity are increased for all parties involved. Assuming an almost 'missionary role of the EU to export peace' (Della Sala, 2016, p. 535), the peace narrative presents EU accession as an act that is mutually beneficial for all, while eliminating the risk of having the power politics of the past resurging. 'The 'democratic peace' rhetoric suggests 'we need to do this because it is necessary and beneficial for them and us'' (Higashino, 2004, p. 353).

4. 2. 3 Accession Based Upon

Values remain central for the peace narrative also when applied to enlargement. The expectation is that the accession process will be narrated as being fundamentally based upon shared values. Historically, the centrality of shared values is easy to observe. Article O of the Treaty of Amsterdam, signed in 1997, for example states that 'any European country which respects the principles set out in Article F(1) may apply to become a member of the European Union' with Article F(1) reading 'the Union is founded upon the principles of liberty, democracy, respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, and the rule of law' (EU, 1997). Today's Article 49 of the TEU similarly states that 'any European State which respects the values referred to in Article 2 and is committed to promoting them may become a member of the Union' (EU, 2012). Article 2 of the TEU includes the same values as the former Article F(1) of the Treaty of Amsterdam, plus human dignity, equality, and minority rights (EU, 2012). Hence, from a legal perspective, values (alongside the criterion of Europeanness) are singled out as condition for EU membership. 'That means that new members must share the EU's

liberal values and adhere to its liberal norms, such as the rule of law, democracy, a market-based economy, and the peaceful resolution of international conflicts' (Skålnes, 2005, p. 229). We would expect the peace narrative to match this legal condition with a narration which highlights the shared value base of the EU and a given candidate country (Johansson-Nogués, 2018; O'Brennan, 2006; Scicluna & Auer, 2023).

These shared values can be presented as stemming from having a common culture, history, geography or outlook (Dahlmann, 2004; Rumelili, 2004). Interestingly, by referring to these shared values, considerable ambiguity is created if we recall the peace narrative's central depiction of the EU as a normatively different actor. The peace narrative in enlargement, thus, may contain an inherent contradiction which presents the EU as special type of actor, with a unique set of values, and a unique approach towards international relations, while insisting on shared values being the *sine non qua* for accession. Academically, this contradiction has been solved by introducing the distinction between *inherent* vs. *acquired* differences, where the EU is believed to construct candidate countries as either possessing values that are inherently different from its own and cannot be learned, or as acquired differences, where candidate countries, with help from the EU, can 'learn' and internalise EU values (Rumelili, 2004).

In EU documents, this contradiction may manifest itself in a language of 'transformation'. Again, the peace narrative's conceptualisation of enlargement as fundamentally value-based process, with *a priori* possessing the same values as the EU being the precondition for being eligible for membership, goes against the idea that any transformation in value terms should be needed. Yet, in the build-up to the 2004 enlargement, for example, EU actors repeatedly highlighted how EU membership will serve to enshrine democracy, rule of law, and respect for human rights in the CEE countries, transforming them from 'Eastern European' into 'European' (Crombois, 2019; O'Brennan, 2006). The point here is not to solve this discrepancy, which can be inherent to any narrative, but rather to take note of it. As seen above, one of the core aspects of the peace narrative is the EU's conception as normatively different actor based on its values. By claiming that EU accession is fundamentally based on shared values with what up until to the moment of joining are still third countries, this claim is being contradicted. Contrastingly, by calling for a 'transformation' of values of candidate countries, the claim that eligibility for EU membership presupposes shared values is equally being undermined. The concept of 'acquired' difference is useful to mitigate this discrepancy by claiming that the EU and the candidate country essentially belong together but have been separated by history. With the EU's support, candidate countries can 're-learn' how to think, behave, and act European.

4. 2. 4 Relation to Power

Another key aspect, that we would expect the peace narrative to have when applied to enlargement, is the presentation of EU expansion as an entirely power-neutral, naturally occurring process. If the EU and its candidate country share the same values and norms and have a common culture and history, enlargement is merely about bringing together what belongs together. Moreover, if the purpose of enlargement is pacifying the European continent, then any mention of how the EU's expansion might affect sensitive power relations and be perceived as threat by neighbouring countries undermines this idealist objective. Hence, we expect no references being made to how the EU's widening impacts power configurations, neglecting the fact that enlargement always and inevitably has a geopolitical side to it.

Studying EU-Russia relations in light of the EU's Eastern enlargement, Akchurina and Della Sala (2018) find that neither enlargement, nor the EaP and the ENP 'were seen by the EU […] as a strategic move but as democracy promotion and assistance with economic transition of bordering states' (p. 1642). With the peace narrative leaving no space for geopolitical considerations (Della Sala, 2023), 'enlargement to central and eastern Europe was a natural development' not motivated by the considerations 'to extend a sphere of influence or to seek out some sort of geostrategic balance but simply, in the EU perspective, the logical consequence of the attractiveness of the EU's postmodern approach of governing' (Akchurina & Della Sala, 2018, p. 1642).

The peace narrative perceives the EU as a value-based actor that does not care about geostrategic 'requisites that have defined geopolitics in the modern era' (Akchurina & Della Sala, 2018, p. 1646). Thus, we expect the peace narrative in enlargement to emphasise that the widening of the EU is a positive-sum game that contributes to the peace and prosperity of Europe. Most importantly, in the telling of the peace narrative 'because there is a tenuous relationship between territory and power, enlargement does not threaten others' (Akchurina & Della Sala, 2018, p. 1647), nor does enlargement mean a 'spread of geopolitical interests into a rival's sphere of interest' (Akchurina & Della Sala, 2018, p. 1648). Precisely because the peace narrative is a stranger to thinking in terms of spheres of influence, EU expansion is presented 'as an almost natural evolution that [does] not affect or change the geostrategic balance or potentially diminish the security of bordering states' (Akchurina & Della Sala, 2018, p. 1642). Importantly, the argument of this work here is not that the acceptance of further EU member states leaves power balances unaltered, but rather that this aspect is not included in the

peace narrative. In the view of the latter, the EU is 'not extending its border but promoting an idea and a model' (Akchurina & Della Sala, 2018, p. 1642).

4. 2. 5 Openness of EU Membership

Speaking of borders, the next characteristic of the peace narrative to be examined here is how it constructs the openness of EU membership. As already mentioned, Article 49 of the TEU (EU, 2012) only names Europeanness and sharing the EU's fundamental values, as listed in Article 2, as membership conditions. Considering that the peace narrative understands enlargement as contributing to the peace and prosperity of the European continent, we expect EU accession to be interpreted broadly in view of having as many countries join as possible that fulfill Article 49 of the TEU. This makes sense if enlargement is presented as positive-sum game that increases peace and prosperity for all, while not impacting any existent power relations. Claiming that the peace narrative will interpret enlargement prospects broadly to have many European countries that share the EU's values join, however, does not imply that the peace narrative does not favour a merit-based accession process. On the contrary, the peace narrative's concern with values and the latter's centrality in the accession criteria leads us to expect that the peace narrative argues in favour of a merit-based process, in which EU accession occurs through fulfilling the criteria and following the respective steps as laid out by the rules.

From the broad interpretation of who is formally eligible to apply for EU membership follow consequences for where the EU's final borders are being imagined. Starting with the concept of 'Europeanness', it does not take long to note the lack of 'any neat definition of Europe, at least on geographical grounds' (Dahlmann, 2004, p. 560). Several authors (Dahlmann, 2004; Della Sala, 2016, 2017, 2018; Mitzen, 2018b, Rumelili, 2004) note how the peace narrative 'does not set out a specific territory as its natural 'homeland' and is essentially agnostic about the finality of borders, leaving open the possibility that Europe's external borders can extend to include whoever shares its basic values' (Akchurina & Della Sala, 2018, p. 1646). Various scholars identify a 'lack of clarity over the EU's final borders' (Scicluna & Auer, 2023, p. 45), an EU 'ambiguity over borders and lack of geographic finality' (Della Sala, 2016, p. 536) or an EU 'dilemma of where its final borders should be set' (Smith, 2005, p. 757).

Following the credo that values transcend boundaries (Dahlmann, 2004) and the fact that membership prospects serve as biggest EU 'carrot' when promoting reforms in candidate countries (Crombois, 2017), it is consistent with the purpose of the peace narrative to keep the membership ambitions of candidate countries alive. In the peace narrative's understanding, a

country's eligibility for membership primarily comes down to its values, in a value-driven interpretation of what EU membership means and what it presumes. Geographical considerations are secondary, with 'Europeanness' being applied broadly and the EU's external borders being mutable (Cecchini et al., 2001; Mitzen, 2018b). Consequently, the peace narrative is rather ambiguous about where the EU's final borders are, turning the EU into an actor that is deeply agnostic about territory (Della Sala, 2018).

The fact that the EU is 'a polity that has ill-defined borders' (Della Sala, 2016, p. 537), 'which has left unanswered the question of the extent to which external borders will be fixed or subject to constant expansion' (Della Sala, 2017, p. 551) is one of the central differences compared to the geopolitical narrative, which emphasises the need to finally become clear about the EU's final shape. In the peace narrative, the ambiguity over borders is something positive, since it increases the EU's pull of attraction and with it its transformative power, supporting the objective of promoting liberal values. Therefore, in the telling of the peace narrative, geographical clarity is not something to strive for, but rather a 'territorial trap' that the EU hopes to avoid (Mitzen, 2018b). Territoriality is associated with the struggle over sovereignty that the peace narrative associates with the war-torn past of the first half of the 20th century. Rather, 'by leaving open the question of where Europe's borders end, the EU has tried to transmit the message that it is not bound by the narrow constraint of national belonging and exclusion' (Della Sala, 2016, p. 534). Scicluna and Auer (2023) go as far as labelling this the EU's 'constructive ambiguity' (p. 46) over territory. Thus, we expect the peace narrative to present the EU's ambiguity over its final shape as either something positive or at least not as something problematic that might induce a sense of threat in its neighbouring countries.

4. 2. 6 Enlargement Criteria

As mentioned above, Article 49 of the TEU formally sets out the conditions for being eligible for EU membership, namely, Europeanness and sharing the EU's fundamental values, as listed in Article 2 (EU, 2012). Beyond Article 49, the Copenhagen criteria, as developed by the Copenhagen European Council in 1993, are an important point of reference. They include stability of institutions guaranteeing democracy, the rule of law, human rights and respect for and protection of minorities (*political criteria*) as well as a functioning market economy and the ability to cope with competitive pressure and market forces within the EU (*economic criteria*). Thirdly, the *'acquis' criteria* stipulate that candidate countries must be able to take on the obligations of membership, including the capacity to effectively implement the rules,

standards, and policies that make up the body of EU law and must adhere to the aims of political, economic, and monetary Union. Additionally, the Conclusions of the Copenhagen European Council also name the EU's absorption capacity as fourth criterion, meaning that the EU's widening cannot come at the expense of losing momentum in the EU's deepening (European Council, 1993). Moreover, the Madrid European Council 1995 confirmed the Copenhagen criteria, while stressing the need for a gradual, harmonious integration of candidate countries through developing a market economy, administrative and judicial capacity, and through creating a stable economic and monetary environment (European Council, 1995). Political requirements were further increased in light of a potential accession of the WB countries by calling for the prosecution of war crimes, the solvation of border conflicts and refugees, and the fight against organised crime (Pridham, 2007).

What implications for the peace narrative in enlargement policy derive from this? As values play an indispensable role both in Article 49 of the TEU and in the Copenhagen criteria, we would expect the peace narrative to frequently reference these formal membership requirements. In so far that the Copenhagen criteria ask from 'new member states that they the EU's values and norms' (Skålnes, 2005, p. 229), they correspond to what the peace narrative understands to be crucial for EU membership, namely shared values. To ensure that new member states match the EU's unique normative base, it is logical for the peace narrative to refer to the 'iron rule' (Higashino, 2004, p. 358) of enlargement by insisting that accession talks should only be opened with candidate countries that meet the Copenhagen criteria in full. Often this iron rule will manifest itself in EU documents by calling for a 'merit-based' accession process, in which advancement in the accession process is strictly tied to the fulfillment of formal criteria. While insisting on the adherence to the Copenhagen criteria is also in line with the geopolitical narrative, in so far as it has implications for the security and stability of the new member states (Skålnes, 2005), the difference is that we expect the peace narrative to keep insisting on a merit-based process also during geopolitically turbulent times. For example, we would expect the peace narrative to highlight how Russia's war of aggression 'has not changed the basic requirements for accession or enlargement' (Anghel & Jones, 2024a, p. 102).

In the purview of the peace narrative, external events and resulting considerations should not feature at all in arguments for or against an advancement of the accession process, understood to be strictly value-based. Whether a country advances towards EU membership will be narrated as being dependent on said country's level of preparedness and not in reference to any sense of urgency (Anghel & Jones, 2022). Again, this is not to claim that external events have

never led to an acceleration of the accession process, quite the opposite. The point here is that the act of admitting new member states that do not meet the accession criteria goes against the logic of the peace narrative, and is, hence, not expected to be part of it.

A final point worth mentioning is that we do not necessarily expect the term 'Copenhagen criteria' to be present in the peace narrative as such. This is due to the peace narrative's nature of making rather emotional appeals based on shared values, history, and culture. Specifically referring to the formal accession criteria or the technical requirements is somewhat at odds with these emotionally charged accounts of 'belonging together'. Therefore, while we expect the peace narrative to insist on the fulfillment of the Copenhagen criteria as conditional for EU membership, this may manifest itself more in a language of 'merit' and 'deservingness'.

4. 2. 7 Most Important Copenhagen Criteria Dimension

Rather obviously, we expect the political criteria to be the most important dimension of the Copenhagen criteria. With democracy, rule of law, human and minority rights, the political criteria directly reference values that are at the core of the peace narrative. Since the peace narrative depicts enlargement as based on shared values, adherence to the political criteria should take center stage in its narration. Once again, this does not have to take the form of name-dropping the political criteria explicitly, but we do expect the peace narrative to single out the political provisions as the most crucial ones.

The peace narrative's standing in enlargement policy is exemplified by the fact that the political criteria are the first to be mentioned in the set of Copenhagen criteria. Moreover, history has shown that in those instances where the full meeting all accession criteria was abandoned, the political ones were the ones that proved to be essential. For instance, in the lead-up to the 1999 Helsinki European Council, the Commission has proposed an 'emergency measure' stipulating that accession negotiations could be opened with all candidate countries that fulfill the political criteria, while the rest of criteria only had to be met before the day of joining the EU (Higashino, 2004, p. 360). As Pridham (2007) writes 'political conditionality has in the past decade been a major, at times central, and occasionally rather visible element in the EU enlargement process' (p. 446) with Schimmelfennig et al. calling the political Copenhagen criteria the 'sine qua non political condition of EU accession' (Schimmelfennig et al., 2003, p. 497).

In particular, the value of democracy has 'been decisive in both opening negotiations and in securing membership at the final stage' (Pridham, 2007, p. 446). Tightening the political criteria in the aftermath of the 2004 enlargement round is in line with the narrative of a Union that

cares about its fundamental values being shared as part of the accession process (Anghel & Jones, 2022; Pridham, 2007, 2008). 'Political conditionality has become broader in its scope, much tighter and its procedures and less easy to control within a less enlargement-friendly environment' (Pridham, 2007, p. 468). Consequently, we expect the values that together form the political criteria not only to feature prominently in the peace narrative, but, if put to a test, to be presented as the most essential, crucial part of the accession criteria.

4. 2. 8 Metaphors

The final characteristic of what the peace narrative looks like when applied to enlargement is about the metaphors we are likely to witness. As pointed out in previous sections, we expect the peace narrative in enlargement to be about values by depicting the EU and its candidate countries as two parts of the same value family. Metaphors that we are, thus, likely to observe will be about 'belonging' together (Higashino, 2004; Manners & Murray, 2016; O'Brennan, 2006). This belonging together will be defined in value terms. Manners and Murray (2016) draw a direct connection between the peace narrative and the language of belonging, writing that 'the peace narrative was complemented by enlargement, as 'belonging' entered the lexicon' (p. 190). According to the authors, the peace narrative was recalibrated into 'a rhetoric of belonging to a broader Europe' (Manners & Murray, 2016, p. 189) in the context of the end of the Cold War and the start of the Yugoslav conflicts.

Presenting enlargement as a natural evolution of bringing together what naturally belongs together, means that another expression we are likely to observe is the one of the 'reunification of Europe' (Akchurina & Della Sala, 2018; Della Sala, 2018). As Rumelili (2004) argues, the peace narrative is likely to construct 'enlargement as the (long awaited) unfication of Europe' (pp. 40-41). Again, this reunfication is defined in terms of shared values and norms related to possessing common cultural and historical roots. Enlargement, in the view of the peace narrative, is about bridging an 'artificial divide' which separates what belongs together (Dahlmann, 2004; Higashino, 2004). EU actors may pick up calls by candidate countries about their 'return to Europe' (Anghel & Jones, 2022; Skålnes, 2005). Candidate countries, in turn, are thought to make 'norm-based appeals for membership' (Higashino, 2004, p. 351) highlighting how they share values, history, and culture with the EU. The EU is expected to use this 'grand ideal of European reunification' (Anghel & Džankić, 2023, p. 490) to call for enlargement in the name of belonging. Moreover, we will likely witness references to a common 'we', 'we-ness', 'we-feeling' or simply to a European 'family' (Johansson-Nogués,

2018; O'Brennan, 2006). All these statements mark instances in which the understanding of enlargement is not a ''technocratic' understanding based on institutions and legal order, [but] one based on 'community' and 'belonging'' (Bosse, 2022, p. 541). Viewing values as the glue that binds Europe together (Anghel & Jones, 2024a), renders enlargement 'an inevitable future of the EU' (Higashino, 2004, p. 354) by reunifying what has historically belonged together but what has been unjustifiably separated by history.

4. 3 The Geopolitical Narrative

This brings us to the geopolitical narrative whose salience we expect to have risen in enlargement policy in recent years. Appeals, such as the ones made by former EU HR/VP Josep Borrell, that the EU must 'learn to think geopolitically' (Bialasiewicz, 2023), hint at the fact that the link between the EU and geopolitics is a relatively new one. Before examining the little literature we have on the EU's geopolitical narrative, it is needed to consider what the term 'geopolitics' means. So far, this work has used 'geopolitics' without offering a clear definition of the term and without providing context for how the use of 'geopolitics' has evolved historically. This is not a particular fault of the present work but rather explained by the fact that 'geopolitics' is one of those frequently used buzzwords that most people possess a vague understanding for but whose exact meaning is hard to pinpoint.

Often, if a definition of geopolitics is provided in scientific texts and not merely assumed, it remains vague. Hill (2003), for instance, writes vaguely that geopolitics refers 'to the impact of spatial organization of the world on international politics' (p. 98). When referring to 'geopolitics' for the EU the term 'usually connotes an approach to foreign policy focused on the distribution of military and economic power and resulting dynamics' (Lehne, 2020). For the scientific standard of this work, such a vague understanding is not enough. Moreover, as we will see in the next section, the troubled history of geopolitics including links to Nazism requires further qualification. Therefore, I regard it as necessary to include a short excursus to explore the meaning and the past usage of 'geopolitics'. It goes without saying that the next few pages can only provide a brief exploration of the term that is bound to be superficial and limited in some regards. For more context, the introductory works of Dodds (2007) and Flint (2022), from whom I mostly draw, provide useful sources.

4. 3. 1 Excursus: Geopolitics – Definition and Evolution

The term 'geopolitics' creates vivid associations for most. Often these associations will be space, geography, power, most commonly hard power, hierarchies, states, borders and so on.

Many of these elements can indeed be found in the definition by Dodds (2007) that geopolitics is 'a way of seeing the world in which a great deal of emphasis is placed on exploring and explaining the role of geographical factors […] in shaping national and international politics' (p. 1). Similarly, Flint (2022) defines geopolitics as 'struggle over the control of geographical entities with an international and global dimension, and the use of such geographical entities for political advantage' (p. 15). Both definitions share a geographical element, which emphasises that a geographical or spatial perspective is a defining feature of a geopolitical approach. The second common element is the reference to the international dimension. Notably, neither of the definitions mentions states as primary geopolitical actors. Flint (2022) provides an explanation for all three of these common features, writing that

> '*Geopolitics is a form of political geography – they both consider the mutual construction of geography and politics. In what we refer to as 'classical geopolitics', the type of politics was, and often still is, limited to international relations, or interactions between countries. […]. Geopolitics was about competition and conflict between states and could be seen as a sub-set of political geography. Contemporary approaches have made the picture much more complicated as geopolitics is recognized to involve more actors than just states.'* (p. 3).

The last sentence is of particular importance given that we are examining a potential geopolitical narrative of the EU. Classical geopolitics emerged in the 19th century in the era of European exploration and imperialism, when the race over exploitable resources and colonies made thinking in terms of 'spheres of interest' prevalent. Famous proponents of 'classical' geopolitics include Sir Halford Mackinder's theory of a Eurasian 'heartland', Alfred Thayer Mayhan's historical distinction between land and sea powers, Friedrich Ratzel's and Rudolf Kjellen's ideas of an organic state that naturally grows and needs a 'lebensraum', or Nicholas Spykman's notion of a 'rimland' as key geopolitical arena (Crombois, 2017; Flint, 2022; Hill, 2003). Mentioning their theories and concepts is important, since they remain influential parts of geopolitical thinking until the present day, with authors such as Marinova (2023) applying the concepts of heartland/rimland to the contemporary EU.

There are some common features that connect these approaches of classical geopolitical thinking. As Dodds (2007) points out, there is 'a propensity to divide the world into discrete spaces often informed by a judgement on hierarchy, which positions some places and peoples as superior to others' (p. 2). Maps play a key role in classical geopolitics as the world is being divided into interest zones and influence spheres that come with labels such as civilised vs. savage, modern vs. underdeveloped (Flint, 2022). These labelling attempts, which are

presented as ‘common sense’, neutral, and objective, served to justify the imperialist ambitions of Western countries (Dodds, 2007). Imperialist ambitions and colonial control, thus, become attempts of ‘developing’ and ‘civilising’ underdeveloped regions. The positioning of the theories and concepts as neutral and objective eliminates the situatedness of their authors, who in classical geopolitics most often wrote from the perspective of white, Western, privileged men. Finally, classical geopolitical theories tend to be state-centric with a zero-sum understanding of international relations in which the expansion of one state’s sphere of interest comes at the expense of another’s.

The link between classical geopolitics and Nazism led to a stigmatisation of geopolitics that caused ‘for the most of the past 60 years or so, scholars, geographers in particular, [to distance] themselves from the topic’ (Flint, 2022, p. 1). Figures like Karl Haushofer disseminated geopolitical ideas to the German public which ‘ran parallel with Hitler’s surge in popularity and his vision of a ‘strong’ Germany’ (Flint, 2022, p. 10). As Hill (2003) notes ‘the aggrandizements of Nazism, fascism and Japanese imperialism were all based on the idea that security, indeed civilization, required territorial expansion’ (p. 98). In the aftermath of WW2 ‘the vilification of ‘geopolitics’ as a Nazi enterprise resulted in its virtual disappearance from the academic scene’ (Flint, 2022, p. 11). Importantly, while geopolitics was sidelined as academic theory after WW2, geopolitics as such did not disappear as the thinking in terms of ‘buffer zones’ during the Cold War era demonstrates (Hill, 2003).

Critical geopolitics emerged in the 1990s to reclaim geopolitics from being associated with Nazism (Flint, 2022). Drawing from post-modernism and discourse theory, critical geopolitics seek to expose the biases and underlying assumptions of classical geopolitical approaches.

> ‘*Critical geopolitics has emerged as a reaction to classical geopolitics and its dubious legacy of Nazism. Instead of emphasizing the relations between geography and politics, critical geopolitics focuses on geographical representations and how these interact with foreign policy analysis using a more constructivist approach. In other words, the extent to which geography can be a social construct that may be used to legitimize political decisions.’* (Crombois, 2017, p. 117).

Critical approaches leave behind the state-centredness of geopolitics by unpacking the state and emphasising the impossibility of separating domestic and foreign politics as well as highlighting the importance of non-state actors in shaping international politics (Flint, 2022). Feminist geopolitics, at the beginning of the 21st century, went a step further by criticising the understanding of the world from a top-down, situated perspective (classical geopolitics) or

simply criticising such a viewpoint (critical geopolitics) as insufficient. Rather, feminist geopolitics argue in favour of an 'embodied perspective' based on putting oneself in the shoes of what it means to be a particular person in a particular country (Flint, 2022).

While critical and feminist geopolitical approaches have certainly helped pointing out the shortcomings of more classical geopolitical approaches, 'classical geopolitics should not be interpreted as historic, past, and hence redundant' (Flint, 2022, p. 4). On the contrary, classical geopolitics have celebrated an academic comeback in the aftermath of 9/11 and with Russian imperialism (Flint, 2022). Re-packaged as 'neo-classical geopolitics' these approaches break with the overly determinist nature of past classical geopolitics, 'while re-assessing the importance of some forms of environmental determinism' (Crombois, 2017, p. 117). In alignment with realist theories, neo-classical geopolitics see international relations as zero-sum game. Indeed, as will become apparent in the next sections, (neo-)classical geopolitical conceptions inform the EU's geopolitical narrative the most.

This historic overview served the purpose to expose the problematic assumptions of such a (neo-)classical understanding of geopolitics. While the geopolitical narrative, as outlined below, thus, in its understanding will have many similarities with a (neo-)classical approach, critical and feminist perspectives serve as important reminders of calling out problematic aspects and assumptions. Hence, it is important to keep in mind that 'geopolitics is itself a venue and practice of politics' (Flint, 2022, p. 14).

4. 3. 2 Basic Features

The geopolitical narrative of the EU has not received extensive coverage by academic literature yet, with Crombois (2017) and Pastore (2019) being noteworthy exceptions. The reason for this may perhaps lay in the longstanding dominance of the peace narrative that rejected the geopolitical dimension of EU foreign policy (Crombois, 2023). While not being able to rely on literature much for this section, EU policy documents and statement by EU leaders provide a useful source for identifying the geopolitical narrative. If the European Security Strategy (ESS) (Council of the EU, 2003) was a key document of the peace narrative, painting a picture how the EU has helped its member states overcome historical tensions giving way to unprecedented peace and prosperity in Europe (Johansson-Nogués, 2018), the equivalent for the geopolitical force narrative is the EUGS (EEAS, 2016). Written in the midst of the EU's 'polycrisis' (Della Sala, 2023), the EUGS delivers a more sombre description of the state of international relations when stating that 'we live in times of existential crisis, within and beyond the European Union.

Our Union is under threat. Our European project […] is being questioned' (EEAS, 2016, p. 7). A shift away from the EU's ambition to be a transformative power towards 'realpolitik' is apparent (Crombois, 2019). The EUGS, thus, demonstrates that even before the start of Russian war of aggression against Ukraine the peace narrative was increasingly mismatched with the reality of the international system, in which cooperation and interdependence were being challenged (Della Sala, 2023). Yet, neither the ESS nor the EUGS go as far as mentioning the need for a geopolitical EU. In fact, geopolitics themselves go unmentioned (Council of the EU, 2003; EEAS, 2016).

This changes once we consider the Strategic Compass (EEAS, 2022), published shortly after the start of the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine. Geopolitics now feature more than ten times, most prominently in the title of the foreword of HR/VP Josep Borrell titled 'Europe's geopolitical awakening' (EEAS, 2022, p. 4). The sentiment of the policy document is even darker (Costa & Barbé, 2023), with 'major geopolitical shifts […] challenging our ability to promote our vision and defend our interests' (EEAS, 2022, p. 10). Geopolitics have featured more prominently since the beginning of the von der Leyen I Commission, which acted as a self-proclaimed 'geopolitical Commission' (Colibășanu, 2022; Della Sala, 2023). HR/VP Borrell's talks about a 'geopolitical awakening' or a 'belated birth of a geopolitical EU' (Bialasiewicz, 2023; Bosse, 2022) provide the soundtrack of this geopolitical Commission. Yet, a first characteristic of the geopolitical narrative worth pointing out is the discrepancy surrounding the idea that the EU already *is* a geopolitical actor or whether it still needs to *become* one. Metaphors of 'awakening' and 'birth' suggest the latter, so does Borrell's remark that the EU needs to 'learn [to] think geopolitically' (Bialasiewicz, 2023, p. 827).

A second aspect worth mentioning is the prominence of the Ukraine war within the talks of a 'geopolitical EU'. This makes sense given that the start of the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine marked 'the return of war in Europe' (EEAS, 2022, p. 10). It brought with it the 'return of power politics' (EEAS, 2022, p. 17), effectively ending the EU's 'fever dreams of a limitless liberal order [that] obscured the stubborn persistence of geopolitics' (Kotkin, 2022, p. 68). It showed the EU that its coming into existence 'did not mean the end of power politics nor that states ceased to think strategically or see the world in zero-sum terms' (Akchurina & Della Sala, 2018, p. 1648). In challenging both the physical security and the ontological security of the EU, the Ukraine war 'marks an epochal break in the European security order' (Bialasiewicz, 2023, p. 826). With it comes the dire need to update the EU's self-understanding and the cognitive and normative maps provided by it.

'To say that the EU is going to be pragmatic and geopolitical is to provide a different cognitive map on how to understand order and a different normative guide as to what is to be done than those provided by the foundational myth of a different kind of actor.' (Della Sala, 2023, p. 368)

Since geopolitics regard international relations as zero-sum (Della Sala, 2023), 'the union can no longer approach international […] relationships as essentially cooperative win-win partnerships' (Lehne, 2020). This is exactly what HR/VP Borrell calls for when stating that 'we must adjust our mental maps to deal with the world as it is, not as we hoped it would be' (Bialasiewicz, 2023, p. 827). The emergence of a geopolitical narrative would address the EU's need to reevaluate its place and type of actorness in global politics (Bialasiewicz, 2023; Marinova, 2023).

4. 3. 3 The EU as Geopolitical Actor

Realising that it did not live in a post-Hobbesian world and that power politics have returned to Europe, if they ever left, begs the question how the EU is reacting to this new international environment (Crombois, 2023; Scicluna & Auer, 2023). As argued above, geopolitical actors 'seek to extend their influence over a geographic territory so as to achieve strategic interests' (Della Sala, 2023, p. 368). We would expect a geopolitical EU to pursue strategic interests over values and to perceive the international order as zero-sum game in which influence spheres matter.

All of these contradict to a varying degree with what the EU has traditionally claimed to stand for. While historically both values and interests have featured in key foreign policy documents, such as the ESS (Council of the EU, 2003) and the EUGS (EEAS, 2016), at the rhetoric level, the EU tended to highlight the importance of values more. Notions such as 'principled pragmatism', introduced in the EUGS (EEAS, 2016), do show a re-orientation of the EU from putting shared values over everything in its foreign policy approach. On the other hand, being willing to combine 'principles' and 'pragmatism' still shows the EU's desire for a rule-based approach to foreign policy, rooted in firm principles. Next, perceiving the international order as zero-sum game is also something we would not associate with the EU, a polity that historically stands for multilateralism, cooperation, and interdependence. Finally, as Akchurina and Della Sala (2018) note, 'the logic of spheres of influence has never been part of the EU's sense of self' (p. 1642) either. In fact, Della Sala (2023) questions whether the EU has ever operated according to a geopolitical logic.

The Russian war of aggression against Ukraine is seen by many scholars as turning point in this regard (Anghel & Džankić, 2023; Anghel & Jones, 2024a; Blockmans, 2022; Orenstein, 2023; Scicluna & Auer, 2023). Confronted with war, the EU started to face 'a glaring need to redefine its geopolitical identity and effectively pursue its interests' (Marinova, 2023, p. 118). The degree to which scholars view this re-definition of the EU's identity as successful varies. Marinova (2023) argues finds that by applying classical geopolitical concepts the EU can be considered 'an extraordinary and critical player in geopolitics' (p. 119). Other authors adopt a more cautious perspective by noting how attempts of the EU to position itself as geopolitical actor do not necessarily result in success (Anghel & Džankić, 2023). Taking a more optimistic stance, Orenstein (2023) argues that 'a more geopolitical Europe is emerging' (p. 334).

Since the interest of the present work is not assessing whether the EU has historically acted geopolitically or whether it will have enough capabilities in the future to start doing so, these different assessments are not a concern. What matters is that a changed self-understanding with the EU identifying as geopolitical actor would also mean 'different ideas, priorities, borders, internal and external dynamics' (Orenstein, 2023, p. 334). Interestingly, enlargement is frequently mentioned by scholars as one area where the EU can act geopolitically (Anghel & Jones, 2024a; Lehne, 2020; Scicluna & Auer, 2023). Having been criticised for the lack of a geopolitical approach when engaging with its Eastern partners that put Ukraine in a vulnerable position regarding Russia (Akchurina & Della Sala, 2018; Crombois, 2023), enlargement is identified as an area in which the EU can act geopolitically. Given that military power will likely remain a prerogative of NATO, 'it would make sense for the EU to focus its attention on areas where it can act geopolitically, such as enlargement' (Scicluna & Auer, 2023, p. 8). Hence, should the EU entertain a geopolitical narrative, enlargement is an appropriate area to detect it.

4. 3. 4 Embracing Hard Power

In contrast to the peace narrative being dismissive about the EU's hard power, the geopolitical narrative openly embraces it. Again, the Ukraine war is seen as major turning point in the EU's relation to hard power, with the decline in transatlantic relations in the years of the first and the beginning of the second Trump US presidency also being deemed consequential. The latter is because the EU and NATO are historically regarded as 'two sides of the same coin' (Scicluna & Auer, 2023, p. 48). As Scicluna and Auer (2023) argue the 'EU's economic/political project and NATO's security project advanced alongside one another throughout the second half of the 20th century, the latter creating the conditions that enabled the former to conceptualize itself as

a peace project' (pp. 53-54). It triggered metaphors like the one by Kagan (2003) that NATO and the US as its key member are from 'Mars', known in mythology as God of war, while Europe is from the soft-hearted 'Venus' (Manners, 2010). The division between the coin sides was pretty neat: NATO, which shares 23 members with the EU, was the preferred organisation for displaying hard power, which left the EU with 'soft geopolitics', namely pursuing its global interests 'through the export of its norms, values, and regulations combined with trade and economic leverage' (Marinova, 2023, p. 118). This distinction has been embraced by EU actors since it allowed for the EU to be presented as peace project (Scicluna & Auer, 2023). Yet, this association of NATO and the EU as package deal has been consequential, with Akchurina and Della Sala (2018) arguing that it problematised the eastwards expansion of the EU in the eyes of Russia.

The increasing uncertainty about US commitment to NATO in the lead-up to the Ukraine war with US President Trump's insistence that NATO partners meet the defence spending target increased the need 'for a more muscular and militarised EU' (Bialasiewicz, 2023, p. 829). With the start of the Ukraine war in 2022 'it is becoming increasingly harder for the EU to cling to the post-Cold War status quo in the international system which allows it to develop and thrive in the security shadow of the United States and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization' (Marinova, 2023, p. 126). The war served as brutal reminder that 'hard power and geopolitics mattered once again' (Crombois, 2023, p. 103). 'The Ukraine war has sent a message that an international system defined by great power rivalries marginalises actors that cannot or will not play the hard power game' (Della Sala, 2023, p. 370). It painfully showed that despite a 'formidable role as an international economic, commercial and regulatory giant, the EU has never succeeded in forging a credible role as a military or defence actor' (Howorth, 2022, p. 30). Policy documents such as the Strategic Compass (EEAS, 2022), which state that 'a more hostile environment and wider geopolitical trends call for the EU to shoulder a greater share of responsibility for its own security' (p. 13), can be interpreted as realisation by EU actors that soft power is no longer sufficient (Costa & Barbé, 2023). Statements of HR/VP Borrell about how 'power politics is back' (Della Sala, 2023, p. 370) and how a geopolitical EU has been awoken or born point towards the EU now embracing geopolitics and regarding the development of hard power capabilities as something that must be sought, rather than avoided (Bialasiewicz, 2023; Bosse, 2022).

Once again, narrating hard power as something that the EU possesses or intends to develop soon is another pair of shoes than the question whether the EU has or can have hard power. The

verdict on the latter is far from clear. Marinova (2023) argues that the Ukraine war has the potential to turn the EU into a real geopolitical defence and security player, with Scicluna and Auer (2023) also seeing potential for the EU to wield hard power and to be 'a complete, not merely a civilian power' (pp. 52-53). Yet, the relationship with NATO will likely continue to play an important role (Orenstein, 2023; Scicluna & Auer, 2023). Orenstein (2023) points out the possibility that a geopolitical EU may be built onto two competing logics, with the EU continuing to foster peace through integration but more readily relying on NATO's hard power in situations where peace through integration fails.

4. 3. 5 Current State

So where does this leave us with the geopolitical narrative so far? There have certainly been more talks about a geopolitical turn of the EU both in literature and in the EU's own policy documents in recent times. These developments cannot be separated with the turmoil that the peace narrative began facing. As Della Sala (2023) notes 'the Ukraine war was forcing the EU to become a different kind of actor, one that had a different understanding of the international order from that of the noble/Nobel narrative' (p. 370). 'Different' in this context means no longer having a different normative basis that shapes the EU's outlook on international relations, but rather 'different' for the EU is what is traditional for other political actors, namely a more realistic, zero-sum understanding.

> *'To the extent that Europe never lived in the post-Hobbesian world that some of its architects (and many proponents) liked to imagine, the foundational myth of the EU as a peace project was always problematic. The Russian invasion of Ukraine has made it untenable'* (Scicluna & Auer, 2023, p. 49).

The expectation that we might witness an increasing salience of the geopolitical narrative appears justified. Enlargement seems to be an especially promising field to observe such a rise of the geopolitical narrative as it is deemed one of the areas where it is easier to wield geopolitical influence (Anghel & Jones, 2024a; Lehne, 2020; Scicluna & Auer, 2023). Hence, we expect enlargement policy to be an appropriate research subject to show whether 'the peace project of yesteryear has indeed taken a turn towards a much more 'geopolitical' frame of mind' (Blockmans, 2022, p. 160). As a next step, we will now outline the specific features that we expect the geopolitical narrative to possess in enlargement policy.

4. 4 Geopolitical Narrative in Enlargement Policy

Table 2 shows the main characteristics of the geopolitical narrative in enlargement, like Table 1 did for the peace narrative. Opting for the same format to highlight the main features of both narratives allows for a direct comparison that indicates the key differences between them. The expected characteristics are once again based partly on a review of the relevant literature, and – more than for the peace narrative – on my own theoretical reflections. We will go through them one by one.

Table 2: Characteristics of the geopolitical narrative in enlargement policy	
Purpose of enlargement	Advancing EU geostrategic interests
Reason for enlargement	Self-interest
Accession based upon	EU interests
Relation to power	Enlargement increases the EU's relevance as geopolitical power
Openness of EU membership	Clear limits of who can/cannot become an EU member state
Criteria for enlargement	Fulfilment of Article 49 of the TEU and the Copenhagen criteria, CFSP alignment and enlargement must be in the EU's strategic interest
Most important dimension of the Copenhagen criteria	All dimensions can be ultimately outdone by geopolitical considerations
Metaphors	- Cost/benefit - Investment - Necessity/Need - Imperative

4. 4. 1 Purpose of Enlargement

While the peace narrative sees the purpose of enlargement in the pacification of the European continent, the geopolitical narrative views enlargement as a mean for the EU to advance its geostrategic interests. What these 'geostrategic interests' are exactly, will vary on a case-by-

case basis. Orenstein (2023), for instance, argues that Ukraine is 'and has always been, more strategically placed than the Balkans' (p. 338), making the country more attractive for the EU as potential member state. On the other hand, a country's attractiveness as potential new member state in the eyes of the EU will not just depend on its geographical location, but also on how this country is related to the geostrategic considerations of other political actors.

The situation in the WB region is a case in point. After the EU's interest in a quick accession faded primarily due to ongoing domestic instability in the WB countries alongside territorial disputes between them, the region became a geopolitical focus point for Russia and China (Bieber & Tzifakis, 2020; Panagiotou, 2021). 'Russia and China now have a significant political, economic, and social presence in the Western Balkans because of the region's protracted transition and delayed EU enlargement' (Anghel & Džankić, 2023, p. 493). The point here is not to outline the manifold ways in which Russia and China pursue their own geopolitical interests in the WB region, but to highlight that their presence impacts the EU's own geopolitical considerations. Another obvious case is Ukraine, where the Russian war of aggression has altered the EU's geostrategic considerations. While always seen strategically important (Orenstein, 2023), Ukraine is part of the EaP, which was formerly deemed to be the burial ground of any accession perspectives (Verdun & Chira, 2011). With the Ukraine war, the EU's geopolitical calculations changed, and Ukraine was granted candidate status with record speed (Anghel & Džankić, 2023).

In the geopolitical narrative, thus, we expect the purpose of enlargement to be aligned with advancing the EU's own geostrategic interests. As a side effect of enlargement being a mean to advance EU interests, we would expect the EU's standing as geopolitical actor on the international stage to increase too. Former Commission President José Manuel Barroso, for example, claimed that the big bang enlargement in 2004 had increased the EU's weight in relation with other great powers who now met the EU 'with far more respect and consideration precisely because we are larger' (Akchurina & Della Sala, 2018, p. 1647). Hence, in the geopolitical narrative, advancing the EU's geopolitical interests and increasing the EU's global weight as geopolitical actor are considered to go hand in hand.

4. 4. 2 Reason for Enlargement

The peace narrative sees the EU acting to pacify the European continent through enlargement as a 'moral obligation' or a higher sense of duty that arises from the fact that the EU perceives itself as normative, 'ethical' type of actor (Akchurina & Della Sala, 2018). In comparison, the

EU as depicted by the geopolitical narrative provides a stark contrast. Viewing the purpose of enlargement to be the advancement of the EU's own geostrategic interests already pre-empts that the EU of the geopolitical narrative is a fundamentally self-interested actor. While in the peace narrative we expect enlargement to be favoured by the EU regardless of whether it proves to be advantageous or disadvantageous out of a moral conviction of doing the 'right' thing, the geopolitical narrative is expected to narrate enlargement as serving the EU's own interests.

Importantly, in so far as being a 'selfish' actor is not deemed a positive attribute, it is perfectly reasonable that the geopolitical narrative does not dwell on the fact that enlargement serves to further the EU's own interests too much. Yet, as will see in section 4. 4. 8, metaphors of the 'necessity' of enlargement or the 'cost/benefit' calculations attached to accepting new member states demonstrate that the EU of the geopolitical narrative is a rational actor that ensures that widening processes serve its own interests. Therefore, we expect the geopolitical narrative to sell enlargement as something positive for the EU, in so far as it contributes to advancing EU interests and increases the EU's weight as geopolitical actor. What the exact interests of the EU are will vary on a case-by-case basis. The important aspect here is that enlargement is not seen as moral obligation that leaves the EU with no choice but to enlarge, whether beneficial or not. Contrastingly, enlargement is narrated as occurring because it serves the EU's own interests.

4. 4. 3 Accession Based Upon

In the geopolitical narrative, accession is based upon EU interests. The frequent reference to interests in the geopolitical narrative's characteristics as purpose and reason for enlargement and now also as something that accession is based upon, should not be interpreted as a lack of theoretical elaboration. Rather, thinking in terms of and acting based upon 'interests' is a key feature of geopolitics as such and, hence, we expect it to be present in the geopolitical narrative in enlargement as well (Dodds, 2007; Flint, 2022). Moreover, the distinction between the peace narrative, as being fundamentally based on shared values, and the geopolitical narrative, as being based on EU interests, serves as an important point of separation between the two. The dialectic between values vs. interests is, for example, is emphasised by Crombois (2019) writing that 'the rising tensions with Russia and the ongoing crisis in Ukraine are testing the limits and putting the EU in the position of having to choose between values and interests' (p. 90). While key foreign policy documents like the ESS (Council of the EU, 2003), the EUGS (EEAS, 2016) or the Strategic Compass (EEAS, 2022) refer to both interests and values a

comparatively number of times, we expect a rise in salience of the geopolitical narrative in enlargement over time to cause references to 'interests' to dominate.

A second important point is that we do not expect accession to be based upon just 'interests', but rather the EU's own interests. Again, this argument is directly linked to the EU in the telling of the geopolitical narrative being a fundamentally self-interested actor. This is another important distinction from the peace narrative, where values are to be shared between the EU and candidate countries for accession to proceed. Consequently, in the peace narrative, candidate countries have some leverage by making norm-based appeals of how the EU's fundamental values are also 'theirs' and, thus, how their membership is a logical consequence (O'Brennan, 2006). The same leverage does not exist in the geopolitical narrative. Here, solely the EU's own interests are what ultimately matters. Ukraine again provides a fitting case since the country saw its future in the EU as early as the 1990s, when it declared European integration to be a major foreign policy objective (Shyrokykh, 2018). Yet, the country was included in the EaP, de facto eliminating the prospect of future EU membership (Verdun & Chira, 2011). If it was not for the war, Ukraine most likely would not have been considered for EU membership (Anghel & Džankić, 2023). With the Ukraine war having shifted the geopolitical considerations of the EU, Ukraine was not only granted candidate status in record speed but also entered accession negotiations quickly.

4. 4. 4 Relation to Power

While the peace narrative perceives enlargement as natural evolution that leaves existing power configurations untouched, we expect the geopolitical narrative to be less dismissive about the effects of widening processes on the EU's power relations. With the EU starting to emphasise its geopolitical side, rather than regarding it as self-conflicting, the geopolitical narrative is likely to be more outspoken about the geopolitical implications of enlargement. Gaining territory by accepting new members is easily narrated as a gain in terms of geopolitical weight and influence. Through expanding and welcoming new member states, the EU inevitably changes the shape of its borders, potentially accumulating new neighbouring countries with their own opportunity/threat perceptions. Moreover, more member states would enlarge the EU's single market with implications for the EU's economic weight. As Colibășanu (2022) notes, economic power is an important dimension of the EU as geopolitical actor with the Union being home to the largest integrated market in the world.

We would expect the geopolitical narrative to reinforce the geopolitical dimension of enlargement, rather than denying that, also because viewing enlargement as one of the EU's most successful policies as essentially geopolitical act would provide legitimacy to the geopolitical narrative of the EU more generally (Crombois, 2017; Moravcsik & Vachudova, 2003; Vachudova, 2014). Lastly, seeing enlargement as power reaffirming or increasing act also fits the ambitions of a 'geopolitical Commission' (Colibășanu, 2022; Della Sala, 2023).

Less clear is, however, what affirming the power implications of enlargement signifies for how quickly the EU should proceed with its widening ambitions. Hill (2003) argues that regarding enlargement as geopolitical act calls for a slow, gradual accession. That is because a slow and predictable change to the EU's external borders gives neighbouring countries the time to adapt and leaves them feeling less threatened. Most scholars, however, seem to follow Orenstein (2023), who argues that promising membership to candidate countries but then dragging out the process over decades hurts the EU's credibility and influence as geopolitical actor. A fitting example is the WB region which was given a membership perspective at the Thessaloniki Summit in 2003, with the influence of the EU having vanished since to the benefit of Russia and China (Bieber & Tzifakis, 2020; Panagiotou, 2021).

At this stage, it is sufficient to note that we expect the geopolitical narrative to openly and explicitly emphasise the geopolitical character of enlargement. Moreover, we expect the geopolitical narrative to present enlargement as mean to increase the EU's power by having a bigger weight in territorial, political, and economic terms. Accepting new member states with a strong military base and an active defence industry has direct implications also for the EU's hard power. Having Ukraine join, for example, would come with vast practical know-how on defence innovation and electronic warfare. Again, we expect the geopolitical narrative to be outspoken about such gains in terms of EU hard power.

4. 4. 5 Openness of EU Membership

The single aspect that the otherwise sparse literature on the geopolitical narrative is the clearest about is the expectation that the narrative is outspoken in naming who has a prospect of becoming an EU member and for whom the door will remain closed forever (Hill, 2003; Missiroli, 2003; Orenstein, 2023; Scicluna & Auer, 2023). Given the focus of geopolitics on control over geographic entities, it is unsurprising that the geopolitical narrative is vocal about the question where the EU's final borders are. As Hill (2003) writes, 'the border question is probably the most important of all foreign policy implications of enlargement' (p. 97). While

the peace narrative is intentionally ambiguous about who can be a part of the Union, we expect the geopolitical narrative to be clear about which of the remaining European states still possesses accession prospects and for whom membership will remain permanently ruled out. That is because as Scicluna and Auer (2023) put it 'the EU can no longer afford blurred boundaries, which only keep the space between current members and Russia in a state of limbo. 'Constructive ambiguity' in this area has proven destructive' (p. 46). Orenstein's (2023) observation is strikingly similar, stating that

'*The EU has left the question of borders open for others to decide. Now the EU faces the question of how to deal with a neighbor that perceives the EU as an expansionist threat. EU refusal to set its own boundaries may have reached its natural limits. […] It may be time for a geopolitical Europe to answer the question*' (p. 338).

We would expect the geopolitical narrative to be clear about where the EU's final borders are since it increases the effectiveness and credibility of its external actions and makes it clear which territory the EU regards as its own and stands ready to defend (Missiroli, 2003). The EU's 'exclusion/inclusion dilemma' (Smith, 2005) negatively affects the EU's ability to say anything certain about its wider geopolitical relations (Scicluna & Auer, 2023). Being clear about the shape of its final borders will come at the cost of losing some leverage over its neighbouring countries and may trigger feelings of exclusion and cause instability (Missiroli, 2003). The EU will lose some power of attraction that the 'carrot' of EU membership contained for countries with membership ambitions. Yet, the experience in the WB region in the last twenty years has shown that simply promising a membership perspective without proceeding is also hurting the EU's credibility as foreign policy actor (Anghel & Džankić, 2023), nor is 'a promise without a clear plan for fulfilment […] enough […] to secure the EU's geopolitical interests' (Scicluna & Auer, 2023, p. 52). As Hill (2003) points out, the sense of uncertainty whether EU expansion is imminent, pending or ruled out that the EU creates through its constructive ambiguity 'could provoke just as much instability as it is able to reduce through 'the power of attraction'' (p. 103).

For these reasons, we expect the geopolitical narrative to adopt a clear language about who is part of the EU, who can still be, and who will never be. Importantly, we expect the geopolitical narrative to not use a language of values and belonging when setting out who is part of the EU, but rather to be motivated by geopolitical considerations. Hill (2003) anticipated that the EU coming clear on its final shape 'will not be able to avoid geopolitical reasoning' (p. 103). Therefore, the geopolitical narrative will exclude countries 'either because they are too far

away, or because they would make the EU too big, or because they would involve it in problems and quarrels that even the irenic optimists in Brussels cannot take on' (Hill, 2003, p. 103).

It is a valid question how much of this line of argumentation of the EU ruling out a country's membership prospects based on geopolitical considerations we will be able to observe in this work, given that we look at instances of countries that were granted a membership perspective. While we may, thus, not be able to observe this part of the argumentation of the geopolitical narrative, the point is that we expect such a narrative to not shy away from naming geopolitical considerations as driving motivation behind the decision-making. Simply put, a geopolitical narrative that presents the EU as geopolitical actor in the realm of enlargement would not hide behind a language of values and belonging but rather be clear in viewing enlargement for what it is, namely an inherently geopolitical act.

4. 4. 6 Enlargement Criteria

The formal accession criteria are the same than those of the peace narrative, namely Article 49 of the TEU (EU, 2012) and the Copenhagen criteria. While, as O'Brennan (2006) notes, the EU accession framework is rather technical and functional, with issues of 'high politics' like foreign policy, security considerations, and diplomacy receiving little attention, it is still perfectly logical for a geopolitical narrative to base accession on the fulfilment of formal membership criteria. Merit-based enlargement based on the Copenhagen criteria is not just consistent with the peace narrative, but also with a geopolitical narrative. 'Adherence to the Copenhagen criteria would […] improve the politico-military security of current EU members. In other words, making membership conditional on adherence to liberal values is consistent with both a constructivist and a geopolitical perspective' (Skålnes, 2005, p. 229).

The quote by Skålnes (2005), however, does demonstrate once again that there is a predisposition within the Copenhagen criteria for values, with the political criteria dominating (Pridham, 2007). However, next to the formal Copenhagen criteria there has been a rise of more foreign policy related factors (Crombois, 2017; Pridham, 2007; Veleva-Eftimova, 2023). Pridham (2007) argues that next to political criteria other factors such as high politics and geopolitical considerations have gained influence over enlargement related decisions. In the case of the WB, for example, dealing with the legacies of past conflicts has led to 'a greater overlap between conditionality and EU foreign policy' (Pridham, 2007, p. 465). This is in line with a geopolitical narrative which regards enlargement as mean to increase the EU's international weight. The same is true when linking NATO membership aspirations with

chances of joining the EU (Veleva-Eftimova, 2023) or when considering whether provisions of energy independency should be included in Association Agreements (AA) (Crombois, 2017).

Therefore, we expect the geopolitical narrative to also uphold the importance of a merit-based enlargement based on the Copenhagen criteria, since it increases the chances of stable countries joining that do not torpedo the EU's security from within. Importantly, the geopolitical narrative is expected to pair the traditional Copenhagen criteria with more foreign policy related factors, such as the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) alignment.

4. 4. 7 Most Important Copenhagen Criteria Dimension

Most importantly, the geopolitical narrative that regards the EU as a geopolitical actor, would argue that ultimately all provisions of the Copenhagen criteria can be outdone by the geopolitical necessity to enlarge. The historical precedent is the Helsinki European Council's decision in 1999 to open accession negotiations also with Bulgaria, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Slovakia, and Romania without these countries having made progress regarding the Copenhagen criteria. Rather, it was the increased threat perception that spurred the EU into the decision to open accession talks, with member states having suggested that

> '*when candidate countries are facing clear threats in the heart of their neighbourhood, the EU should start negotiations with them to mitigate the deteriorating effect, and that in this light the full compliance of the Copenhagen criteria was of less significance*' (Higashino, 2004, p. 359).

A similar precedence of geopolitical considerations over fulfillment of the Copenhagen criteria has occurred when Bulgaria and Romania finally joined the EU in 2007 (Anghel & Džankić, 2023; Anghel & Jones, 2022, 2024a, 2024b; Veleva-Eftimova, 2023). For Anghel and Jones (2024b), the CEE enlargement has indicated that the EU is flexible in applying membership criteria and that 'accession reflects the broader requirements for European security more than the transformation of the candidate countries' (Anghel & Jones, 2024b, p. 2). As Anghel and Jones (2024a) note, the red lines for disallowing candidate countries from joining seem to be few, with countries having become members despite having frozen conflicts, occupied territory or secessionist movements.

Again, we do not necessarily expect the geopolitical narrative to openly state that it will disregard the Copenhagen criteria in favour of geopolitical considerations when required. As argued above, the fulfilment of the Copenhagen criteria is in its interest. However, we do expect to witness a language which presents enlargement as urgent and as necessity, which means that meeting the Copenhagen criteria might be a less important factor.

4. 4. 8 Metaphors

Finally, which type of metaphors do we expect the geopolitical narrative to use? Firstly, we expect the narrative to adopt a less emotionally charged and a more pragmatic language compared to the peace narrative. In a more realistic outlook on international relations, we would expect enlargement to be presented as a trade-off between ensuring that all accession criteria are met and geopolitical interests. We expect the geopolitical narrative to highlight 'the trade-offs of realizing enlargement […] versus the trade-offs of *not* realizing enlargement' (Scicluna & Auer, 2023, p. 54, emphasis in original). Therefore, we expect the geopolitical narrative to talk about the *costs and benefits* of choosing enlargement over non-action. As Higashino (2004) argues, while the peace narrative is expected to talk about the 'moral obligation' of enlargement, a geopolitical narrative will focus on the 'costs' and 'risks' related to (non-)enlargement. The geopolitical narrative would present enlargement as '*investment*'. Again, this shows a realistic outlook on international relations which sees the EU being willing to make trade-offs in its accession criteria as a short-term cost, while winning weight as geopolitical actor in the long-term. Therefore, enlargement is seen as imperfect solution that is nevertheless attractive for the EU because of the return on investment it offers, namely turning the EU into a more powerful geopolitical actor.

Another metaphor that we might observe is presenting enlargement as *necessity*, *need* or *imperative* (Anghel & Jones, 2024a). We expect this due to the historical developments around the CEE expansion, when enlargement was similarly presented as necessity simply because all other alternatives would have been worse (Anghel & Jones, 2024a). Enlargement may not be the EU's preferred option, especially when candidate countries do not sufficiently fulfil the Copenhagen criteria, but 'a failure to act would be even more perilous' (Cecchini et al., 2001, p. 156). Presenting accession as the only viable option considering a threat turns the attention away from candidate countries and their fulfilment of the accession criteria towards the international environment. In this regard, it is also reasonable to expect that the geopolitical narrative will make more references to the international system and to the main actors that operate in it, when justifying enlargement-related decisions.

4. 5 Linking the Peace and the Geopolitical Narrative

After having explored the peace and the geopolitical narrative in detail and having established what they may look like when applied to enlargement, it is now time to move towards the empirical part of this work to explore whether we can find the narratives in enlargement-related

documents, and if so if they take the expected form. Before doing so, I would like to make one last point by briefly outlining the possibility of finding a geopolitical narrative that serves to uphold the EU's traditional peace narrative. As argued in the theory chapter, OSS assume that political actors have multiple narratives that sustain their sense of self. The theoretical expectation is, therefore, that we will not find *either* the peace narrative *or* the geopolitical narrative but that we will find *both.* That is why this work is interested in analysing how their salience changed over time and how they relate to one another in EU documents.

Since we have seen that the peace narrative and the geopolitical narrative are contrasting each other in many of the characteristics listed above, the question how the EU manages to incorporate both into the same policy without creating obvious contradictions is particularly interesting. The point that I would like to raise here is the potential for presenting the need for a geopolitical EU as a mean to protect the EU as value-based, special actor. While such an argumentation contains an obvious contradiction in so far that becoming a traditional geopolitical actor would necessarily stripe the EU of its special status, it still is a plausible way to link the geopolitical narrative with the peace narrative.

Cachia and DeBattista (2023) argue that it is feasible for the EU to argue that if it is to maintain its original scope, namely, to provide peace, it needs to develop more security capabilities. Thus, maintaining peace could serve the EU as justification to re-invent itself in geopolitical terms. Russia is identified as one reason why 'in order to continue the commitment initiated by the founding fathers, the rhetoric is that the European Union has to adapt to the new realities and has to react to the threats it is facing and which might threaten the whole European project' (Cachia & DeBattista, 2023, p. 716). Hence, a geopolitical EU becomes the precondition for the EU as peace project to continue existing.

For our purpose here, it is enough to keep in mind that the peace narrative and the geopolitical narrative will likely occur together and that they will be presented in a way that reduces the contradicting characteristics both narratives are built on. Presenting the geopolitical narrative as something that the international environment has turned into a requirement for the peace narrative to be able to survive is a potential way of how the two contrasting narratives could be mitigated. So far, everything outlined in this work has been derived from academic literature and my own theoretical reflections. To see whether we can observe both narratives as expected in the field of enlargement and how they relate to each other, it is now time to turn to the empirical part of this work. The next chapter introduces the data and methods used.

5. Method & Data

Having outlined the expected traits of the peace and the geopolitical narrative, it is time to turn empirical. This chapter introduces the method used to identify the narratives in enlargement policy and to determine their respective salience. Moreover, I will present Serbia, Albania, and BiH as the specific cases that will be analysed and demonstrate their appropriateness for the purpose of answering the research question. Then, I will briefly introduce all three cases and the enlargement-related documents that serve as basis for the empirical investigation. Finally, I will justify why the research interest of this work is limited to the European Commission as promoter of narratives in enlargement policy only. I start with presenting the method.

5. 1 Method

The common denominator of the wide variety of works in IR using OST is the conviction that political actors use narratives to achieve ontological security (Mitzen, 2018a). Perhaps unsurprisingly, given the vast number of works that explore narratives since the 'narrative turn' in IR, there is no methodological consensus on how narratives ought to be analysed. Indeed, many authors use the term 'narrative analysis' loosely to indicate that their papers seek to identify the narratives of a particular actor or a specific policy field, but what they do empirically is conducting a document analysis (Kaiser, 2015), discourse analysis (Bosse & Vieira, 2023; Schaub, 2021), qualitative content analysis (Jones & McBeth, 2010; Nemec & Zorić, 2025) or use histography as a method (Subotić, 2016). Often, authors fail to provide details on what their 'narrative analysis' entails in methodological terms (Allison-Reumann, 2020; Crombois, 2017; Della Sala, 2010, 2016, 2017; Johansson-Nogués, 2018). Therefore, Miskimmon and O'Loughlin (2019) have a point when noting that 'there are some methodological problems in this literature' (p. 270) referring to how many articles use the concepts of 'narrative' and 'discourse' interchangeably and treat them as if they were the same.

Moving on to those works that do not only claim to conduct a narrative analysis but actually do so, we are once again met with a great heterogeneity of approaches. To illustrate the broad variety of approaches to narrative analysis, I have collected some of them in *Table 3.*

Table 3: Overview of different models for narrative analysis	
A. Narrative properties analysis model by Burke (1966) Each narrative has five properties. By looking for these properties, a narrative can be structurally	**B. Narrative actant model by Greimas (1983), as modified by Fiol (1990)** Each narrative contains six actant roles. By searching for these six actant roles, narratives can be identified. The six actant roles are:

and analytically identified. The five properties are: 1. *Character/actor* 2. *Setting/environment/scene* 3. *Conflict or action* 4. *Tools* 5. *Resolution or goal* ***Used by:*** Miskimmon and O'Loughlin (2019). ***Empirical use:*** Properties are used to identify narratives in elite interviews and news media content. In addition, Miskimmon and O'Loughlin (2019) also analyse the presence of strategic narratives by looking for system, identity, and issue narratives.	1. *Destinator* 2. *Receiver* 3. *Subject* 4. *Object* 5. *Adjuvant* 6. *Traitor* ***Used by:*** Biegoń (2013); Hernandez et al. (2023). ***Empirical use:*** Actant roles are reconstructed and extensively mapped, empirical material is systematised to find overarching narratives. For each identified narrative, actant roles are then presented separately.
C. Narrative analysis model by Mishler (1995) Each narrative can be analysed according to the following dimensions: 1. *Narrative structure* 2. *Narrative identity* 3. *Narrative engagement* 4. *Narrative change* 5. *Narrative (in)security* 6. *Narrative norms* ***Used by:*** Manners and Murray (2016). ***Empirical use:*** Documents are analysed over time to identify their narratives. Identified narratives are presented separately focusing on how they structure events, what they narrate as an actor's identity, how their audience engagement evolved, how the narrative changed, and whether the narrative is motivated by security or insecurity as well as what norms it contains.	**D. Narrative policy framework analysis based on Jones et al. (2014)** Each narrative consists of specific building blocks, which are: 1. *Setting* 2. *Characters* 3. *Plot* 4. *Moral of the story/policy solution* ***Used by:*** Nessel and Verhaeghe (2022). ***Empirical use:*** Thematic coding of documents is used to identify the setting, characters, plot, and policy solution of a narrative. The identified building blocks are then presented separately to demonstrate the broader policy narrative that spans across texts and time in a specific policy field.

All models outlined in the above, are narrative analyses. Yet, they contain stark differences which are easy to observe. The models by Burke (1966), Greimas (1983), and Jones et al. (2014) focus on identifying specific elements within a single narrative. Greimas' (1983) model in particular concentrates on the relation between different roles within the narrative and how they relate to one another without considering the policy implications that follow from the narrative. The models by Burke (1966) and by Jones et al. (2014) are the most similar, since they both examine the characters and setting of a specific narrative and look at the policy

solution that gets derived from the narrative's plotline. The addition that Miskimmon and O'Loughlin (2019) provide to Burke (1966), by also searching for system, identity, and issue narratives is important, since it opens up the focus of the empirical analysis towards situating a particular narrative in a broader context of viewing the international system, certain policy issues, and the political actor's role from a specific perspective that arises from the narrative itself. This addition is important, since it re-connects narratives with the core of OST, namely that narratives serve as cognitive and normative maps for political actors.

The relation between issue, system, and identity narratives is important in the context of the present work. While we are focusing on enlargement and, thus, on a certain policy issue, the idea is that the way enlargement-related decisions are presented in the narrative itself also has wider implications for how the international system and most importantly, the identity of the EU as political actor, is constructed, is crucial. This relation is something that will inform the empirical analysis. Beyond that, the approaches by Burke (1966), Greimas (1983), and Jones et al. (2014) do not fully suit the research interest of the present work. With their extensive focus on the elements of a single narrative, these approaches are more appropriate for inductively discovering new narratives to develop a first description of their elements. Given that we already have an expectation for what both the peace and the geopolitical narrative will look like, we are not interested in using the analysis to describe their elements in detail. The focus is more on discovering the dynamics between the two narratives in relation to each other.

In this regard, the model developed by Mishler (1995) and used by Manners and Murray (2016) would be the most appropriate one. Firstly, it allows for analysing various narratives at the same time. Secondly, it is the most dynamic of the models, since it explicitly looks at narrative change by assessing how narratives are present in policy documents across time and how their respective salience has evolved. This is in line with the research interest of the present work. Moreover, investigating the narrative identity and the norms the narrative contains provides a close link to OST and the assumption that narratives shape the sense of self of a political actor as well as the norms said political actor chooses to uphold. Yet, Mishler's (1995) model for narrative analysis contains aspects we are less interested in such as analysing the narrative's structure or measuring narrative engagement. For the latter we would have not only consider policy documents to detect the presence of a certain narrative, but to also include some type of content analysis of news media to determine whether a narrative was successful in transmitting a certain message to a certain audience. This goes beyond the scope of this work. Therefore, while the dimensions of narrative change and narrative norms are highly relevant for the

context of the present work, other dimensions, such as narrative engagement, are not. This renders Mishler's (1995) model a somewhat appropriate approach towards narrative analysis, but with the pitfall that some of the dimensions could not be explored since they go beyond our research interest and the scope of this work.

Furthermore, even analysing narrative change would pose problems when using Mishler's (1995) model since we would have to look *continuously* at a certain policy field to determine how a narrative has evolved. That, again, poses problems of feasibility, since we cannot look at enlargement from the first enlargement round in 1973 to now. Rather, we will have to focus on certain periods, which in turn allows us to say whether a certain narrative was present at a specific time and how dominant it was in relation to other narratives, but it is not possible to trace the evolution of said narrative as such. Hence, while Mishler's (1995) approach is promising due to its focus on temporal analysis, it is not appropriate for the present work.

Having explored the variety of approaches for conducting a narrative analysis and having considered the alternatives outlined above, I have concluded that another, fifth approach is the most appropriate for our research interest. It is it one developed by Czarniawska (2004) in the SAGE handbook on how to use narratives in social science research. Again, this model for narrative analysis builds onto different dimensions, which in this case are the *chronicle,* the *mimesis,* and the *emplotment*. While the meaning behind these terms is not easily accessible at the first reading, I believe that they offer great value when it comes to providing clear guidance on each step of the narrative analysis. I will expand on what each of these terms entails one by one, starting with the first step of the empirical analysis, namely identifying the chronicle.

The *chronicle* is the most straightforward of the three dimensions since it is also used outside of narrative analysis. It commonly refers to a historical account of events that get arranged according to their time sequence. As Czarniawska (2004) writes, the chronicle of a narrative analysis simply lists what events and developments are happening and when. Therefore, we can understand the chronicle as an extraction of the events and developments reported in each document, which are being put into a raw sequence to understand what is happening and when. This can entail a description of which actions are taken by a political actor, the timeline of events or a list of policies, decisions, and initiatives. Perhaps the most important aspect here is about what the chronicle is *not.* In contrast to the mimesis and the emplotment, the chronicle is not an interpretation of events and decisions. The chronicle functions as the empirical base on which the interpretive steps of the narrative analysis later build on. By extracting what is

happening in a document and sequencing it into a timeline it is shown that 'events have an orientation in time (start time, duration), place, situation and characters' (Bontje & Slinger, 2017, p. 187). In doing so, the base for the next analytical step, the mimesis, is laid, since the assumption is that the sequence of events and decisions taken reveals something about the sense-making activities of political actors and brings us a step closer to their narratives.

The *mimesis*, then, looks at how these events and decisions are being represented in the document. In fact, the term 'mimesis' refers to how reality is represented, imitated or re-created in art. Thus, mimesis studies how events are being represented in a document – how is the story being told, how are events presented, and developments being constructed? With the mimesis we look at representation of real-life events in text form. By asking 'how does it look?', mimesis is the 'dimension that allows the listener to construct a virtual picture of events' (Czarniawska, 2010, p. 60). To understand how this virtual picture of events is created, the mimesis focuses on the narrative devices being employed by the political actor in a document (Bontje & Slinger, 2017). Bringing us closer to the narrative we seek to detect, one important narrative tool are metaphors. As Czarniawska (2010) points out, 'metaphor' means a transport from one place to another in Greek, thus, referring to the exact act of reconstructing real-life events in documents and representing them in a certain way. Part of the mimesis stage of analysis is identifying the metaphors used by political actors and to assess the way in which events and actions are being portrayed. The characteristics we have defined in Chapter 4 will serve as an important point of reference when analysing the metaphors as well as the overall language, appeals, and calls of a given document.

The final dimension is the *emplotment*. This third stage will be where we finally see the narrative emerging. Emplotment 'means introducing structure that allows making sense of the events reported. Traditionally, it answers the question: Why?' (Czarniawska, 2010, p. 69). Having extracted a sequence of events in the chronicle part of the analysis and having looked at the tools used to represent these events in texts in the mimesis part, the emplotment takes the final step of assessing whether narratives can be identified and if so, which ones. Hence, the emplotment reconstructs the underlying narrative that emerges from the events' sequence and the language and metaphors used. By asking 'why?', the emplotment focuses on the meaning that is created in each document. Through 'introducing logical structure which allows making sense of the events' (Czarniawska, 2010, p. 60), we move closer to the sense-making activities of political actors in narratives. 'The plot functions to transform a chronicle or listing of events

into a schematic whole by highlighting and recognizing the contribution that certain events make to the development of the whole' (Czarniawska, 2010, p. 69).

In practical terms, the final analytical stage of identifying the emplotment involves assessing if a narrative emerges that puts the events into a coherent storyline. We look at what narrative links the events together and makes sense of them. This involves looking at what is being presented as the problem, what meaning is being attributed to certain actions, and finally what solution is presented. Once again, the characteristics we have carefully set out for both the peace and the geopolitical narrative in Chapter 4 will play an important role in this analytical step. By giving us clear ideas of what we can expect either of these narratives to look like, we can use an abductive method to see whether the narratives that emerge in the emplotment stage correspond to either of these narratives.

To summarise, the model for narrative analysis proposed by Czarniawska (2004) is composed of the following three stages of analysis:

Table 4: Overview of the stages of narrative analysis following Czarniawska (2004)

	1. *Chronicle*	2. *Mimesis*	3. *Emplotment*
Description	Listing of events in their temporal sequence	Representation of real-life events in the text	Identification of narratives that make sense of the text
Question	What is happening and when?	How are the events being constructed and represented?	What do the events mean? Why do they occur?
Character	Descriptive	Interpretative	Analytical

The narrative analysis model by Czarniawska (2004) was used by Cachia and DeBattista (2023). Their article, therefore, serves as an important methodological reference point for this work on how to correctly apply the model. Moreover, using a model that is developed within a methodological handbook offers the advantage that there is ample explanation on its use. Another benefit of using Czarniawska's model is the fact that it can be used for abductive thematic coding, namely by allowing for deriving expected features for each narrative from academic literature and theoretical reflections, while remaining open towards finding new, unexpected features. In what perhaps resembles the approach of a post-structuralist discourse analysis, by using this method it is possible to engage deeply with each document to determine

what the chronicle, mimesis, and emplotment are and whether we can detect the peace and/or the geopolitical narrative. By examining multiple enlargement-related documents within the same period, it is possible to assess whether the peace and/or the geopolitical narrative are present in that period, how strong their salience is in relation to each other, and how they relate to one another. Finally, by repeating this analysis with various enlargement-related documents at three distinct time periods (see section 5. 2. 1 below), we can say something about how their salience has evolved over time, providing an answer to our research question. Moreover, we might discover new features of both narratives, providing us with a better understanding for how either of these narratives look like in the field of enlargement.

A few caveats are due. From the narrative analysis models presented in this section, the one by Czarniawska (2004) is perhaps the most interpretivist. This invites subjective judgements that fall short on scientific criteria. In this regard, it is important to state clearly that all approaches on how to conduct a narrative analysis are inevitably containing a degree of subjectivity. That is because, as Nemec and Zorić (2025) point out, 'there is subjectivity involved both in the narrative itself, which focuses on individual speeches constructed from a particular worldview, and in the interpretation of the analysis by different researchers' (p. 644). In so far that narratives are part of the sense-making activities of political actors that provide them with ontological security, they are necessarily subjective both on the political actor's end that creates them and on the audience's side that receives them. Subjectivity is, hence, not an issue as such. Given that the researcher is part of the audience of a narrative, uncovering the subjectivity of helps demonstrating how a specific political actor views and understands a policy issue, its situatedness in the international system, and their own role in it (Nemec & Zorić, 2025).

The danger is reading a specific narrative into a policy document without it clearly being contained driven by the interest to contribute something to the existing literature. To prevent this, the characteristics set out in Chapter 4 that we expect both narratives to possess, are an important guide throughout the process of conducting the narrative analysis. However, it is important to mention that the openness for abductive coding that Czarniawska's (2004) model allows does come at the risk of potentially over-classifying findings as being part of either narrative for the sake of discovering something and avoiding null results, where neither of the narratives' expected characteristics are detected. Therefore, an important judgement to make will be how much of the expected features of a narrative were observed in a specific document and period. Hence, we must carefully evaluate whether it is justified to view a certain narrative as detected when only some of its expected characteristics are observed.

5. 2 Data

The research question specifically asks for how the narratives put forward by one particular actor in the field of enlargement have changed over the last decade. This actor is the European Commission. The choice to only focus on narratives promoted by the Commission merits some justification. Firstly, the decision to focus exclusively on Commission is, as so often, motivated by pragmatic reasons of feasibility. To analyse how narratives have changed across time, it is necessary to investigate several periods. Doing so for several actors each time would exceed what is empirically possible in the scope of a master's thesis. That is not to deny that other EU actors, such as the European Council, the Council of the European Union or the European Parliament, do not have enlargement-related narratives of their own. They might be the same as those of the Commission, slightly differ in some details or be entirely different. Moreover, in the case of the European Parliament, for example, it is likely that narratives would diverge between what is being promoted in official Parliament documents vs. how individual political groups represented in Parliament narrate enlargement. In the European Council and the Council of the European Union narratives could diverge according to a member state's geographic position or economic interests (Schimmelfennig, 2001). All of this serves to highlight that accounting for the variety of narratives promoted by different EU actors at different periods goes beyond what a master's thesis with a reputable scientific standard can deliver.

The question, then, is why the European Commission? The reasons for choosing the Commission as the one EU actor to focus on are both *functional* and *evidence-based*. Regarding functional reasons, the Commission is a key player in enlargement at all stages. If a country applies for EU membership, the Commission evaluates its application and prepares an opinion (*Avis*) on the country's eligibility, which serves as the European Council's basis for the unanimous decision on whether to grant candidate status. The Commission also prepares the annual progress reports, which lay out which reform progress candidate or potential candidate countries have made, and which challenges they still need to address. Once the necessary reforms have been conducted, it is the Commission who prepares a recommendation for the Council of the EU to open accession negotiations. If the Council unanimously decides to open accession negotiations and adopts a negotiating framework, prepared by the Commission, the Commission is in charge of monitoring the progress for each chapter of the *acquis communautaire*. Moreover, the Commission has an important financial and technical role in the enlargement process, through managing the financial Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA) and by offering technical support to candidate countries on how to implement

EU legislation. Lastly, the Commission is also the EU institution which communicates the strategic objectives of enlargement to the public, by issuing policy documents such as annual communications on enlargement which accompany the release of the individual country progress reports.

Communications and strategy papers are particularly suited types of documents for narrative analysis since 'they contain policy ideas, goals and principles' (Cianciara, 2017, p. 52) that inform a given narrative. Hence, the Commission's function in recommending candidate status and the opening of accession negotiations, as well as its periodic communications of the overall strategic objectives driving enlargement policy, make it an interesting EU actor to focus on. On the evidence backed side, the Commission has repeatedly been shown to be active as 'narrative entrepreneur' (Subotić, 2016). Next to having a key leadership function in enlargement (Pridham, 2007; Skålnes, 2005), the Commission is 'well known for its policy activism and is arguably well placed to frame issues towards its fields of competences' (Hakansson, 2024, p. 26). As 'narrative entrepreneur', the Commission is active in creating and sustaining narratives. Della Sala presents evidence how narratives often 'emanate from the EU institutions, primarily the Commission' (2013, p. 169) and how 'political elites in the EU – primarily in the Commission' (2010, p. 3) have always understood the importance of narratives.

Furthermore, there is evidence that the Commission is both active in promoting the peace narrative and a narrative based on the EU's need to develop more hard power. Regarding the peace narrative, Crombois (2017) finds that 'such a narrative is deeply embedded in the EU enlargement experience. It is mostly produced by EU institutions and the Commission in particular' (p. 120). This suggests that the Commission is an appropriate research subject to identify the presence of the peace narrative in enlargement. For the geopolitical narrative, it is also reasonable to expect Commission to be one of its main promoters since the Commission is among the main actors promoting a more security focused EU (Cachia & DeBattista, 2023). Thus, it is justified to expect the Commission to 'create new narratives on security and peace to strengthen the EU in the security area' (Cachia & DeBattista, 2023, p. 703).

The Commission has gradually grown into the main actor within the EU institutions that promotes a deeper integration in security and defence (Cachia & DeBattista, 2023). This trend has been accelerated by the outbreak of the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine (Blockmans, 2022; Fiott, 2023; Hakansson, 2024; Marinova, 2023). As Blockmans (2022) shows, supranational EU institutions adopted a leadership role in the EU's political messaging

following the invasion, with the Commission President and the HR/VP playing 'unprecedently active roles in the EU's response to the war since February 2022' (Marinova, 2023, p. 128). The advocacy of the Commission for more EU security and defence powers serves its self-interest of becoming a more important actor in these areas. Therefore, the Commission being particularly active as narrative entrepreneur in the aftermath of the start of the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine can be regarded as opportunist act, in which the Commission intends to seize a window of opportunity to strengthen its own position within the EU's institutional architecture (Hakansson, 2024).

What is important for our case here, is that there is ample reason to choose the Commission as the one actor within the EU's wider set of institutions to focus on. In particular, the strategy papers and communications are an appropriate source to study narratives (Cianciara, 2017). The next decision that merits justification is the choice of periods and cases of enlargement-related events for the analysis.

5. 2. 1 Case Selection

Having justified why this work focuses exclusively on the Commission as narrative entrepreneur, it is now time to defend the case selection. Two broad decisions must be justified: the choice of which periods to analyse and the selection of country cases to focus on. Both decisions are interlinked since choosing which periods to concentrate on also limits the options of which countries were part of the accession process at that time. Starting with the choice of periods, the research question is concerned with analysing how the narratives promoted by the Commission in the field of enlargement have changed over the last decade. Since we are interested in analysing *change across time,* we need multiple periods of analysis. The question, then, is which ones. One reflection that we must make in this regard is thinking about events that reasonably could have altered the EU's narratives to then choose periods that precede or succeed these moments to assess if and how the Commission's narratives have changed.

Two such events spring to mind: one is the release of the EUGS in June 2016 (EEAS, 2016), the other is the start of the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine in February 2022. The publication day of the EUGS is not relevant as such, but what matters is that the culmination of crises the EU was facing in the lead-up to the release of this policy document can be reasonably expected to have changed the EU's outlook on international relations and its own role in them. The EUGS includes a more sobering outlook on international relations, with relations with other actors having become more complex and hostile. Lehne (2020) argues that

the EUGS ‘indicated a shift in the Union’s approach’ away from transformative ambitions towards protecting EU interests and ensuring stability and resilience.

There is ample reason to believe that this shift with its more pragmatic understanding of international relations could have impacted the narratives promoted by the Commission in enlargement. The expectation is that the peace narrative might have lost salience around this period, which saw a reorientation of the EU away from promoting values in its external relations towards a focus on strategic interests by applying ‘principled pragmatism’. In the manner of a swan song to the peace narrative, Della Sala (2023) argues that ‘clearly, the 2014 annexation of Crimea and the ongoing conflict in eastern Ukraine made EU actors more aware of what had made the EU so exceptional since its foundation might not be congruent with the unilateral re-drawing of borders of a sovereign state’ (p. 367). On the other hand, the geopolitical turmoil that preceded the publication of the EUGS, could have boosted the geopolitical narrative by rendering it more appropriate for dealing with developments at the global stage. Indeed, Crombois (2017) notes that the geopolitical narrative has ‘gathered momentum in the aftermath of the Russia-Ukraine crisis of the autumn of 2013’ (p. 121). Add to that the rising numbers of migrants arriving to Europe in 2015 alongside the historic first of a member state leaving the EU and the first Presidency of Donald Trump in the US and it becomes reasonable to expect that all these events combined might have impacted the EU’s sense of self and its normative and cognitive maps.

Therefore, this work regards it as justified to assume that something in the narratives promoted by the Commission in the field of enlargement might have changed around 2016 (Crombois, 2017; Della Sala, 2023). To assess whether this assumption is true, we need to analyse which narratives were present in enlargement-related documents put forward by the Commission pre-2016 (t_1) and post-2016 (t_2). Consequently, we need to choose a period before 2016 and one after 2016 for our analysis. The other event that could have reasonably impacted the narratives promoted in enlargement is the start of the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine. As discussed elsewhere, the Ukraine war not only impacted the EU’s physical security but also its ontological security by showing how the EU’s self-understanding as normative, exceptional actor is increasingly at odds with the reality of the international order (Della Sala, 2023). Moreover, the fact that the war has put enlargement back on the EU agenda (Anghel & Jones, 2024a), including the accession of countries whose membership perspectives were previously regarded as equalling zero (Verdun & Chira, 2011) and that with a ‘speed of the EU decision-making process [that] was unprecedented’ (Anghel & Džankić, 2023, p. 487) could hint at a

change in the dominant narrative guiding enlargement policy. Thus, this work is also interested in analysing whether the narratives put forward have changed in the aftermath of the start of the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine. The expectation would be that another rise in salience of the geopolitical narrative can be observed in the aftermath of February 2022. Thus, the analysis will include a third period (t_3) post-February 2022 to assess how the narratives in enlargement have evolved after the Ukraine war. *Table 5* displays the three periods of analysis:

Table 5: Periods of analysis		
t_1 – Period before 2016	*t_2 – Period between 2016 and February 2022*	*t_3 – Period after February 2022*
Enlargement-related event that occurred before the start of the EU's polycrisis, exemplified by the release of the EUGS.	Enlargement-related event that occurred in the aftermath of the publication of the EUGS and before the start of the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine.	Enlargement-related event that occurred after the start of the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine in February 2022.

As mentioned above, the periods chosen are interlinked with the enlargement-related events that can be analysed. Having set out which periods will be analysed in broad terms, the next step is to look at what types of enlargement-related events occurred in each of these periods. By 'enlargement-related event' I mean three types of events in which we could expect a significant number of strategic documents to have been released by the Commission, which can serve as basis for the narrative analysis:

1. *Type of enlargement-related event:* recommendation to grant candidate status.
2. *Type of enlargement-related event:* recommendation to open accession negotiations.
3. *Type of enlargement-related event:* positive opinion on granting EU membership.

These three types of enlargement-related events are broadly what we can analyse given that for each of these the Commission plays an important role, and we can consequently expect that several strategic documents and communications were published. According to this categorisation of enlargement-related events and the three periods we have established, these are the enlargement-related events that fall into each period:

Table 6: Overview of enlargement-related events in the relevant three time periods		
t_1 – Period before 2016	*t_2 – Period between 2016 and February 2022*	*t_3 – Period after February 2022*
• **North Macedonia** - *From 01/10/2009 onwards:* Recommendation by the Commission to open accession negotiations (repeated in 2010, 2011, 2012, 2013, 2014, with conditions added in 2015). • **Montenegro** - *09/11/2010:* Recommendation by the Commission to grant candidate status. Candidate status granted by the European Council on 17/12/2010. - *12/10/2011:* Recommendation by the Commission to open accession negotiations (repeated on 22/05/2012). Endorsed by the European Council on 26/06/2012. • **Serbia** - *12/10/2011:* Recommendation by the Commission to grant candidate status. Candidate status granted by the European Council on 01/03/2012. - *22/04/2013:* Recommendation by the Commission to open accession negotiations. Endorsed by the European Council on 28/06/2013. • **Croatia** - *12/10/2011:* Positive opinion by the Commission on	• **Albania** - *09/11/2016:* Recommendation by the Commission to open accession negotiations (repeated on 01/04/2018 and on 29/05/2019). Endorsed by the European Council on 26/03/2020. • **North Macedonia** - *01/04/2018:* Unconditional recommendation by the Commission to open accession negotiations. Repeated on 29/05/2019. Endorsed by the European Council on 26/03/2020.	• **Ukraine** - *17/06/2022:* Recommendation by the Commission to grant candidate status. Candidate status granted by the European Council on 23/06/2022. - *08/11/2023:* Recommendation by the Commission to open accession negotiations. Endorsed by the European Council on 14/12/2023. • **Moldova** - *17/06/2022:* Recommendation by the Commission to grant candidate status. Candidate status granted by the European Council on 23/06/2022. - *08/11/2023*: Recommendation by the Commission to open accession negotiations. Endorsed by the European Council on 14/12/2023. • **Georgia** - *17/06/2022*: Recommendation by the Commission to grant a European perspective. European perspective granted by European Council on 23/06/2022. - *08/11/2023*: Recommendation by the Commission to grant candidate status. Candidate status granted by the European Council on

accession. European Council adopts decision on Croatia's admission on 05/12/2011, accession treaty signed on 09/12/2011, EU membership valid from 01/07/2013 onwards. • **Albania** - *10/10/2012:* Recommendation by the Commission to grant candidate status subject to the completion of key reforms. Unconditional recommendation of candidate status on 16/10/2013. Candidate status granted by the European Council on 27/06/2014.		14/12/2023 on the understanding that reforms are taken. • **Bosnia and Herzegovina** - *12/10/2022:* Recommendation by the Commission to grant candidate status on the understanding that a number of steps are taken. Candidate status granted by the European Council on 15/12/2022. - *08/11/2023*: Recommendation by the Commission to open accession negotiations. European Council decision on 14/12/2023 to open accession negotiations once necessary degree of compliance with membership criteria is achieved. Commission repeats its recommendation on 12/03/2024. Endorsed by the European Council on 21/03/2024.

So which case to select for each period? The cases to choose from are vast for t_1 and t_3, with considerably less options for t_2. The overriding concern for the case selection is the principle of *comparability*. To ensure the highest possible degree of comparability between the cases selected for each of the three periods, two selection strategies exist. On the one hand, picking the same country in each period would ensure that the country context remains stable, eliminating the possibility that some events or developments affect one case only and impact the narratives identified. By picking a country that in t_1 received candidate status, progressed in t_2 towards accession negotiations, and was granted EU membership in t_3 we could follow a given country's path towards EU membership and analyse how the narratives and their respective salience have changed. A quick check of *Table 6*, however, shows that no country made such a progression through the different stages of the accession process in our three predefined periods. Thus, this selection strategy cannot be used.

Moreover, there would have been an important pitfall of using such a selection strategy: an observed change in the salience of narratives might have not been due to an altered self-understanding of the EU, but rather a consequence of different types of narratives dominating in different stages of the enlargement process. For example, it seems reasonable to expect that when handing out candidate status, which is a lower hanging fruit in terms of commitment than entering accession negotiations, a different narrative could dominate. Hence, the second selection strategy is choosing the same type of enlargement-related event (recommendation of candidate status, recommendation of opening accession negotiations or recommendation of granting EU membership) for each of the three periods. The advantage of this selection strategy is that by analysing three cases of the same instance of enlargement-related event the likelihood is higher that an observed change in the salience of narratives is due to a modified self-understanding of the EU. The pitfall of using this selection strategy is that the observations will only be valid for the chosen type of enlargement-related event and cannot be generalised to enlargement policy as such. For instance, if we find that the salience of the geopolitical narrative has risen for cases of granting candidate status across time, we cannot generalise this finding for instances of entering accession negotiations. That is, once again, because different stages of the enlargement process might be guided by different narratives.

Since the option of choosing the same country case for all three periods is ruled out and contains some clear disadvantages regardless, choosing the same type of enlargement-related event for all three periods is our chosen selection strategy. Once again, the options of what type of enlargement-related event to choose are limited by empirics. In t_2 we only have two instances of the Commission recommending to open accession negotiations, thus, this will have to be the enlargement-related type of event this work focuses on if we intend to analyse the same type of event for all three periods. This leaves us with the option of analysing either Albania or North Macedonia for t_2, while we have the choice between the opening of accession negotiations with North Macedonia, Montenegro, and Serbia for t_1 and with Ukraine, Moldova, and BiH for t_3.

To avoid selection bias, the selection of cases should be guided by the following considerations. Firstly, given that it is impossible to select the same country for all three periods, no case should be selected for two out of the three periods as this might distort the results. Secondly, while it is impossible to select the same country for all periods, it is beneficial for the reduction of biases introduced by different external factors to at least select three country cases within the same enlargement region. This consideration is important given that the narratives promoted

when it comes to the accession of the WB region might diverge from those promoted for the accession of the EaP countries. As Anghel and Džankić (2023) show, the accession context significantly differs between the WB countries, which have been in the waiting room of EU membership since the Thessaloniki European Council summit in 2003 and the EaP countries for whom 'enlargement was not even an option' (p. 489) for a long time. Choosing a WB candidate country for two periods and an EaP candidate country for the third could distort the findings simply because the context of and the challenges faced by these countries vary starkly.

Since we only have two instances of WB countries entering accession negotiations in t_2, this means that this work opts for WB countries for all three periods. Focusing on WB countries has the additional advantage that we get to analyse countries that have a longer history in EU enlargement policy. If we would have observed the enlargement narratives of countries like Ukraine, Moldova or Georgia, it is likely that a more geopolitical reasoning would have been present simply because of the geopolitical context that their membership perspectives were born out of. Especially Ukraine would have been an atypical case to analyse, given the country's involvement in the Russian war of aggression that likely played into its advancement towards EU membership. Similarly, the membership perspectives of Moldova and Georgia occurred in the slipstream of Ukraine's, also making strong geopolitical motives likely.

This leaves us with the options of North Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia for t_1, Albania or North Macedonia for t_2, while stipulating that BiH, as the only WB country for t_3, will be our chosen case. Moreover, North Macedonia cannot be chosen for t_1 and t_2 at the same time. The choice for t_1 and t_2 will be made depending on how much empirical material exists for each case. The idea is to analyse documents issued by the Commission in a time window of six months in the lead-up and the aftermath of the recommendation to open accession negotiations with the selected country. Specifically, the documents this work analyses can be communications by the Commission about the enlargement package in which the opening of accession talks was recommended, other related policy documents and press releases, press statements, as well as speeches made by the members of the Commission in relation to this recommendation. Importantly, while the analysis is focused on narratives promoted by the Commission, within the Commission policy documents, statements and speeches by different actors will be analysed including the Commission President, the HR/VP, the Commissioner responsible for enlargement, and others. This work includes documents related to the HR/VP, since the HR/VP is considered in their function as Vice-President of the Commission, thus, being a member of the Commission.

Having scanned through which empirical material exists for the remaining country options for t_1 and t_2, I have decided to focus on Serbia for t_1 and Albania for t_2. For both cases, ample empirical material exists on which the narrative analysis can be based. *Annex 1* lists the empirical material for each of the three cases. The sample was drawn up using a variety of different search strategies. Firstly, the website of the Commission was used to identify relevant documents that were published by the Commission around the time when the opening of accession negotiations was recommended. This way it is possible to collect press releases, press statements, policy documents, and speeches that were issued by the Commission and either concern the opening of accession negotiations directly or were released in close temporal proximity to it. Often, these documents contain direct quotes by the Commission President, the HR/VP or the Commissioner responsible for enlargement or speeches by either of these actors. To identify all relevant documents, a keyword search consisting of a country's name and terms like 'accession negotiations', 'accession', 'enlargement' or 'membership' was conducted. Additionally, I also searched for the country's name and the Commission President, HR/VP or enlargement Commissioner at the time. The same search strategy was repeated on the website of the EEAS.

As mentioned, the time frame for the analysis of each instance of opening of accession negotiations should be six months. These six months should cover the lead-up to the recommendation of starting accession negotiations and the aftermath. Nevertheless, taking into consideration how the identified documents are concentrated on certain weeks and months, I have decided to be flexible in choosing the exact period of these six months for each case. Thus, the date on which the Commission has recommended to open accession negotiations should be somewhat in the middle of the six-month period this work analyses but does not have to be the exact middle to ensure sufficient empirical material. For BiH, the start of accession negotiations was recommended on November 8, 2023. Not many relevant documents were issued in the build-up to this recommendation but many documents followed once the European Council first decided that accession negotiations should be opened once the country has reached the necessary degree of compliance with the membership criteria on December 14, 2023, and once the opening of accession negotiations was endorsed by the European Council on March 12, 2024. Therefore, to have sufficient material for the empirical analysis, I have decided to use 01/10/23 – 31/03/24 as period of analysis for BiH for t_3.

For Albania, our case for the t_2 period, matters are even more complicated. While I chose Albania over North Macedonia, seeing that more empirical material exists for the former, both

cases share the difficulty that the Commission did not recommend the opening of accession negotiations just once, but instead repeated it several times until the European Council endorsed the recommendation. For the case of Albania, the start of accession negotiations was first recommended by the Commission on November 9, 2016. This recommendation was repeated on April 1, 2018, May 29, 2019, as well as on March 2, 2023, before the European Council endorsed the recommendation on March 26, 2020. Since covering the period from the initial recommendation in 2016 until the recommendation was followed by the European Council in 2020 would exceed what is empirically possible in the context of this work, one of the recommendations must be picked for the analysis. Again, how much material was released by the Commission for each of these recommendations is the main factor when deciding. Seeing that most documents were released for the 2020 recommendation, it is our chosen one. The period of the analysis is 01/01/2020 – 30/06/2020 for Albania for t_2.

Finally, t_1 is the most complicated period of the three. The potential cases for t_1 are North Macedonia, Montenegro or Serbia. Seeing that North Macedonia is a complicated case in so far that the recommendation to open accession negotiations was issued by the Commission first in 2009 and then repeated several times up to year 2020, I have decided to focus on the clearer cases of Montenegro or Serbia. Given that more material is available for the Serbian case, I have picked Serbia for t_1. Nevertheless, t_1 having to be a period pre-2016 poses significant challenges when it comes to putting together the corpus of empirical material. That is because both on the website of the Commission and the EEAS, policy documents, press releases, and statements as well as speeches dating back to this period are scarce. In fact, the EEAS website offers no material for the Serbian analysis for which the Commission has recommended the opening of accession negotiations on April 22, 2013, which was endorsed by the European Council on June 28, 2013. While the website of the Commission does offer some relevant documents, they are more limited in quantity than those of Albania and BiH.

To increase the number of official EU documents, I have repeated the keyword search for the Serbian case using the platform 'European Sources Online', which links old press statements, press releases or speeches by the Commission, allowing me to increase the number of official EU documents for the Serbian case. But even with this additional measure, considerably less empirical material was identified for Serbia compared to the other two cases. To bring the number of sources to a comparable level, two alternative sampling strategies were considered. Firstly, if the period of analysis remains limited to six months, a way to get additional materials would be relying on news media articles that quote the Commission directly. Importantly, only

direct quotes of the Commission could be used for the analysis, since the purpose of this work is to analyse the narratives promoted by the Commission and not the narratives present about enlargement in news articles as such. Secondly, the more pragmatic solution would be to increase the length of the period analysed for t_1 so that additional official EU documents can be included in the corpus that otherwise narrowly miss the six months limit.

Having considered both options and being motivated by the overall goal of bringing the material for t_1 to a similar level than that for t_2 and t_3, I believe that increasing the length of the period of analysis for t_1 is the more appropriate option since it is more in line with the overall research objective of the present work. While I would have only used the direct quotes by the Commission in news media articles, there is still a risk that they might not have been reported correctly or could have been taken out of context. Moreover, given that I would have only relied on these direct quotes, the empirical material for t_1 would still have been considerably less. Therefore, I consider expanding the period of analysis for t_1 to a period longer than six months as better alternative. This way, by continuing to rely on official EU publications only, there is no risk of quotes being taken out of context. Furthermore, since Serbia got its recommendation of starting accession negotiations on April 22, 2013, extending the period of analysis for a bit in either direction does not risk an overlap with t_2.

Taking into consideration how the relevant documents identified for Serbia in 2013 are spread out, I choose 01/03/13 – 31/12/13 as period of analysis. By extending the period of analysis from six to nine months, we extend the number of official EU documents that the narrative analysis for t_3 is based on. Overall, this leaves us with the following cases and periods of analysis for t_1, t_2 and t_3 respectively:

Table 7: Overview of selected periods and country cases for the narrative analysis

t_1 – Period before 2016	*t_2 – Period between 2016 and February 2022*	*t_3 – Period after February 2022*
Case: Recommendation to open accession negotiations with Serbia (22/04/2013).	**Case:** Recommendation to open accession negotiations with Albania (as repeated on 02/03/2020).	**Case:** Recommendation to open accession negotiations with BiH (08/11/2023).
Period of analysis: 01/03/2013 – 31/12/2013.	**Period of analysis:** 01/01/2020 – 30/06/2020.	**Period of analysis:** 01/10/2023 – 31/03/2024.

5. 3 Analytical Steps

Seeing that this chapter has set out the method, data, cases, and periods of analysis, the next question is how the narrative analysis will proceed in practice. As mentioned, I will use the model of narrative analysis provided by Czarniawska (2004), which seeks to identify the chronicle, mimesis, and emplotment of each document to identify the narratives present. Having identified the relevant documents for each period of analysis as listed in Annex 1, the empirical analysis will be carried out for each period separately. Starting with the Serbian case for t_1, I will analyse each document separately to identify whether a narrative is present using Czarniawska's (2004) model of narrative analysis and if so, whether it is the peace or the geopolitical narrative. Czarniawska's (2004) model of narrative analysis will, thus, be used to assess whether a narrative is present in each enlargement-related document, while I will rely on the expected characteristics of the peace and the geopolitical narrative in enlargement policy, as defined in Chapter 4, to evaluate which narrative it is.

I will repeat this narrative analysis for all documents and all three periods. The overview of chronicle, mimesis, and emplotment and identified narratives for each document is provided in detail by *Annex 2*, which serves as a basis for the findings presented in the next chapter.

6. Analysis & Results

This chapter presents the findings of the narrative analysis carried out following the model by Czarniawska (2004) for the periods t_1 (Serbia), t_2 (Albania) and t_3 (BiH). The results are presented for each period and for each narrative separately, while their broader implications are being discussed in the next chapter.

6. 1 t_1 – Serbia

For t_1 (period before 2016) our case is Serbia. As t_1 deals with a time before the EU's full-fledged so-called 'polycrisis', which manifested itself in a more sober and pragmatic outlook on international relations as apparent in the EUGS (EEAS, 2016), we expect a more normative understanding of enlargement to be dominating. Hence, the expectation is that the peace narrative with its emphasis on enlargement as moral obligation to pacify the European continent and its focus on shared values and belonging to be dominant. We also expect that the peace narrative will be the most present in this period out of three periods analysed. Contrastingly, we assume that the geopolitical narrative will have little relevance, given that the EU's physical security was not yet under threat and that the international system was perceived as relatively stable, with multilateralism, interdependence, and cooperation being key features. This is especially true since we picked the recommendation to open accession negotiations with Serbia as case for t_1, with the documents dating to the period 01/03/2013 – 31/12/2013. Hence, our analysis focuses on a time before the Russian annexation of the Crimean Peninsula, which might have made physical security concerns and the geopolitical narrative more prominent.

6. 1. 1 General Observations

In total, 18 documents were analysed for the Serbian case. The earliest document is from 18/03/2013, the latest from 23/12/2013 (see Annex 1). Out of these documents, seven were memos, four were press releases, another four were transcripts of speeches, two were progress reports, and one was an accompanying communication. Besides being documents released by the European Commission as institution or the HR/VP in formal capacity, the actors delivering the memos and speeches were predominantly the then Enlargement Commissioner Štefan Füle, the then HR/VP Catherine Ashton, and the then Commission President José Manuel Barroso.

The documents are concentrated around some key dates that occurred in the period of analysis. One the one hand, the first part of documents deals with the recommendation to open accession

negotiations with Serbia made by the Commission in its exceptional spring progress report, with whose drafting it was tasked by the European Council in December 2012. The spring progress report was published jointly by the Commission and the HR/VP on 22/04/2013 and recommends the opening of accession negotiations with Serbia. Related documents focus on highlighting the progress of Serbia in the normalisation of its relations with Kosovo and on its recent reforms. On the other hand, the second bulk of documents is concentrated around the 16/10/2013, when the Commission released its regular annual progress report for Serbia. Here the focus has shifted from praising the reform progress achieved towards highlighting the need to stay on track with implementing reforms.

Overall, a key feature emerging from the material is the emphasis the Commission puts on accession being a merit-based process. This observation stretches over almost all documents analysed. In particular, the agreement reached between Serbia and Kosovo on 19/04/2013 is being repeatedly praised by the Commission as 'historic agreement' and 'landmark deal' which would showcase Serbia's European orientation. Or as Enlargement Commissioner Füle put it 'the agreement with Pristina has sent a strong message across Europe about Serbia's European attitude' (nr. 5). 2013 is repeatedly being referred to as 'a historic year for Serbia on its path to the European Union' (nr. 14). The decision to recommend the opening of accession negotiations by the Commission, endorsed by the European Council, is presented as directly resulting from Serbia's 'unprecedented efforts towards the normalisation of its relations with Kosovo' (nr. 17) and its progress in implementing key reforms related to the Copenhagen criteria. Therefore, the overall impression resulting from the analysis is that Serbia has 'earned' the opening of accession negotiations and is deemed 'worthy' of such a step. Thus, the progress achieved by Serbia is being directly related to the decision by the European Council, with the Belgrade-Pristina dialogue paving 'the way for the European Council decision to open accession negotiations' (nr. 14).

Therefore, enlargement policy is narrated as strictly merit-based. The Commission confirms this impression in its 2013 progress report on Serbia when stating that 'the process is built on strict but fair conditionality with progress towards membership dependent on the steps taken by each country to meet the established criteria, based on the principle of own merits' (nr. 14). Underlining the merit-based character of accession is, thus, the main feature emerging from the documents analysed for Serbia for t_1. Importantly, highlighting how enlargement follows a merit-based logic is consistent with both the peace and the geopolitical narrative, and can be a feature of several other narratives as well. As argued in Chapter 4, the peace narrative possesses

a merit-based logic, given that it wants candidate countries to 'earn' EU membership by displaying the same values as the EU. In the geopolitical narrative proceeding according to a merit-based logic also makes sense since the Copenhagen criteria ultimately aim to ensure that politically and economically stable countries join the EU, thereby safeguarding the EU's own security and stability. A merit-based logic, thus, neither hints at the peace nor at the geopolitical narrative. Moreover, merit is not the core of either of the two narratives, with the peace narrative being fundamentally concerned with values and the geopolitical narrative looking at enlargement as a tool to further EU geostrategic interests. Hence, a first takeaway of the analysis of the Serbian case is that while the key observation neither refutes the presence of the peace nor the geopolitical narrative, the most salient aspect of these documents is not as inherently and as strongly related to the peace narrative as we would have expected.

A second aspect worth mentioning is that the Commission repeatedly underlines that it is on Serbia's side and that it wants to welcome Serbia to the EU. Enlargement Commissioner Füle, for example, says that 'we want Serbia to succeed in its European efforts' and that the Commission intends to bring 'Serbia not only closer to the EU, but into the EU' (nr. 1). Commission President José Manuel Barroso can be found stating that 'the Commission stands by Serbia in this European journey' (nr. 6). Another feature is that the Commission frequently highlights the benefits of EU membership for Serbia. Enlargement Commissioner Füle, for instance, calls the recommendation to open accession negotiations 'good news for the people in Serbia' (nr. 2) and presents EU membership as a modernisation tool (nr. 1), that paves 'the way for a better future for all people of Serbia' (nr. 5). Similarly, HR/VP Catherine Ashton claims that the accession path is 'about ensuring that we support people to a better life' (nr. 8). This narration of enlargement as tool to give Serbians a better life and to modernise the country is in line with Rumelili's (2004) concept of acquired difference, which sees the EU constructing certain candidate countries as possessing certain attributes, such as a lower quality of life, which can be overcome with the EU's help. Consequently, a certain hierarchy of inferior/superior is apparent in the documents. The Commission also repeatedly takes credit for having initiated and facilitated the Belgrade-Pristina dialogue, calling it an 'EU-facilitated dialogue' (nr. 2). Passages like, 'it is only because they were offered a European perspective that now Serbia and Kosovo come to an agreement, under the mediation of the EU' (nr. 10), imply that while Serbia has earned the opening of accession talks, the incentives that made this possible were created by the EU.

A final general point worth raising is that the tone of the documents analysed shifts from being enthusiastic about Serbia having achieved the opening of accession talks in the first part of the material, towards a more sober and realistic tone in the second. Accession negotiations are presented by the Commission as opening 'the door to the next important phase in Serbia's European path' (nr. 6), yet the lengthy and complex nature of this process is being underlined. For example, Enlargement Commissioner Füle says that 'the negotiations process is demanding and takes time' (nr. 9), while HR/VP Ashton highlights that 'it is a challenging process' (nr. 8). By continuously using the word 'we', the Commission makes it clear that it stands on Serbia's side and that it is willing to support its accession journey. While the new phase might be demanding, the Commission presents the challenges as a joint one, which is clear by Füle saying that 'we have a lot of challenges ahead of us' (nr. 11). Nevertheless, accession remains merit-based, with the Commission frequently highlighting that it is key that Serbia now sustains the reform momentum by continuing to implement reforms.

With these general observations pointed out, it is time to move towards assessing which aspects of the peace and the geopolitical narrative were found and what their respective salience is.

6. 1. 2 The Peace Narrative

As mentioned above, the expectation for t_1 was that the peace narrative in would be especially pronounced. Having analysed the material related to the opening of accession talks with Serbia, our findings are somewhat mixed. On the one hand, the peace narrative was identified on a few occasions. On the other hand, its presence is not as frequent and salient as expected. The characteristic of the peace narrative that is the most apparent is the link between accession and values that the Commission repeatedly establishes. Serbia's willingness to strike the 'historic' agreement with Kosovo in April 2013, which paved the way to the Commission's recommendation, is taken as proof that the country shares the EU's values. This becomes apparent in statements like this one by Enlargement Commissioner Füle:

'*The deal with Pristina was possible thanks to: determination, courage, willingness to compromise, wisdom and the ability to look into the future, well beyond one electoral term. These are very European virtues*' (nr. 5).

While not the being the exact same values as mentioned in the Article 2 of the TEU (EU, 2012), a clear link is being created by Füle between the values that Serbia has displayed and the values that the EU is being narrated to possess. Füle cites the agreement with Kosovo as evidence for Serbia's Europeanness a second time, when saying that:

'*I am sure we will see another one: the implementation and bringing agreements from paper into practical life. Solving through issues the European way is not making countries weaker, but stronger*' (nr. 5).

Again, the impression is created that by solving issues 'the European way', namely by engaging in negotiations and compromising, Serbia has shown that it shares the EU's values. Almost the same logic is also apparent in a statement of Commission President Barroso, who argued that Serbia's agreement with Kosovo 'reflects the European spirit: we are not weaker because we talk and try to reach compromise; on the contrary – we are stronger because we build bridges' (nr. 6). Note the use of 'we' by Barroso to refer to both the EU and Serbia together which is in line with the metaphors and language we expected this narrative to display in enlargement policy. 'We' is also used by Enlargement Commissioner Füle when addressing that accession negotiations can be tricky and lengthy, stating that 'we have a lot of challenges ahead of us' (nr. 11). The implication, once again, is that the EU and Serbia sit in the same boat and will face and tackle these challenges together. Another metaphor that we expected the peace narrative to use is the one of a 'European family'. Indeed, we find Enlargement Commissioner Füle referencing the 'future of Serbia in the European family' (nr. 4).

The concern of sharing the same values as condition for EU accession is also present in a second event that is frequently mentioned in the material: the decision by the Serbian government to cancel the Pride Parade planned in Belgrade for September 2018. This cancellation is being called out as an instance in which Serbia has fallen short of displaying EU values, namely anti-discrimination and tolerance. Throughout the documents analysed, the cancellation of the parade is labelled 'a missed opportunity to show respect for fundamental rights' (nr. 12, 15) and is deemed 'regrettable' (nr. 14, 15). Enlargement Commissioner Füle makes it clear that sharing EU values is crucial for advancing on the European path, by stating

'*As Commissioner for the EU Enlargement policy, I am committed to seek from candidate countries that they fully embrace values such as freedom of assembly and freedom of expression that are amongst the core foundations on which the European project is built upon*' (nr. 12).

So far, we have seen some evidence for some of the expected features of the peace narrative in the Serbian material, especially references to shared values being the base line for accession as well as some metaphors of 'we-ness' and 'family' that hint at the presence of the peace narrative. Another expected feature that was observed is the importance of the Copenhagen criteria for advancing towards EU membership, with special emphasis on the political criteria. This is apparent in statements like the one by Enlargement Commissioner Füle who says that

the Copenhagen criteria 'reflect the core values on which the European Union is founded: democracy, rule of law and the respect for fundamental rights' (nr. 16). With this statement, Füle implies that the EU is an entity founded on values. The decision by the Council in 2011 to adopt a 'fundamentals first' approach in accession negotiations, with Chapter 23 on judiciary and fundamental rights and Chapter 24 on justice, freedom and security being opened first, is interpreted by the Commission as indication that with the rule of law a value 'is now at the heart of the enlargement process' (nr. 14). This is tied to the wider claim, central to the peace narrative, that 'safeguarding values, such as the rule of law, is what the European Union was made to do' (nr. 14).

All these passages quoted show that we can speak of a presence of the peace narrative in the Serbian material for t_1. However, in all documents cited so far, there are only one or two elements of the peace narrative present, which are not enough to justify the identification of the peace narrative as such. The one exception is the SOTEU address delivered by Commission President Barroso in September 2013 to the European Parliament. In it, we can clearly identify both the peace narrative in its general variant and in its application to enlargement. The general variant emerges from statements like Barroso claiming that values are the foundation of the EU. 'We are much more than a market […] It is about values, and I underline this word: values' (nr. 10). The fact that Barroso's speech references the wars of the 20th century a total of three times is another strong indication of the peace narrative. A crucial element of the peace narrative, namely that the EU was born out of the ruins of WW2 with the intention to pacify the continent is, thus, apparent. 'The European continent has never in its history known such a long period of peace since the creation of the European Community. It is our duty to preserve and deepen it' (nr. 10). Note how talk about 'duty' and 'moral obligation' is another element of the peace narrative. Finally, the Nobel Peace Prize, which the EU has received a year prior to opening accession negotiations with Serbia, is also mentioned and directly related to the EU's success in promoting peace. 'Last year's Nobel Peace Prize reminded us of that historic achievement: that Europe is a project of peace' (nr. 10).

From Barroso's words the peace narrative clearly emerges, but beyond this general version we also find the specific application of the peace narrative to enlargement policy. Enlargement, too, is presented as mean to pacify the European continent, in line with what we expected the peace narrative to make out the purpose of enlargement to be. Passages like

'*Next year, it will be one century after the start of the First World War. A war that tore Europe apart, from Sarajevo to the Somme. We must never take peace for granted. We need to recall that it is because of Europe that former enemies now sit around the same table and work together*' (nr. 10),

directly link Europe's war-torn past to enlargement turning the latter into a reconciliation tool. Enlargement is praised by Barroso as a story of reconciliation and 'healing'. 'Does everyone still realise how enlargement has been a success in terms of healing history's deep scars, establishing democracies where no one had thought it possible?' (nr. 10). This language of 'healing' is not unique to Barroso's SOTEU address but was found also elsewhere in the material. For instance, the Commission in its communication titled 'Enlargement Strategy and Main Challenges 2013-2014' references the April 2013 agreement between Serbia and Kosovo as 'proof of the power of the EU perspective and its role in healing history's deep scars' (nr. 14). Given that the language of 'healing' always inherently possesses a strong element of the past by referring to overcoming wounds acquired in a violent past, it is reasonable to see it as a metaphor of the peace narrative that emerged inductively from the material.

Another evidence of the peace narrative's presence in Barroso's SOTEU address also in its application to enlargement is the fact that the latter is presented as being about values. This is in line with the expectation developed in Chapter 4 that the peace narrative is likely to depict enlargement as based on shared values. Passages like 'safeguarding its values, such as the rule of law, is what the European Union was made to do, from its inception to the latest chapters in enlargement' (nr. 10) create a strong link between enlargement and values. The Serbian case is even singled out by Barroso and referenced as an instance that shows how the tie between advancing peace and advancing on the European path creates strong incentives for candidate countries to reconcile. Indeed, in Barroso's conception of events, the EU is to be credited for having made the agreement between Serbia and Kosovo possible by granting both countries membership perspectives: 'it is only because they were offered a European perspective that now Serbia and Kosovo come to an agreement, under the mediation of the EU' (nr. 10).

If we needed one more element of the peace narrative to confirm its presence, the conceptualisation of the EU as 'open' entity can be cited, with Barroso describing the EU as 'open' towards accepting new member states. This is in line with the peace narrative's understanding of EU membership as open, inclusive, and welcoming towards new members, on the condition that they are 'European' in the broad sense and that they share the EU's values.

Where does this leave us with the peace narrative in t_1 for Serbia overall? The preliminary takeaway must be that, generally, the peace narrative was less present than we would have expected. Although several of its elements have been observed across various documents, the peace narrative rarely emerged as narrative that dominated these documents and their argumentation logic in full. Rather, for most of the documents analysed, the peace narrative simmered in the background. While the way enlargement policy was conceptualised and presented did not contradict the peace narrative's logic, the presence of the latter was often muted. The one exception is the 2013 SOTEU address by Commission President Barroso, in which it was clearly observable both in its general version and in its application to enlargement, with many expected features present. Beyond the expected characteristics, a potential new metaphor of the peace narrative in enlargement, namely enlargement as 'healing' process, was observed. The reason why the peace narrative was perhaps not as strong as expected will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter, for now we move on to the geopolitical narrative.

6. 1. 3 The Geopolitical Narrative

While the peace narrative was less pronounced than expected in t_1, the expectation that the geopolitical narrative will be hardly present in t_1 has been met. Indeed, almost no references were found to this narrative at all, neither in its general form nor in its application to enlargement. Indeed, it is striking that in no document a connection is made between Serbia's membership prospects and the implications this would have for the security and stability of the WB region, the EU as a whole or how this would affect the EU's geopolitical standing. Nowhere in the material analysed are other international actors such as Russia or China being mentioned, which in academic literature (Anghel & Džankić, 2023; Bieber & Tzifakis, 2020; Panagiotou, 2021) are considered to be an important factor in the EU's ambitions to grant membership to the WB countries as a mean to shield these countries from foreign influence.

Moreover, no connection is established between the April 2013 agreement between Serbia and Kosovo and the implications this agreement has for the security and stability of the WB region. The agreement is exclusively presented as possessing a past orientation, meaning that its importance lies in overcoming past conflict and in reconciling former enemies by normalising relations. No connection to the future, in terms of how the agreement serves to lower the risk of future conflict, that could threaten the security and stability of both sides and the wider WB region, is drawn. The one exception to this is the Commission communication stating that the agreement between Serbia and Kosovo contributes to 'stability in a region so recently afflicted

by conflict' and helps 'overcoming the legacy of the past, thereby minimising the risk of open bilateral issues being politically instrumentalised' (nr. 14). Yet even here no link is drawn between a conflict in the WB and the EU's security interests, nor are the effects of a potential conflict escalation on the geopolitical situation of the WB being mentioned.

Indeed, the only instance of geopolitics being mentioned at all is the 2013 SOTEU address by Commission President Barroso, who says that

'*In our world of geoeconomic and geopolitical tectonic changes, I believe that only together, as the European Union, we can give our citizens what they aspire: that our values, our interests, our prosperity are protected and promoted in the age of globalisation*' (nr. 10).

The rest of the speech does not detail on what these 'geopolitical tectonic changes' are. It is telling that while crisis plays an important role in the 2013 SOTEU address of Barroso, it is being strictly interpreted in economic terms, looking at how the EU is on the road of recovery after the GFC that hit Europe from 2007 onwards. Therefore, while a sense of crisis and insecurity is present in the speech of Barroso, this insecurity is not a physical one. And while calls like 'I hope the European Parliament will take up this challenge with all the idealism it holds, with as much realism and determination as the times demand of us' (nr. 10) do bear a resemblance to the concept of 'principled pragmatism' that was born later with the EUGS (EEAS, 2016), nowhere in the documents can a sense of urgency be found in regard to the EU's sense of self no longer being fit for purpose given the international environment.

Hence, the preliminary conclusion for the geopolitical narrative for Serbia for t_1 must be that it was not detected. Geopolitics, furthering EU interests in the WB, cutting out other international actors as well as power relations played no role in the material analysed. As we move on to the Albanian case now, the expectation is that we will find a significant increase in the weight of the geopolitical narrative.

6. 2 t_2 – Albania

For t_2 (period between 2016 and the start of the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine on February 24, 2022) our case study is Albania. As we expect the EU's conception of the international system and its own role in it to have assumed a more pragmatic, sobering perspective, as exemplified by the EUGS released in June 2016 (EEAS, 2016), we expect that this change will be reflected in the narratives promoted by the Commission in enlargement. Therefore, we anticipate that the geopolitical narrative will play a stronger role in providing

the cognitive and normative maps for the EU's self-understanding in t_2. Hence, we should find more traces of this narrative in t_2 for Albania than we did for Serbia in t_1. Contrastingly, the peace narrative's salience is expected to have dropped in t_2, without it having entirely disappeared.

The opening of accession negotiations was first recommended for Albania by the Commission in its progress report of 2016. This recommendation has been repeated by the Commission several times. In its subsequent progress report, published in April 2018, the Commission recommended the opening of accession negotiations again, with the Council in June 2018 acknowledging the progress achieved by Albania but delaying the decision by setting a path to open accession talks in June 2019. In May 2019, the Commission once again repeated its recommendation, with the Council, however, deciding to postpone the decision to October 2019, which is when the European Council decided to revisit the question only ahead of the EU-WB summit planned for May 2020. The recommendation to open accession negotiations, that the present analysis focuses on, is, thus, the fourth one that the Commission gave for Albania, when it came forward with the same recommendation again on March 2, 2020.

The reason why this fourth recommendation to open accession negotiations is our chosen one is that it was the decisive one, with the Council greenlighting the decision on March 25, 2020, and the European Council giving its endorsement on March 26, 2020. Hence, more empirical material exists around this fourth recommendation than for the previous three. The exact period of analysis for Albania is 01/01/2020 – 30/06/2020, thus, covering the three months leading up to the recommendation given by the Commission on March 2, 2020, and the three subsequent months, including the dates of the decision of the Council and the endorsement by the European Council. Since we find more relevant empirical material for Albania than for Serbia, the period of analysis is kept shorter for t_2 (six instead of nine months).

6. 2. 1 General Observations

In total, 24 documents were analysed for the Albanian case. The oldest of these documents dates back to the 16/01/2020, while the most recent one was released on the 24/06/2020 (see Annex 1). From these 24 documents, eight were press statements, seven were press releases, and five were speeches, with one report, communication, memo, and video message being analysed respectively. Beyond some formal reports and communications being released by the Commission as institution, the actors that delivered the press statements and speeches were predominately the Commissioner for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Olivér Várhelyi, the

Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, as well as the HR/VP Josep Borrell. Compared to t_1, the documents analysed are spread out more evenly, with the material covering each of the targeted six months except for April 2020.

The first general observation that emerges from the analysis is that the merit-based character of EU accession continued to be emphasised by the Commission also in t_2. This is apparent in several documents, with the most explicit example being Enlargement Commissioner Várhelyi directly stating that 'enlargement is merit-based' (nr. 41). The decision of the Council to open accession negotiations with Albania at the fourth attempt is being linked by Várhelyi to the 'accelerated and very tangible results the country has delivered on fighting organised crime, illicit asylum claims, judicial reform' (nr. 30). Hence, the opening of the accession negotiations becomes a matter of 'recognition of the significant progress and the crucial reforms' and 'an acknowledgement of these countries' efforts' as stated by HR/VP Borrell (nr. 32). Indeed, the decision to not open accession negotiations in the first three instances of the Commission recommending doing so, is deemed a 'failure' (nr. 30) by Várhelyi, implying that the EU has 'failed' Albania by not fulfilling its part of the promise, despite the country's reforms. Once accession negotiations were finally greenlighted in March 2020, the Commission was, thus, keen on emphasising that the EU now 'delivers' on its side of the promise. Commission President von der Leyen, for example, interprets the decision as 'the European Union deliver[ing] on its promise' (nr. 31); Enlargement Commissioner Várhelyi sees it as a confirmation of 'the EU's commitment to the European perspective of the [WB] region' (nr. 31); while HR/VP Borrell claims that 'the EU also made the right step on its side. It is an encouraging message that hard work and real leadership on both sides leads to results' (nr. 34).

While the emphasis on the merit-based character of accession remained, there is a newfound prominence of the concept of credibility that constitutes a difference compared to the material analysed for t_1. In the Serbian case, much focus was put on presenting the country as 'worthy' of advancing towards accession negotiations. In the Albanian case for t_2, the Commission appears to be more concerned with what the continuous postponement of the decision to start accession negotiations does to its own credibility as an actor in enlargement policy. Therefore, the talk about the EU 'delivering' on its side of the promise becomes more pronounced and related not only to the momentum of Albania on its European path, but to the wider WB region to 'encourage' the latter's reform pace. This changed emphasis can perhaps be explained by the fact that the credibility of the 'European perspective', granted to the WB countries at the Feira (2000) and Thessaloniki (2003) European Council summits, has eroded further in 2020 than it

had in 2013, when with Croatia the first WB country had just joined the EU. So-called 'enlargement fatigue' became more characteristic of the EU's engagement with the WB region as the 2000s and 2010s went on, matched by an 'accession fatigue' which saw the WB countries being less committed to implementing the reforms needed for advancing on their European path (O'Brennan, 2014; Schimmelfennig, 2008; Szolucha, 2010). Regaining credibility in enlargement policy towards the WB, thus, became an important mission of the von der Leyen I Commission, inspiring the revision of the methodology for accession negotiations proposed by the Commission in February 2020 to render the accession process more credible, subject to a stronger political steer, more predictable, and more dynamic (nr. 23).

On the other hand, the Commission repeatedly stressed that 'there are no shortcuts' on the accession path (nr. 24) and that Albania is expected to continue implementing reforms and must even step up its efforts as it enters the accession negotiations stage. Albania is presented as having the fate of how long this new stage preceding actual membership will last in its own hands by tying the pace of accession negotiations to the pace of implementing reforms. Or as Enlargement Commissioner Várhelyi put it 'faster tangible results on reforms mean moving faster in accession negotiations' (nr. 41). Nevertheless, the Copenhagen criteria remain the cornerstone of accession. The Commission makes it clear that even in the revised methodology the Copenhagen criteria, 'which are very clear, and do not change' (nr. 24), remain at the core of the accession process and that 'these conditions will not go away' (nr. 30).

A second aspect worth noting is that both the EU and Albania as well as the world at large are presented to be 'in crisis' in most of the material analysed for t_2. If we recall the findings for Serbia, the EU at that time was also narrated as being in crisis, but with the emphasis being on the EU slowly emerging from this crisis period. Moreover, the crisis in t_1 was defined in socio-economic terms, with the root cause being the GFC. In 2020, the EU and the globe were hit by a crisis of a very different kind, although possessing severe socio-economic consequences. By the beginning of March 2020, the COVID-19 virus had spread to most EU member states and decisively influenced the political priorities of the EU in the months to come. Hence, the COVID-19 crisis acts as backdrop for most of the material, which, as we will see, also impacted the narratives put forward by the Commission in enlargement.

At this stage it is important to note that half of the material analysed (nr. 30-42) was written in a time when the EU was narrated to be undergoing 'a very difficult time' (nr. 34), an 'unprecedented challenge' (nr. 39), and an 'unprecedented global crisis' (nr. 33). The EU is

presented by the Commission as an actor that did not back down from its priorities or change its political course regarding the accession of the WB countries during the pandemic. For instance, Enlargement Commissioner Várhelyi can be found stating that 'let me take the example of the European Union's relationship with the Western Balkans: The crisis did not diminish our ambitions' (nr. 37). In line with the idea of the EU being 'forged in crisis', where being confronted with a severe crisis makes the EU take a leap forward towards further integration, the pandemic is narrated as an opportunity. Várhelyi says regarding the EU-WB relationship that he is 'very hopeful that the current crisis will be used as an opportunity across the board' (nr. 37).

With the information that half of the documents analysed for Albania were published during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic hitting Europe, let us now see whether the peace narrative has been detected for t_2 and if so, how pronounced it was.

6. 2. 2 The Peace Narrative

The peace narrative was, as expected, less pronounced in the documents for Albania for t_2 than it was for Serbia in t_1. Most notably, the peace narrative was entirely absent from the most influential policy documents released by the Commission in this period, including the communication on the revised methodology for accession negotiations or the press releases and statements congratulating Albania on the Council greenlighting the start of accession negotiations. Mentions of values are notably absent from these documents, so are arguments that this is a significant step towards uniting two entities that share the same values. References to values in general are rare in the documents analysed for t_2, with two exceptions.

On the one hand, rule of law is playing a crucial role within the wider set of values that are part of the political dimension of the Copenhagen criteria. In the documents analysed for Serbia in t_1, rule of law already had a prominent role within the accession process, with the Commission promoting a 'fundamentals first' approach which saw Chapter 23 on the judiciary and fundamental rights and Chapter 24 on justice, freedom and security being opened first. With its revised methodology for accession negotiations, the Commission focused even more on fundamentals first and rule of law, with reforms in these areas determining the overall pace of accession negotiations. Yet, rule of law is not being presented in any of the documents as a fundamentally European value or as a shared value between the EU and Albania which serves to legitimise the accession process. Additionally, while highlighting the importance of rule of law does put a value in the spotlight, emphasising the need for rule of law is not only consistent

with the peace narrative, but also with other narratives. For instance, ensuring rule of law has also economic implications for creating a stable business environment conducive for investments or has security implications for establishing stable and functioning institutions. Hence, the mere presence of rule of law as a value does not point towards the peace narrative.

A second value that had a reoccurring, prominent position in the documents is solidarity. Solidarity, like rule of law, is mentioned in Article 2 of the TEU (EU, 2012) as one of the EU's foundational values and is frequently linked by scholars to the objectives of the European project (Della Sala, 2023; Johansson-Nogués, 2018; Niţoiu, 2013). The reason why solidarity is emphasised so strongly in the Albanian material is due to two external events that affected the country and caused solidarity-based appeals. On the one hand, Albania was hit by an earthquake in November 2019, which cost the life of 51 people and caused damages estimated to be as high as EUR 1 billion. The EU held a donors' conference in February 2020 to raise funding for reconstruction efforts. In her speech at this conference, Commission President von der Leyen repeatedly referred to solidarity: 'This is a story of loss, but it is also a story of heroes. It is a story of solidarity, among Albanians and fellow Europeans' (nr. 26). Enough other elements of the peace narrative are present in this speech to confidently identify the peace narrative as such. For instance, von der Leyen narrates Albania as 'belonging' to the 'European family', thus, using two of the narrative's central metaphors.

'*The whole European Union mobilised for a country that is at the heart of our continent – and that I hope and I am convinced one day will also be part of our Union. The people of Albania know that they belong in our European family – now more than ever*' (nr. 26).

In the same speech, von der Leyen also draws a link between the fate of Albania and the history of the EU. The reference to how Albania will emerge out of the 'ashes' of the earthquake does bear some familiarity with the tale of the peace narrative of the EU as 'phoenix' that rose from the ashes of WW2. Moreover, the reference to Albania as a country 'united in solidarity' resembles the EU's own motto of being 'united in diversity', which could be more than coincidental. Nevertheless, von der Leyen does not claim that EU membership for Albania is based on shared values, with solidarity not being presented as foundational value of the EU.

The second instance where multiple appeals to solidarity are made is the COVID-19 pandemic that hit the European continent from late February/early March 2020 onwards. The pandemic is presented by HR/VP Borrell as a challenging time in which 'we have to demonstrate what European and global solidarity means', since 'nobody is able to deal with the current situation

alone' (nr. 34). Similarly, Enlargement Commissioner Várhelyi claims that the pandemic 'confirmed very clearly the need for European and international cooperation' (nr. 37). The EU and the WB are narrated as having supported each other in an act of mutual solidarity. On the one hand, the EU is praised for having matched the unprecedented crisis with 'unprecedented solidarity' (nr. 36), showing the people in the WB that 'the Western Balkans can count on the solidarity of the EU. And not only in times of crisis' (nr. 34). In turn, the WB have demonstrated their solidarity with the EU by providing medical personnel and equipment to the hardest hit EU member states at the beginning of the pandemic. This display of solidarity by the WB is even presented as a confirmation that the decision to grant a European perspective to the region has been the right one, with Várhelyi saying that 'the COVID-19 pandemic confirmed clearly that the future of the Western Balkans is in the European Union' (nr. 36).

One document in which the peace narrative is clearly present is related to the solidarity displayed by Albania in the wake of the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, when the country sent thirty doctors to Italy to support the latter's hospitals which were struggling to cope with the number of patients. Albania is praised for setting 'an example of European solidarity against the coronavirus' with the act of sending doctors to support Italy being interpreted as 'an act of solidarity and friendship' (nr. 35). Moreover, Albania's efforts to support the repatriation of EU citizens stranded in Albania due to travel restrictions are seen as 'another tangible example of the concrete solidarity that Albania is providing in times of need' (nr. 35). What makes these statements different from those in other documents analysed and qualifies them as observations of the peace narrative is the statement by HR/VP Borrell that 'solidarity is at the heart of the European Union' (nr. 35) which implies that a value is at the core of the European project, which in turn becomes a value-based undertaking. While this is evidence for the presence of the general version of the peace narrative, it is applied to serve as cognitive and normative map for enlargement when arguing that

'*The solidarity shown demonstrates another good reason that Albania enters the European Union as soon as possible. Their spirit of solidarity and vicinity that* [they] *are demonstrating with these people here is precisely that common value that gave birth to the EU*' (nr. 35).

In this statement, the display of solidarity, a foundational value of the EU, is being presented as a common value that inspired the European project and is being narrated as the reason why Albania deserves to become an EU member state. In doing so, accession is narrated as being based on shared values, while resemblance between the EU and Albania is created.

This is the only clear instance of the peace narrative in the Albanian material. As mentioned, overall, the peace narrative is less pronounced in t_2 than in t_1, with especially values receiving little attention, apart from rule of law and solidarity. The latter's prominence is related to the outbreak of the COVID-19 crisis during the period analysed. While we find elements of the peace narrative in some documents, especially in those dating to the aftermath of the start of the pandemic, there is only one document that presents enlargement as being based on values and justifies the opening of accession negotiations with Albania with the claim that the country shares the EU's values. So far, thus, our expectation for t_2 has been fulfilled, with the peace narrative being less salient than in t_1, but still present. Next, it is time to assess whether we can also observe the expected rise in presence and salience of the geopolitical narrative.

6. 2. 3 The Geopolitical Narrative

Geopolitics receive frequent mentions in the documents analysed for Albania. Indeed, already in the first document analysed, Enlargement Commissioner Várhelyi explains the WB being the chosen destination for his first non-EU visit since taking office as Commissioner with the fact that enlargement and the WB as geographic area are priorities for the new Commission. The new Commission under the leadership of President Ursula von der Leyen is a self-proclaimed 'geopolitical Commission', implying that geopolitical reasoning and narratives will play a more pronounced role in the 2019-2024 mandate. This is confirmed by our findings: in the documents analysed for t_2 we frequently find elements of the geopolitical narrative.

This starts with the WB and enlargement policy now both being considered priority areas for the new Commission. Enlargement Commissioner Várhelyi can be found stating that 'enlargement is a priority for the new European Commission' (nr. 20) and that 'enlargement is a key political project' (nr. 25). The new emphasis on enlargement as a priority area for the von der Leyen I Commission is a stark contrast to the approach of its predecessor, the Juncker 2014-2019 Commission, which saw then Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker explicitly calling for 'a break from enlargement' in his political guidelines (Juncker, 2014). With the 'geopolitical Commission' taking office, enlargement is presented as being back on the agenda, with 'full engagement with our neighbours' being considered a 'priority' (nr. 41).

The simultaneous appearance of the geopolitical Commission and the comeback of enlargement policy as priority begs the question whether the new Commission views enlargement from a geopolitical perspective. Beyond enlargement, the WB are also considered a priority area for the new Commission, with Enlargement Commissioner Várhelyi stating that

‘as you know, for us, enlargement and the Western Balkans is (sic) a priority’ (nr. 19). Not only are enlargement *and* the Western Balkans a priority for the new Commission, enlargement *to* the Western Balkans also has priority, with Várhelyi announcing that ‘the European Union enlargement to the Western Balkans is a top priority for the Commission’ (nr. 25). Moreover, a link between the new emphasis on enlargement and the WB and the geopolitical nature of the new Commission is created by statements such as Várhelyi saying that ‘for me, it was a priority to come here very early on in the mandate to reinforce our support for Albania and also to reinforce the geopolitical nature of this new Commission’ (nr. 19).

So far, we have seen that the new Commission narrates itself as possessing a geopolitical nature and that it considers enlargement in general, and enlargement to the WB specifically, priorities. While these observations are not the geopolitical narrative themselves, they do imply a strong likelihood that we will find it in the documents. And indeed, multiple elements that we have identified in Chapter 4 as characteristics of the geopolitical narrative in enlargement can be found in the material analysed for Albania for t_2.

Starting with the purpose of enlargement being narrated as advancing the EU’s own geostrategic interests, such a logic is apparent when Enlargement Commissioner Várhelyi states that enlargement to the WB is a priority because ‘we want to increase our presence here. We want to have more influence here. We want to be an even more important partner for this region’ (nr. 19). The accession of the WB is narrated not as something that reunites the region with the EU, but as a mean that serves to advance EU interests in the region. It becomes clear that the driver to increase the EU’s presence and influence in the WB derives from geostrategic interests if we consider Várhelyi’s argument that ‘the geo-political (sic) cannot work without bigger leverage, bigger influence in the region’ (nr. 25). This perception of enlargement as a mean to an end, namely, to advance EU geostrategic interests, is a far cry from the peace narrative, where accession is considered as an end in itself by reuniting what belongs together.

The reason for enlargement being considered a priority, thus, can be summarised into the EU seeking to advance its own interests in the WB region. These interests include ensuring the EU’s own security. As the Commission argues in its communication ‘Enhancing the accession process – A credible EU perspective for the Western Balkans’, published in February 2020, ‘a credible accession perspective is the key incentive and driver of transformation in the region and thus enhances our collective security and prosperity’ (nr. 22). Therefore, a ‘firm, merit-based prospect of full EU membership for the Western Balkans is in the Union’s very own

political, security and economic interest' (nr. 22). Whether it is increasing the EU's presence, influence, leverage or ensuring its security in the WB region, what emerges clearly from the material is that the Commission narrates the accession of Albania and the wider WB region as something that is in the EU's own interest. This becomes clear when considering how the reason for enlargement gets narrated in this statement

'*Maintaining and enhancing this policy is thus indispensable for the EU's credibility, for the EU's success and for the EU's influence in the region and beyond – especially at times of heightened geopolitical competition*' (nr. 22).

Accession here is exclusively presented from the EU's own perspective by listing the manifold ways that it supports the EU in reaching its own geostrategic objectives. This statement is emblematic for many others, where accession is primarily considered from the EU's perspective and centred around advancing the EU's own interests, while the benefits that accession holds for the candidate countries receive less emphasis. For the first time in the material analysed, increasing the EU's influence in the WB is also tied with the presence of other foreign actors in the region, with the Commission arguing that enlargement to the WB supports the 'need to tackle third country malign influence' (nr. 22) in the region. The Commission does not detail on who is meant exactly, with Russia and China being known as having increased their influence in the WB region in recent years (Anghel & Džankić, 2023; Bieber & Tzifakis, 2020; Panagiotou, 2021). Yet, the sole fact that third country influence is mentioned as a factor why enlargement to the WB is a priority for the Commission shows the underlying geopolitical reasoning in line with the geopolitical narrative.

Other elements of the geopolitical narrative are also present. First, there is talk about 'completing' the EU, implying that enlargement has clear limits and boundaries that determine who can join and who cannot join. As argued in Chapter 4, the EU becoming clear about where its final boundaries will lay and what territory it regards as its own is an essential element of the geopolitical narrative in enlargement. And indeed, HR/VP Borrell makes an explicit claim over the WB by stating that 'the European Union is not complete without the Western Balkans' (nr. 32, nr. 34). Secondly, the importance of a 'merit-based' accession process is stressed in the documents. Highlighting the need for a merit-based enlargement policy is in line with the geopolitical narrative since it has implications for the EU's own security and stability by making sure that certain standards are reached before accession. The Copenhagen criteria are being referenced as the basis for the accession process, with the different dimensions of the Copenhagen criteria being attributed equal importance. Thirdly, we can also find a link between

enlargement and power implications, for example when Commission President von der Leyen highlights that 'today marks the start of the journey to a bigger and stronger European Union' (nr. 31), implying that the EU becomes stronger by accepting new member states.

Finally, the specific metaphors of the geopolitical narrative can also be found. Enlargement to the WB is repeatedly referred to as a 'geostrategic investment' (nr. 22, nr. 25), implying that it is motivated by a cost-benefit calculation where the EU is ready to bear some short-term hardships for the sake of advancing its geostrategic interests in the long-term. 'In times of increasing global challenges and divisions, [enlargement] remains more than ever a geostrategic investment in a stable, strong, and united Europe' (nr. 22). There is also a sense of urgency with no alternative to enlargement existing that emerges from statements like Várhelyi claiming that enlargement is a 'geostrategic investment that we all need to make' (nr. 25).

Overall, the finding is that several of the documents analysed for t_2 contain elements of the geopolitical narrative, confirming our expectation that this narrative will be more salient in t_2 than it was in t_1. In two of the documents analysed (nr. 22, nr. 31) several elements of the geopolitical narrative were apparent, allowing us to observe the entire narrative as such. While the geopolitical narrative has been more salient than the peace narrative in t_2, there is a clear shift between the first half of the documents analysed for t_2 (nr. 18-29) and the second half (nr. 30-42). In the first half, the geopolitical narrative clearly dominates, with the focus being on the geostrategic importance the enlargement to the WB has for the new geopolitical Commission. The start of the COVID-19 crisis in late February 2020/early March 2020 put a break on this strong geopolitical reasoning. While elements of the geopolitical narrative can also be observed in the second half of the material, they share the spotlight with elements of the peace narrative. Hence, while our expectations for t_2 were overall met, we can only speculate how our results would have looked like had there not been a pandemic starting in the middle of the period of analysis. The guess is that the geopolitical narrative would have been even more salient, if the COVID-19 crisis had not called for solidarity-based appeals.

Leaving the realm of speculation and moving towards our case for t_3, BiH, the expectation is that the geopolitical narrative will be even more salient in this period, and that the peace narrative will have almost entirely disappeared. With the EU dealing with yet another crisis, this time a security one, the geopolitical narrative is likely to be even more pronounced.

6. 3 t_3 – Bosnia and Herzegovina

For t_3 (period after the start of the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine on February 24, 2022) our case is the opening of accession negotiations with BiH. We expect that the physical security threat has also caused an ontological security threat for the EU with its traditional peace narrative no longer being appropriate for the reality of the international system, as already foreshadowed by the multiple crises the EU was dealing with in the years preceding 2022. Consequently, the expectation is that the salience of the peace narrative has decreased even further in t_3 than it did in t_2 and that, in turn, we will be able to observe a rise in salience of the geopolitical narrative. While this change in salience should be valid for the general version of the two narratives, we expect to witness it in the specific field of enlargement as well. Hence, the expectation for t_3 is that the geopolitical narrative, with its focus on advancing EU geostrategic interests, will be more pronounced than the peace narrative on the one hand, and that it will be the most pronounced out of the three periods analysed.

The concrete period analysed for the case of BiH for t_3 is 01/10/2023 – 31/03/2024. With the total length of the period analysed being six months, it is the same as for Albania for t_2. This period covers the first, conditional recommendation of the Commission to open accession negotiations with BiH once the country has achieved the necessary degree of compliance with the membership criteria, published as part of the Commission's annual enlargement package on 08/11/2023. It also covers the unconditional recommendation of the Commission to open accession negotiations with BiH presented on 12/03/2024, when the Commission delivered an updated report on the reform progress of BiH. This recommendation was subsequently followed by the European Council, which decided to open accession negotiations with BiH on 21/03/2024. BiH had first applied for EU membership in 2016, with the Commission presenting its opinion (*Avis*) on BiH's application in May 2019, identifying 14 key priorities, where BiH was asked to fundamentally improve its legislative and institutional framework for accession negotiations to be opened. These 14 key priorities, next to the eight additional steps that the Commission had identified in its progress report for BiH in 2022 for granting candidate status, played an important role in the decision to open accession negotiations.

6. 3. 1 General Observations

In total, 25 documents were analysed for BiH for t_3. That is almost the same number as for Albania for t_2, where it was 24, with both numbers being slightly higher than for Serbia (18 documents). Out of the 25 documents analysed for BiH, eight were press statements, seven

were speeches given by members of the Commission, and five were press releases. Additionally, two reports on the reform progress made by BiH, two enlargement-related communications, and one memo were also part of the analysis. All these documents were either issued by the Commission as institution or were quotes of either Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, HR/VP Josep Borrell or Commissioner for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Olivér Várhelyi, except for one speech given by the VP of the European Commission and Commissioner for Democracy and Demography Dubravka Šuica. The material is spread out more unevenly over the period of analysis compared to the Albanian material, with no relevant document having been identified for October 2023. The bulk of the material analysed dates to November 2023, with significantly less material covering the other four months. This means that de facto the period covered by the material for t_3 was five months, not by choice but because no relevant document was identified for October 2023.

A first general observation is that enlargement policy continued to be narrated by the Commission as possessing a merit-based logic. This understanding of the Commission of accession as merit-based is evident in countless statements that relate the recommendation to open accession negotiations with BiH to the country's reform progress. Commission President von der Leyen praises BiH for having achieved more reform progress in the course of 2022 and 2023 than in the entire preceding decade (nr. 65). The recommendation to open accession talks with BiH is repeatedly presented as being 'in the light of' the progress and results achieved since BiH was made a candidate country in December 2022, clearly implying a merit-based logic. Most explicitly, the merit-based nature of accession is being referred to in statements like 'accession is and will remain a merit-based process, fully dependent on the objective progress achieved by each country' (nr. 48). The Copenhagen criteria are presented as being the 'central element' and 'key pillar' of enlargement policy and as having 'stood the test of time' with the EU having to 'continue building our joint future on these criteria' (nr. 56).

Consequently, each enlargement country is being deemed to have its fate in its own hands, with the pace of implementing reforms determining the pace of the accession process. Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, for instance, states that 'the more you deliver, the more convincing you are, and the better it is, the more you help me to produce a report that reflects this movement forward' with it being 'in Bosnia and Herzegovina's hands to embrace the path you have chosen' (nr. 62). Finally, the Commission also creates a link between a merit-based enlargement process and the EU's own security when writing that 'a credible, merit-based prospect of EU membership is the key driver of transformation and thus enhances our collective

security and socio-economic prosperity' (nr. 46). This corresponds to the argument made in Chapter 4 that a merit-based logic of the accession process based on the Copenhagen criteria is consistent with both the peace and the geopolitical narrative.

The second observation worth noting is that considerably more emphasis is put on the economic implications of enlargement in t_3 than in previous periods. While there have been references to enlargement as driver of prosperity before, the economic potential of enlargement gets highlighted more in t_3. Prosperity is often cited by the Commission as purpose of enlargement alongside peace, security, and stability in t_3. Importantly, this work is not interested in identifying any other narratives beyond the peace and the geopolitical. Yet, it is worth recalling the concept of 'polyphony', which stipulates that most times there will be several narratives present in a given policy field. For instance, Manners and Murray (2016) identify an economic EU narrative, which presents the economy as underlying reason for European integration. One potential explanation for the increased presence of an economic reasoning is the temporal situatedness of the case analysed. Only just about recovering from the socio-economic turbulences that the COVID-19 crisis had introduced, the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine created new economic obstacles from February 2022 onwards in the form of rising energy prices. Highlighting how enlargement can be a booster of economic growth for the WB region and the EU appears reasonable when considering this context. The presentation of a 'Growth Plan for the Western Balkans' by the Commission on the same day as the publication of the annual enlargement package for 2023 further points towards the interconnection between enlargement and economy observed for t_3.

With the existence of the economic connotation that enlargement often has in t_3 noted, it is time to turn to the narratives that the present work is interested in, starting with the peace narrative.

6. 3. 2 The Peace Narrative

The assumption that we would witness a further decrease in the salience of the peace narrative in t_3 was confirmed. Compared to t_2, the peace narrative plays even less of a role in t_3. EU membership for BiH is never exclusively presented as a mean to pacify the European continent. In those instances where peace is being mentioned as one of the objectives of enlargement, it is being referenced as one objective among many, including objectives attributed to the geopolitical narrative. Values play a secondary role in the way the Commission narrates the accession of BiH, with hardly any claim being made that the EU and BiH share the same values and that, thus, enlargement is a natural process that brings together what belongs together.

Indeed, the Commission makes almost no claims about what the EU's values or those of BiH are. In turn, there is very little material in t_3 that supports the idea of enlargement as a value-based policy. The political criteria of the Copenhagen criteria are not narrated as being particularly important in t_3, with CFSP alignment assuming a more prominent role instead.

While I will present those few elements of the peace narrative that were identified for t_3, this should not create the misleading impression that the peace narrative was overly present in this period. On the contrary, it is striking when compared to the evidence reported for the peace narrative for Serbia in t_1 how little and superficial the references to this narrative are. Thus, the crucial takeaway from this section is more what elements have *not* been found for the peace narrative in t_3 rather than what was found. For this purpose, it is useful to recall the references to the EU's birth out of the horrors of war in the 20th century and the claims that the EU is a value-based actor whose foundational values are being shared by the candidate countries that we found in the Serbian case for t_1, none of which are present for t_3.

Therefore, the expectation that the peace narrative would diminish in salience subsequently in the three periods analysed, being the most pronounced in t_1 and the least present in t_3, holds. Regarding the few elements of the peace narrative that were identified in t_3, it is important to note that these elements predominantly appeared in connection with elements that we identified as belonging to the geopolitical narrative. This is a key difference compared to t_2. While elements of the peace and the geopolitical narrative can be found in both the Albanian case for t_2 and BiH's case for t_3, in t_2 it is mainly *either* the peace narrative *or* the geopolitical narrative that is present in each analysed document. In t_3, if elements of the peace narrative were present at all, they were often mixed in with elements of the geopolitical narrative.

Moving on to the traces of the peace narrative that we did find for BiH, peace is referenced as one purpose of enlargement alongside reconciliation (nr. 46, 49, 57). While the Commission nowhere claims that accession is primarily based on shared values, in its communication accompanying the 2023 enlargement package, the Commission quotes the Granada declaration of the European Council (2023), which states that enlargement 'must foster the values on which the European Union was founded' (nr. 46), implying that the EU is a value-based actor. The most explicit reference to the peace narrative can be found in said communication:

'*In line with the aim of the Union to promote peace, its values and the well-being of the peoples, EU enlargement continues to be a powerful tool to promote democracy, the rule of law and respect for fundamental rights'* (nr. 46).

The 2023 communication on enlargement is the exception for t_3, with several elements of the peace narrative being present. Beyond the implication of the passage cited above that the EU's founding purpose was the promotion of peace and of other EU values and that enlargement is a mean to promote said values, the Commission writes that it expects enlargement countries to 'embrace and promote EU values firmly and unequivocally' (nr. 46). The importance of displaying 'shared values' is also repeated elsewhere (nr. 48, 49, 63) but always in relation to a candidate country's alignment with the EU's CFSP serving as a proof of these 'shared values'. These common values are being presented as being 'essential' for enlargement policy

'*What we cannot accept is a backsliding on our common values, or divisions, in any part of your country. We all know – and you said it – there is the respect of the constitutional order, of the founding freedoms and of civil society that are at the core of the EU values and essential on the European path'* (nr. 43).

BiH is presented by Commission President von der Leyen as a country that shares the EU's values, with von der Leyen saying that 'we all know that geography, history, and common values bind us' (nr. 47). This 'common history' which binds BiH and the EU is also being referred to elsewhere (nr. 61) by von der Leyen. Other elements of the peace narrative include the narration of enlargement as a win-win situation for all parties involved, with von der Leyen claiming that 'past enlargement have shown the enormous benefits for both the accession countries and the EU. We all win' (nr. 48). In line with the core of the peace narrative, enlargement is narrated as a 'unique opportunity' for both the candidate countries and the EU, which contributes to peace, with peace being something that makes the EU 'special'.

'*Enlargement is a unique opportunity both for the countries aspiring to join the European Union and, of course, for us. It is a driver for peace and prosperity that make our Union so special*' (nr. 47).

Regarding the Copenhagen criteria, we find that the political criteria are not being particularly emphasised within the wider set of accession criteria. This is striking, since the political criteria played a crucial role in the Commission's 2019 opinion (*Avis*) on BiH's membership application, where it recommended that accession negotiations should be opened 'once the country has achieved the necessary degree of compliance with the membership criteria and in particular the Copenhagen political criteria requiring the stability of institutions guaranteeing notably democracy and the rule of law' (European Commission, 2019, p. 14). The subsequent 14 key priorities for reform primarily target democracy and functionality, rule of law, and fundamental rights related reforms. Given the prominence the political criteria were granted by the Commission in the case of BiH's membership application, it is especially telling that they

played only a minor role in the documents released by the Commission once the country actually entered this stage of the accession process. Quotes like Enlargement Commissioner Várhelyi saying that continued reforms will be needed 'including, also, the areas of the fundamentals, the rule of law, democracy, as these are key conditions for any integration into the European Union' (nr. 53), are the exception for t_3 rather than the norm.

Finally, we find some of the metaphors we identified in Chapter 4 as belonging to the peace narrative. BiH as part of the 'European family' is referenced by Commission President von der Leyen stating that BiH 'is showing that it can deliver on its membership criteria, and on its citizens' aspiration to be part of our family' (nr. 66) and that the EU feels 'a new sense of urgency to unite our European family' (nr. 54). Moreover, von der Leyen also uses the metaphor of 'belonging' when claiming that all enlargement countries 'share one feeling. They feel that they belong to the European Union' (nr. 54).

The overall finding from the analysis of the material for t_3 is that while the peace narrative continues to be present with some of its elements, these elements are considerably fewer and play a less central role than in the previous two periods. Therefore, our expectation that we will witness a decrease in the salience of the peace narrative when moving from t_1 to t_3 is confirmed. The next question, then, is if this decrease in salience of the peace narrative is accompanied by a complementary rise in salience of the geopolitical narrative.

6. 3. 3 The Geopolitical Narrative

There is a significant increase in the presence and salience of the geopolitical narrative in t_3. From being almost entirely absent in t_1 the geopolitical narrative has grown to be dominant in t_3, with the purpose and guiding logic of enlargement, as narrated by the Commission, shifting accordingly. The presence of statements like this one by HR/VP Josep Borrell,

> '*We have to ask the people of Bosnia and Herzegovina to avoid any kind of divisive attitude, to join forces in order to take advantage of this geopolitical moment, in which enlargement is becoming a key issue for the future of the European Union and the future of the Western Balkan countries'* (nr. 58),

alone indicates the new sense of urgency with whom enlargement policy is being treated and the way this is being related to the current 'geopolitical moment'. Several of the documents analysed for t_3 refer to this 'unprecedented time' (nr. 57), which sees the world being 'shaken by multiple crises' (nr. 61), with the Commission arguing that 'the reasons for enlargement today have never been stronger or more compelling' (nr. 61). The sense of urgency with whom

the Commission wants to see accession being pushed forward is repeatedly related to the new 'geopolitical moment' that was created by the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine. Enlargement Commissioner Várhelyi, for example, says that 'to grasp this new geopolitical momentum, we must accelerate the enlargement process' (nr. 48), and the Commission argues that because of the risks introduced by Russia to the stability of the WB countries 'the need to bring them closer to the EU and to accelerate their accession process […] has never been clearer than today' (nr. 50). The Commission continues to view itself as a 'geopolitical Commission' for whom enlargement policy is 'on the highest political agenda of Europe' (nr. 57).

The sheer number of times that geopolitics and the changed geopolitical context in light of the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine are being referenced is telling. In total, the geopolitical narrative has been identified in seven of the 25 documents analysed for t_3, with its elements being present in several other documents. This is a considerable increase compared to t_1, when it was barely detected at all, and t_2, when it was detected, but not in this frequency and salience. Moreover, compared to t_2, when the geopolitical narrative's presence diminished with the outbreak of the COVID-19 crisis, in t_3 it is present throughout the period of analysis. In addition, it is striking how many different elements, that we identified in Chapter 4 as being characteristic of the geopolitical narrative in enlargement, were found in the material for t_3. This serves as assurance that the operationalisation done in Chapter 4, before starting the empirical analysis, was accurate. It allows us to consider the elements of the geopolitical narrative identified one by one.

Firstly, the geopolitical narrative's idea, of the purpose of enlargement being the advancement of EU geostrategic interests, is evident in statements like 'full EU membership for the Western Balkans is in the Union's very own political, security, and economic interests' (nr. 50). This self-interest of the EU to enlarge emerges even stronger when von der Leyen claims that

> '*Today, it is clear that the stability of every country in our continent of course also affects our own stability. Their security is our security. And if our Union is not fast enough in bringing candidate countries closer, others will fill the vacuum. It is in our geopolitical interest to complete our Union and make it even stronger than ever'* (nr. 54).

The Russian war of aggression against Ukraine is being referenced as having the potential to derail the stability of the WB region (nr. 50), with hybrid threats such as foreign information manipulation and interference (FIMI) being identified as potential security threats. These hybrid threats are being attributed to Russia by HR/VP Josep Borrell, who claims that 'as the

Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine developed, so did the spreading of different Kremlin narratives in the enlargement countries, with varying results' (nr. 49). Commission President von der Leyen also cautions against the threat of not realising the 'geostrategic interest' of having the remaining six WB countries join the Union, which 'would create a vacuum that others will fill' (nr. 55). From all the documents cited above, it emerges quite clearly that the Commission views EU accession as serving the EU's own interests.

Next, regarding how enlargement is narrated in relation to the EU's power and international standing, it is notable that the Commission views a widening of the EU as positive development for increasing the Union's international weight. Commission President von der Leyen, for instance, claims that enlargement gives the EU a 'stronger voice' in international politics.

'*Enlargement is also an investment in our security. Because integrating new members in the European Union also shields them from foreign interference, and it therefore stabilises our neighbourhood. In times where we see the rules-based international order increasingly called into question, of course a larger and stronger European gives us a stronger voice in the world'* (nr. 47).

This stronger position in the world is being justified by von der Leyen with the EU having more 'leverage as a trading partner' (nr. 47) or with growing the single market to turn 'Europe [into] an even more attractive and stronger partner on the global stage' (nr. 54). Furthermore, there is ample talk about the need to 'complete' the EU (nr. 46, 48, 49, 54, 55). Completing the Union is narrated as following a 'geopolitical logic' (nr. 48) and as the 'best investment in peace, security, and prosperity for our continent' (nr. 49). Moreover, von der Leyen also justifies the push towards further accession by claiming that 'to complete our Union [is] to make it stronger than ever' (nr. 55).

Similarly, we find frequent references (nr. 46, 48, 49, 58, 59, 62, 64, 65, 66, 67) to the importance of candidate countries displaying full alignment with the EU's CFSP, when it comes to membership criteria. This signifies a considerable rise in importance that is attributed to foreign policy alignment as precondition for EU accession. The importance of demonstrating full CFSP alignment is related by the HR/VP Borrell to the Ukraine war, which

'*Further underlines the need for unity and solidarity among the EU and its closest partners and thus the importance of a common foreign and security policy (CFSP) alignment in the enlargement process*' (nr. 49).

CFSP alignment is deemed by HR/VP Borrell 'a more significant signal than ever of shared values and strategic orientation' (nr. 48) and is even considered to be of 'vital importance' (nr.

58). While enlargement continues to be narrated as following a merit-based logic based on the Copenhagen criteria, CFSP alignment assumed a more prominent role next to the Copenhagen criteria. This increased importance was directly linked to geopolitics, with the Commission suggesting that full CFSP alignment is 'crucial in these times of geopolitical turmoil' (nr. 65).

Finally, various references to enlargement as 'investment' were observed (nr. 46, 48, 49, 50, 57, 61, 65). Again, a direct link is created between the Ukraine war and enlargement as a 'geostrategic investment', with the Commission claiming that 'Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine illustrates once again the need for a determined geostrategic investment in a stable, strong and united Europe' (nr. 50). Beyond being a 'geostrategic investment', enlargement is also referred to as an investment in the stability and security of Europe (nr. 61).

Consequently, it is appropriate to claim that several elements of the geopolitical narrative are present in t_3 and that the expectation that we will witness a rise in the salience of this narrative across our periods of analysis was confirmed. Importantly, we do not only observe a rise in the presence of the elements that we attributed to the geopolitical narrative, but we also detect the narrative as whole considerably more often in t_3 than in the other two periods of analysis. As exemplary document for t_3 we can consider the 2023 communication on enlargement of the Commission (nr. 46), a key document of the annual enlargement package. In this communication, we find a reference to the geopolitical nature of enlargement.

'*The geopolitical significance of EU enlargement was further underlined in 2022, when Ukraine, the Republic of Moldova, and Georgia applied to become EU members in the wake of Russia's unprovoked and unjustified war of aggression against Ukraine*', (nr. 46).

Furthermore, the Commission presents enlargement as serving EU interests when stating that 'a firm prospect of EU membership for the Western Balkans, Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia is in the EU's very own political, security, and economic interest and essential in the current geopolitical context' (nr. 46). Other elements that led to the identification of the geopolitical narrative are the depiction of enlargement as 'powerful tool' for the EU and the claim that 'in a rapidly changing geopolitical environment' the EU has strengthened its stance on the international stage and has 'assumed more international responsibility' (nr. 46). The implication here is that enlargement is not a power neutral, natural process like the peace narrative suggests, but that it has the potential to alter power constellations between international actors.

Next, the frequent call to 'complete' the Union is also present in this communication, with the Commission writing that 'we must now work on accelerating EU enlargement and completing

our Union' (nr. 46), which implies a sense of urgency which makes enlargement imperative. The importance of CFSP alignment is also stressed in the communication and is directly related to the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine, which renders CFSP alignment 'a more significant signal than ever' (nr. 46). Lastly, the Commission once again deems enlargement a 'geostrategic investment'. The fact that we can find so many of its elements in this document makes it clear that the geopolitical narrative is indeed the dominating narrative in the 2023 communication on enlargement of the Commission. It also once again indicates that the operationalisation done for this narrative in Chapter 4 is valid and accurate.

6. 3. 4 Linking the Geopolitical and Peace Narrative

Before discussing the main takeaways and remaining open questions in next chapter, a final point worth making is the way elements of the peace and geopolitical narrative are both present and interact in t_3, with elements of the latter, however, being clearly more pronounced. While both narratives have also been detected in the Albanian case for t_2 their elements did not mix. In t_3 a different picture emerges, with the elements of the peace narrative often being interwoven with elements of the geopolitical narrative. Examples include 'completing' the EU and enlargement being deemed an 'investment in peace' (nr. 46, 48, 49, 57); CFSP alignment being taking as indication of 'shared values' (nr. 48, 49, 64); or 'completing' the Union being referred to as 'the call of history, the natural horizon of the EU' (nr. 48), implying that enlargement is a natural process like the peace narrative claims.

All examples cited here take some elements of the geopolitical narrative and mix them with elements of the peace narrative creating a situation where we find elements of both being simultaneously present. Again, it is worth recalling the concept of polyphony of narratives that suggests that we will rarely witness just a single narrative. An even more interesting point to keep in mind as we enter the discussion of the findings in the next chapter, is the fact that, as OST stipulates, narratives provide cognitive and normative maps for political actors. With the peace narrative having long been the dominant narrative promoted by the EU, its increasing at oddness with the reality of the international system renders it an increasingly inappropriate cognitive and normative map. Consequently, the possibility that the Commission purposefully chooses to mix some elements of its traditional narrative with the newer geopolitical narrative might be an attempt to 'soften' the landing in this new geopolitical reality without creating too hard of a rupture or too obvious contradictions. We will discuss this hypothesis alongside the other main takeaways and open questions in the next chapter.

7. Discussion & Conclusion

This final chapter reviews the key findings of the narrative analysis and relates them to the existing literature and theoretical reflections to assess their broader implications. The limitations of the findings and the avenues for future research are being discussed before this chapter concludes this work by outlining its main takeaways.

7. 1 Discussion of Key Findings

The present work set out to analyse whether we can observe a rise of a geopolitical narrative in enlargement policy in the recent decade. Starting from the theoretical perspective that all political actors 'need […] to affirm and confirm who they are and why they exist as political community' (Akchurina & Della Sala, 2018, p. 1638), we focused on narratives as tools for political actors to create ontological security for themselves. Narratives help political actors to establish ontological security by providing a storyline for who they are, why they exist, and how they are ought to act (Della Sala, 2017). Simply put, narratives function as 'normative and cognitive maps' (Della Sala, 2018, p. 276) for political actors by giving guidance on who they are supposed to be and how they are expected to act. This work has argued that the EU's traditional master narrative, the peace narrative, is an increasingly inappropriate normative and cognitive map in a world order characterised by rising tensions in which 'geopolitics has come back with a vengeance' (Lehne, 2020). That is because the peace narrative narrates the EU as a fundamentally value-based actor, whose historic experience of having emerged out of the ashes of WW2 made the promotion of peace and liberal values its overarching purpose. In turn, the EU is also an actor for whom geopolitical thinking and display of hard power run counter its own *raison d'être* (Della Sala, 2018). This self-understanding of the EU as non-geopolitical actor is increasingly at odds with the international order which saw a 'return of power politics' (EEAS, 2022, p. 17).

Enlargement, then, is a particular promising policy field to analyse how this increasing inappropriateness of the peace narrative plays out and whether we can observe a rise of an alternative, geopolitical narrative. That is because enlargement is a policy field in which this at oddness is expected to be particularly pronounced.

'*Enlargement and geopolitics are polar opposites. Geopolitics is fast and unstoppable. Enlargement is slow and eminently stoppable. Geopolitics is disruptive, divisive, and often follows a zero-sum logic. Enlargement is transformative, unifying, and the ultimate positive sum game*' (Lehne, 2025).

While this is not to deny that previous enlargements, in particular the 2004 ‘big bang’ enlargement to the CEE region, had a geopolitical dimension, the premise of the present work is that geopolitical reasoning was not the predominant logic in which the EU narrated its enlargement policy (Lehne, 2025). The research interest of this work, thus, was assessing whether we can observe a rise in salience of a geopolitical narrative in enlargement policy in recent years, at the expense of the traditionally dominant peace narrative.

More specifically, we have examined how the narratives promoted by the European Commission in enlargement have changed over time. We have done so at three distinct time periods. Our first period of analysis (t_1) was with 01/03/2013 – 31/12/2013 a time before the EU has entered its so-called ‘polycrisis’. For t_1, we have analysed the narratives present in Commission documents for the case of Serbia entering accession negotiations. To allow for better comparability and to avoid selection bias, our case of choice for the second period of analysis (t_2) was also an instance of a WB candidate country entering accession negotiations. We analysed documents related to the Commission’s recommendation to open accession negotiations with Albania, released in the time 01/01/2020 – 30/06/2020. The expectation was that we would witness a decreased presence of the peace narrative in t_2 compared to t_1, while we expected the salience of the geopolitical narrative to have increased. Finally, for the third period (t_3) we analysed the recommendation by the Commission to start accession negotiations with BiH, focusing on the period 01/10/2023 – 31/03/2024. We expected that with the start of the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine on February 24, 2022, the salience of the geopolitical narrative in enlargement policy has increased even more, leading to a further decrease in the presence of the peace narrative.

Our findings are broadly in line with our expectations. The short answer to our research question is that yes, a rise in salience of the geopolitical narrative in enlargement policy across the three periods analysed can be clearly observed and that yes, it comes at the expense of the peace narrative. Most impressively, the geopolitical narrative has gone from having virtually no presence in t_1 in the documents related to the opening of accession negotiations with Serbia to being the guiding logic in the reasoning of the Commission in the documents related to the start of accession negotiations with BiH in t_3. In light of the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine, enlargement is increasingly deemed a ‘geostrategic investment’ whose realisation is imperative in times of geopolitical upheaval. The narration of enlargement as something that the EU must do and needs to accelerate in its own interest security interest is an increasingly prominent one across the three periods analysed, reaching its peak in t_3 with the logic of the

peace narrative being hardly present anymore. Tying these findings back to insights from theory and literature, our results support the claim by Della Sala (2023) that the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine has forced the EU to develop a different narrative from the peace narrative to make sense of the increasingly turbulent international order. We can interpret the rise of the geopolitical narrative in enlargement as the Commission's attempt to update the EU's cognitive and normative maps in accordance with this new reality in which power politics have returned, if they were ever absent.

Moreover, we can also conclude at this point that the conceptualisation of the geopolitical narrative that we did in Chapter 4 was rather accurate. In particular, highlighting how enlargement serves the EU's own interests, turning it into a stronger and more influential global actor, was a prominent element of the geopolitical narrative. So was the emphasis put by the Commission on the importance of countries that enter accession negotiations aligning fully with the EU's CFSP. Another frequently found element of the geopolitical narrative was the talk about the need to 'complete' the EU. This is perhaps the element of the geopolitical narrative that is the least obvious one, but as argued in Chapter 4, adopting a more geopolitical narration of enlargement also means becoming clear about which territories the EU regards as its own (Hill, 2003; Missiroli, 2003; Scicluna & Auer, 2023). Overall, these elements of the geopolitical narrative taken individually or in their entirety mean that the EU has a newly dominant narrative in enlargement, at least in the documents published by the Commission. This narrative is more appropriate in dealing with the accession process in the current international environment by openly and explicitly affirming the geopolitical dimension of enlargement, instead of suppressing and hiding it, as the peace narrative long did. It means that on the rhetorical level at least, the Commission has been reactive to the changed requirements by the international system to maintain actorness (Costa & Barbé, 2023).

The question, whether these changes towards a more geopolitical understanding of enlargement on the rhetorical level will be matched by the complementary actions and developments on the ground, is an entirely different one. Since OST assumes that narratives function as cognitive and normative maps for actors, it would expect that this new geopolitics-centred rhetoric is matched by actions, such as an acceleration of the accession process with multiple of the current candidate countries joining the Union within a reasonably short timeframe. Of course, one important caveat exists in this regard: the present work has only shown that the geopolitical narrative has become an increasingly important narrative in enlargement policy for the Commission. The Commission, however, is far from the only institution involved in

enlargement policy, with the European Council and the Council of the EU having decisive roles in blocking a country's path towards EU accession. Thus, should we not witness the corresponding actions in enlargement policy, one potential explanation might be that other narratives are still dominating the cognitive and normative reasoning of other EU institutions. An alternative explanation of why corresponding actions might be lacking is the traditional 'capability-expectation gap' (Hill, 1993), which stipulates that the EU in foreign policy talks a big game put cannot live up to its rhetoric announcements with corresponding actions. The verdict on whether the Commission will follow-up its geopolitical rhetoric with actions in enlargement is still out for future research to address. Events like Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia receiving candidate status with unprecedented speed (Anghel & Džankić, 2023) and accession negotiations being opened with Ukraine and Moldova equally quickly could be early signs of the geopolitical narrative being matched by these corresponding actions.

The second key question we must address, then, is where all of this leaves the peace narrative. An important starting point for the discussion here is that the peace narrative was less present than we would have expected already for Serbia in t_1. We can only speculate why this is the case. Perhaps the fact that enlargement always has a geopolitical dimension to it made the peace narrative less pronounced than in other policy fields to avoid obvious contradictions. What we do observe clearly is the expected decrease in the salience of the peace narrative when moving chronologically from t_1 to t_3. In t_1 we found the most references to the EU being a value-based actor who emerged from the horrors of WW2 with a mission to promote peace. This is in line with the conception of the peace narrative that we derived from academic literature in Chapter 4, with the additional metaphor of 'healing' having been discovered, which narrates the EU as an actor determined to reconcile former enemies to overcome history's scars. Enlargement policy too is presented in the Serbian case for t_1 as following a value-based logic.

In t_2 this value-based logic of enlargement was already less pronounced. Indeed, the references to the EU's foundational values are largely narrowed down to two in t_2: the importance of rule of law is repeatedly stressed by the Commission as essential in accession negotiations and, with the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, solidarity-based appeals became more frequent. The start of the pandemic submerged the geopolitical narrative, which we observed more strongly in t_2 in documents released by the Commission before the outbreak of the COVID-19 crisis. While again containing some speculation, it seems reasonable to expect that the peace narrative would have been even less salient in the Albanian case had the start of the pandemic not coincided with our period of analysis. The Commission narrated the solidarity that Albania

displayed with EU member states in the early days of the COVID-19 crisis as evidence that Albania shares the EU's values and used this to justify the advancement of the country on the accession path. By t_3, the peace narrative has almost entirely disappeared, with peace being mentioned in the documents of BiH only as one objective of enlargement among many and with strikingly little claims being made that accession would follow a value-based logic or that the EU and BiH share the same values.

Interestingly, the few remaining elements of the peace narrative in t_3 are interwoven with elements of the geopolitical narrative, with the latter being more pronounced. This link between the peace and the geopolitical narrative is another interesting finding of the analysis. As already teased at the end of Chapter 6, this link between the peace and the geopolitical narrative emerges from statements like enlargement being narrated as an investment in peace or CFSP alignment being taken as indication of shared values between the EU and enlargement countries. The question, then, is why we observe this connection between the two narratives, whose elements are rather contradictory, as demonstrated in Chapter 4. One potential explanation could be Subotić's (2016) argument that social actors will cling to their existing narratives in moments when their physical security is at risk. Arguably, the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine poses such a significant security threat for the EU.

Therefore, to not add fuel to the fire by also getting rid of the no longer appropriate but traditionally upheld peace narrative, following Subotić's (2016) train of thought, it would make sense for the Commission to still use some of the peace narrative's elements while transitioning towards the geopolitical narrative. By still promoting some of the elements of the familiar peace narrative, the Commission avoids creating a strong rupture in the shift from the peace to the geopolitical narrative which might add ontological insecurity on top of the physical insecurity. The fact that we only observe some selected elements of the peace narrative, like references to shared values and the importance of peace, but not others, that are a more obvious contradiction to the geopolitical narrative, is in line with Subotić's (2016) argument. For instance, the peace narrative's emphasis of enlargement being 'open' to all European countries that share the EU's values has completely vanished in t_3 giving way to the talk about 'completing' the Union. Since enlargement policy cannot simultaneously remain open while the EU is being 'completed' without creating an inherent contradiction and perpetuating a state of 'constructive ambiguity' (Scicluna & Auer, 2023, p. 2), which undermines the EU's actorness as geopolitical player, the precedence being given to the notion of completing the EU indicates which narrative the Commission chooses to prioritise. Whether this shift from the peace towards the geopolitical

narrative will be ever fully completed with the former completely vanishing remains to be seen. The dynamics we observed from t_1 to t_3 do point towards a future dominance of the geopolitical narrative in enlargement, and so do the latest developments at the international stage that certainly do not look like geopolitics will disappear anytime soon.

7. 2 Limitations

A few important caveats are of course due. First, more research is needed to turn the statement that we observed an increase in salience of the geopolitical narrative at the expense of the peace narrative in enlargement policy into a founded claim. That is because strictly speaking the present work has only examined instances of a country being recommended the opening of accession negotiations, which composes only one stage in the lengthy EU accession process. Therefore, this work, for instance, cannot claim anything about which narratives are being promoted by the Commission in statements related to the granting of candidate status or membership, as these narratives and their respective salience might be different. Consequently, the present work only shows that there has been a rise in salience of the geopolitical narrative in recent years in documents issued by the Commission related to the opening of accession negotiations.

'Commission' is another important keyword here. In a similar vein to the argument made above, we cannot generalise our findings to all EU institutions, since we only investigated one. It is reasonable to expect that the narratives promoted by other institutions, such as the intergovernmental Council of the EU and the European Council, might be slightly or entirely different ones, or that their respective salience varies. Likewise, the narratives in enlargement as entertained by the European Parliament might be different too, despite the Parliament sharing its supranational character with the Commission. Beyond the narratives promoted by the Parliament as institution, it is likely that one would discover also a considerable variety in the narratives that the individual political groups put forward in the field of enlargement. The point here is that, again, the present work's findings are clearly limited to the Commission as institution, and to the instance of opening accession negotiations.

Another limitation derives from the specific cases we choose for t_1, t_2, and t_3. For reasons of better comparability, we opted for three countries of the WB region. However, the narratives promoted by the Commission related to the opening of accession negotiations with WB countries do not have to be the same as those for opening accession talks with the EaP countries. Nor can we be sure that the narratives will not also vary based on which WB country we are

analysing at a given period. The latter provides a clear reservation against the present work, but as discussed in Chapter 6, there was no country that progressed through all stages of the accession process in the periods we wanted to analyse. And, as argued above, even looking at one and the same country for all three periods could have introduced some bias since the narratives promoted by the Commission could vary based on which stage of the accession process said country is currently in. In short, there would always have been some sort of bias, that this present work tried to minimise by opting for three different country cases for the three periods of analysis whilst keeping the region (WB) and the enlargement-related event (recommendation to open accession negotiations) stable.

A final limitation worth paying attention to is that in all three periods, we were confronted with an EU currently undergoing a crisis. The crisis sentiment was less pronounced in t_1, where the Union was being narrated as slowly emerging from the GFC and the socio-economic consequences it brought about. In t_2 and t_3 the sense of crisis was more acute, with the start of the COVID-19 crisis falling into the period of analysis for t_2 and the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine being in full swing in t_3, constituting a security crisis with economic consequences for the EU. Of course, the fact that we have examined three instances of crisis partly derives from our research interest and theoretical expectations. For t_3, we specifically looked for a case of opening accession negotiations while Russia was fighting its war of aggression in Ukraine. While having the start of the COVID-19 crisis in Europe being part of the analysis for t_2 was not planned, it is nevertheless fitting since post-2016 the EU entered its polycrisis era (Della Sala, 2023).

What is important to state clearly, however, is that by examining three periods of crisis, the present work does contribute to the overrepresentation of moments in literature in which an actor's sense of self might be disrupted (Browning & Joenniemi, 2017), which do not constitute the norm. As argued in Chapter 3, the reason why focusing on instances of crisis is so appealing is that it is in these moments of crisis and disruption that we might see new narratives arise or their respective salience change. Simply put, it is in these moments of crisis in which we can reasonably expect something to change. However, it is important to underline that these instances of crisis in which an actor's sense of self is being severely disrupted constitute the exceptions, given that it is exactly the purpose of narratives to provide actors with a stable sense of self. While crises might have increased both in frequency and in type in recent years, it is crucial to be aware that narratives in general are rather stable and that the moments of

existential ontological insecurity in which we might witness new narratives being born are the exception, not the norm.

7. 3 Directions for Future Research

All the limitations pointed out above constitute promising avenues for future research to assess whether the shift from the peace towards the geopolitical narrative is also apparent in enlargement policy elsewhere. Firstly, this means looking at which narratives are being promoted by the Commission with which salience also in other enlargement-related events, such as the recommendation to grant candidate status or EU membership. Secondly, future research should examine the narratives in enlargement promoted by other EU institutions, including the European Council, the Council of the EU or the European Parliament. For instance, European Council conclusions and declarations could be a promising material for analysis, given that recent declarations such as the Granada declaration (European Council, 2023) contain an interesting mix of elements attributed to the peace and the geopolitical narrative. Thirdly, another potentially promising avenue for future research would be looking into how the geopolitical and the peace narrative are present in enlargement-documents related to the EaP countries Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia. The expectation is that the geopolitical narrative could be even more pronounced here given that these countries did not have a membership perspective for the longest time (Verdun & Chira, 2011), and that, hence, the peace narrative might be historically less enshrined in this region. Moreover, the fact that Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia applied for EU membership shortly after the start of the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine (Anghel & Džankić, 2023) might indicate a close link between geopolitics and enlargement in both the eyes of the applying countries and the EU. Finally, the fast pace with whom Ukraine and Moldova have first been granted candidate status and then entered accession negotiations could also point towards a more geopolitical narrative guiding the accession process in the East compared to the WB, where enlargement has been stalling for years before picking up speed again recently.

Future research should also investigate whether the rise of the geopolitical narrative can also be observed in other policy fields, beyond enlargement. The present work has made an important contribution to the conceptualisation of the geopolitical narrative in enlargement policy by carefully defining its expected features in Chapter 4, with the geopolitical narrative having been severely undertheorized previously (Crombois, 2017; Pastore, 2019). The characteristics defined in this work can serve as starting point for future research that intends

to detect the geopolitical narrative elsewhere, with some potential modifications to its expected features being required to render the conceptualisation appropriate for other policy fields. Assessing the rise of the geopolitical narrative in other policy fields is crucial since as Lehne (2020) argues

> '*The EU's traditional business model is quite unsuited for the demands of the geopolitical age. Each strand of EU external policy - from trade, development, mobility, transportation, and connectivity to enlargement and the neighborhood - usually follows its own political dynamic, which is driven by member states' interests and powerful lobbies. […] But geopolitical action demands bringing together all relevant policies behind comprehensive and coherent external action based on a strategic outlook'.*

If Lehne's (2020) assumption is correct, that for the EU to become a more relevant geopolitical player, mainstreaming of geopolitical thinking into all policy areas is needed, then it should be possible to observe a rise of the geopolitical narrative also elsewhere in other policy areas.

Finally, a crucial question that future research will have to address is how a shift away from the peace narrative towards the geopolitical narrative impacts the EU's actions and decisions in the field of enlargement, and potentially elsewhere. The crucial importance that makes narratives such a worthwhile research subject is their functioning as cognitive and normative maps for political actors. If more research finds that there has been a shift in the EU's master narrative towards a geopolitical dimension, what consequences does that bear for enlargement policy? Does enlargement being narrated as 'necessity' come with an accelerated pace of accession? How does the talk about 'completing' the Union affect the EU relations with its neighbourhood once the ultimate 'carrot' of EU membership has been removed for some countries forever? All these questions will have to be answered by future research, with the outcome of some of them being far from clear at present day. This work regards it as its contribution to have defined what a geopolitical narrative looks like and to have provided some initial findings on its rise in enlargement policy, on which future research can build on.

7. 4 Summary and Conclusion

To summarise, the present work looked at how the narratives promoted by the European Commission in enlargement policy, specifically related to the opening of accession negotiations, have changed over the course of the last decade. In doing so, this work contributed to the state of OST literature by being the first to examine the EU narratives in the field of enlargement. The expectation was that we would observe a rise in salience of a geopolitical narrative in enlargement, given the international context in which geopolitics have grown more important

again. This work expected that the growing prominence of a geopolitical narrative would come at the expense of the peace narrative, the EU's traditional master narrative, which narrates the Union as a value-based actor that regards enlargement as an opportunity to promote its own values and advance peace. By defining what both the peace and the geopolitical narrative look like in enlargement, this work contributed to a better understanding of these narratives. Moreover, given that the EU's geopolitical narrative has barely been described before, the present work is among the pioneer works (Crombois, 2017; Pastore, 2019) that explore the characteristics of this 'unfamiliar type of rhetoric' (Lehne, 2020) emerging from the Commission.

Arguing that the geopolitical narrative in enlargement policy likely grew more salient following the EU's shift away from its transformative agenda towards a more sober outlook characterised by 'principled pragmatism' (EEAS, 2016) and a focus on EU interests, this work compared the salience of the peace and the geopolitical narrative for a period stretching from before to after 2016. Additionally, expecting that the geopolitical narrative would have only grown more prominent following the start of the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine, we also included a period after February 24, 2022, in the narrative analysis. Using Czarniawska's (2004) model for narrative analysis, three instances of the Commission recommending to open accession negotiations with a WB country were analysed for the respective three periods. While the peace narrative was found to be less pronounced in enlargement policy in the first place than expected, we did find that over the course of the last decade its salience diminished significantly. As expected, this work found a clear rise in salience of the geopolitical narrative, which was the dominant narrative in Commission documents related to the recommendation to open accession negotiations with BiH in 2023/2024.

Therefore, we find that in a world where 'enlargement […] has turned into a key factor in a geopolitical contest' (Lehne, 2025), this new reality is being reflected in the narratives that the Commission promotes in the realm of its enlargement policy. How having the geopolitical narrative as the new guiding cognitive and normative map of the Commission will impact the EU's enlargement policy more broadly remains to be seen.

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Annex 1

A. t_1 - Serbia

Nr.	*Publication date*	*Type of document*	*Source*	*Retrieved from*
1	18.03.2013	Memo	COM	https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/memo_13_234
2	22.04.2013	Press release	COM	https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_13_347
3	22.04.2013	Annual progress report	COM/ HR/VP	https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52013JC0007
4	25.04.2013	Memo	COM	https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/memo_13_385
5	26.04.2013	Memo	COM	https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/memo_13_387
6	26.06.2013	Speech	COM	https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/SPEECH_13_577
7	05.07.2013	Press release	EEAS	https://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_data/docs/pressdata/EN/foraff/137792.pdf
8	10.07.2013	Speech	EEAS	https://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_data/docs/pressdata/EN/foraff/137959.pdf
9	16.07.2013	Press release	COM	https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_13_698
10	11.09.2013	Speech	COM	https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/SPEECH_13_684
11	17.09.2013	Memo	COM	https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/memo_13_795
12	27.09.2013	Memo	COM	https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/memo_13_832
13	16.10.2013	Progress report	COM	https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/serbia-progress-report-2013_en
14	16.10.2013	Commun-ication	COM	https://www.ab.gov.tr/siteimages/birimler/kpb/communication-on-eu-enlargement-policy_en_2013.pdf
15	16.10.2013	Memo	COM	https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/memo_13_894
16	16.10.2013	Speech	COM	https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/SPEECH_13_816
17	03.12.2013	Memo	COM	https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/memo_13_1089
18	23.12.2013	Press release	COM	https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_13_1311

B. t_2 - Albania

Nr.	*Publication date*	*Type of document*	*Source*	*Retrieved from*
19	16.01.2020	Press statement	COM	https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/news/remarks-commissioner-oliver-varhelyi-press-conference-prime-minister-albania-edi-rama-2020-01-16_en

20	16.01.2020	Press release	EEAS	https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/commissioner-varhelyi-visits-north-macedonia-and-albania_en
21	17.01.2020	Press release	EEAS	https://www.eeas.europa.eu/delegations/north-macedonia/visit-commissioner-european-neighbourhood-policy-and-enlargement-negotiations-olivér-várhelyi-0_en
22	05.02.2020	Communication	COM	https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/enhancing-accession-process-credible-eu-perspective-western-balkans_en
23	05.02.2020	Press release	COM	https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_20_181
24	05.02.2020	Memo/Q&A	COM	https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/qanda_20_182
25	05.02.2020	Press statement	COM	https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/news/more-credible-dynamic-predictable-and-political-eu-accession-process-commission-lays-out-its-2020-02-05_en
26	17.02.2020	Speech	COM	https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/news/opening-remarks-president-von-der-leyen-international-donors-conference-together-albania-2020-02-17_en
27	18.02.2020	Speech	COM	https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/speech_20_2601
28	02.03.2020	Report	COM	https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/document/download/8eeac348-268d-4a61-83e1-1eef64893425_en?filename=update-on-the-republic-of-albania.pdf
29	02.03.2020	Press release	COM	https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/news/commission-reports-progress-made-albania-and-north-macedonia-2020-03-02_en
30	24.03.2020	Press statement	COM	https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/statement_20_2643
31	25.03.2020	Press release	COM	https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_20_519
32	25.03.2020	Press release	EEAS	https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/hrvp-josep-borrell-green-light-eu-membership-talks-albania-and-north-macedonia-good-news-region-and_en
33	26.03.2020	Video message	COM	https://vimeo.com/400898969?turnstile
34	30.03.2020	Press statement	EEAS	https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/accession-talks-albania-and-north-macedonia-and-eu's-commitment-western-balkans_en
35	31.03.2020	Press release	EEAS	https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/albania-—-example-european-solidarity-against-coronavirus_en
36	06.05.2020	Press statement	EEAS	https://www.eeas.europa.eu/delegations/montenegro/against-all-odds-covid-19-pandemic-cemented-eu-ties-western-balkans_en
37	15.05.2020	Speech	COM	https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/speech_20_2703
38	28.05.2020	Press statement	EEAS	https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/implementation-justice-reform-must-continue-more-determination-ever_en
39	29.05.2020	Speech	COM	https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/speech_20_2723
40	05.06.2020	Press statement	COM	https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/news/albania-joint-statement-high-representative-vice-president-josep-borrell-and-neighbourhood-and-2020-06-05_en

41	18.06.2020	Speech	COM	https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/speech_20_2764
42	24.06.2020	Press statement	COM	https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/statement_20_2778

C. t_3 - Bosnia and Herzegovina

Nr.	*Publication date*	*Type of document*	*Source*	*Retrieved from*
43	01.11.2023	Press statement	COM	https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/statement_23_5481
44	08.11.2023	Progress report	COM	https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/bosnia-and-herzegovina-report-2023_en
45	08.11.2023	Memo / Q&A	COM	https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/qanda_23_5613
46	08.11.2023	Commun-ication	COM	https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/2023-communication-eu-enlargement-policy_en
47	08.11.2023	Press statement	COM	https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/statement_23_5641
48	08.11.2023	Press release	COM	https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_23_5633
49	08.11.2023	Press release	EEAS	https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/hrvp-borrell-eu-enlargement-policy-driving-force-peace-security-and-prosperity-our-continent_en
50	08.11.2023	Commun-ication	COM	https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/2023-communication-new-growth-plan-western-balkans_en
51	08.11.2023	Press release	COM	https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_23_5604
52	08.11.2023	Speech	COM	https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/speech_23_5647
53	08.11.2023	Press statement	COM	https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/speech_23_5648
54	08.11.2023	Speech	COM	https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/speech_23_5646
55	10.11.2023	Press release	COM	https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ac_24_5
56	22.11.2023	Speech	COM	https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/speech_23_6024
57	23.11.2023	Speech	COM	https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/speech_23_6015
58	28.11.2023	Press statement	EEAS	https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/western-balkans-press-remarks-high-representativevice-president-josep-borrell-meeting-nato-foreign_en
59	05.12.2023	Speech	COM	https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/speech_23_6375
60	13.12.2023	Press statement	COM	https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/statement_23_6589
61	15.12.2023	Press statement	COM	https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/news/opening-remarks-president-von-der-leyen-joint-press-conference-president-michel-and-prime-minister-2023-12-15_en

62	23.01.2024	Press statement	COM	https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/news/statement-president-von-der-leyen-joint-press-conference-dutch-prime-minister-rutte-croatian-prime-2024-01-23_en
63	26.02.2024	Speech	COM	https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/speech_24_1122
64	12.03.2024	Report	COM	https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/document/download/fa9da504-4ecb-4317-b583-c9fff0b833b2_en
65	12.03.2024	Press release	COM	https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_24_1423
66	12.03.2024	Speech	COM	https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/speech_24_1415
67	21.03.2024	Press statement	COM	https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/statement_24_1661

Annex 2

A. t_1 - Serbia

Nr.	*Actor(s)*	*Chronicle*	*Mimesis*	*Emplotment*	*Narrative(s)*
1	Štefan Füle (ENLARG COM), Catherine Ashton (HR/VP).	- High frequency of contacts between EU and Serbia (RS). - EU membership of RS is a common objective of EU and RS. - Whether decision to open accession negotiations happens in June 2013 depends on RS's reform efforts. - Key priority is improving the relations with Kosovo, the February 2013 meeting between the Presidents of RS and Kosovo was an important step. - Other areas where reforms are needed include the judiciary, anti-corruption strategy, anti-discrimination, media freedom, and inclusion of vulnerable groups. - The European Commission (COM) is due to release its spring report on enlargement on 16/04/2013.	- EU is committed to a Serbian EU membership: 'You can see from the high frequency of contacts between Belgrade and Brussels what importance we attach to Serbia and its European path'. 'We want Serbia to succeed in its European efforts'. - A Serbian EU membership is a shared objective of both RS and the EU. The common objective is 'bringing Serbia not only closer to the EU, but into the EU'. - EU membership is presented as a tool to modernise RS. - While EU assists RS on its reform path, RS has it in its own hands whether accession negotiations will be opened and how quickly. This will depend on whether RS can improve its relations with Kosovo, which is the key priority for the EU. Other reforms are also still needed.	- The EU is an ally of RS that wants to see RS become part of the Union and is determined to help RS achieve this shared objective. - Nevertheless, the EU cannot overlook whether RS has delivered on the required reforms, in particular the Belgrade-Pristina Dialogue is crucial. - Consequently, EU enlargement is strictly merit-based. Opening of accession negotiations depends on RS delivering on reforms. - RS ultimately has it in its own hands if and how quickly accession negotiations will be opened. While the EU stands ready to support and cheer RS on, it all depends on RS itself. - Becoming an EU member state is beneficial for RS and would modernise the country, implying that current RS is outdated.	*Identified narrative(s):* none. - Highlighting the importance of a merit-based enlargement process corresponds with the peace and the geopolitical narrative.
2	COM, Catherine Ashton (HR/VP), Štefan Füle (ENLARG COM).	- RS and Kosovo have struck an agreement in the Belgrade-Pristina dialogue on 19/04/2013. - COM and HR/VP released a joint report on 22/04/2013 in which they	- The agreement between RS and Kosovo is a 'historic agreement' and a 'landmark deal'. - EU takes credit for this deal since it is an 'EU-facilitated dialogue'.	- RS has delivered on the reforms needed to open accession negotiations, in particular by visibly and sustainably improving its	*Identified narrative(s):* none. - Highlighting the importance of a merit-based enlargement process

		recommend opening of accession negotiations with RS. - RS has improved its cooperation with the European Union Rule of Law Mission in Kosovo (EULEX). - RS has made reforms in areas concerning rule of law, independence of institutions, media freedom, anti-discrimination, minority protection, protection of the business environment, and in regional cooperation. - RS will have to sustain these efforts over time.	- For ENLARG COM Füle 'Serbia and Kosovo have proved that they can both focus on the future rather than staying entangled in the past'. - The recommendation to open accession negotiations is due to the 'progress achieved'. - RS is presented as deserving/worthy of advancing on its European path. - The recommendation to open accession negotiations 'is good news for the people in Serbia and Kosovo, and in the whole region' (ENLARG COM Füle). - The recommendation marks 'a decisive break with the past and a common step towards a European future' (HR/VP Ashton).	relations with Kosovo. - The EU takes credit for the 'historic agreement', presenting itself as facilitator of dialogue. - COM rewards RS by recommending the opening of accession negotiations, with RS being 'deserving' and 'worthy' of this recommendation, thus, having earned it. - EU membership is the future of RS, while being entangled in conflict is its past. - EU membership is beneficial for RS, its citizens, and the region at large. - The accession path will continue to be merit-based, and RS has yet to prove that it can sustain its reform efforts.	corresponds with the peace and the geopolitical narrative. - Some hints of the peace narrative by linking peaceful neighbourly relations with EU membership, while presenting conflict as part of the past. - EU as actor that facilitates peaceful relations, and dialogue is consistent with the peace narrative but also aligns with the geopolitical narrative.
3	COM, HR/VP.	- Council tasked COM and HR/VP in Conclusions on 11/12/2012 to present joint progress report on RS in spring 2013. - Progress report presented on 22/04/2013. - Report finds that RS has met the key priority of visibly and sustainably improving relations with Kosovo, including by having participated in ten high-level meetings of the respective Prime Ministers between October 2012 and April 2013, leading to a first agreement between RS and	- The accession process follows a merit-based logic in which the membership criteria must be adhered to. - The report adopts technical perspective and language to assess whether RS has made progress, particularly when it comes to the key priority of visibly and sustainably improving the relations with Kosovo. - HR/VP and COM find that RS 'has taken very significant steps towards visible and	- COM/HR/VP present the path towards EU membership as a clearly defined process, in which progress is linked to the fulfilment of membership criteria, making it a merit-based undertaking. - COM/HR/VP deliver a positive finding for RS, arguing that the improvement of relations with Kosovo, the progress on reforms regarding the membership criteria and the regional	*Identified narrative(s):* none. - Highlighting the importance of a merit-based enlargement process corresponds with the peace and the geopolitical narrative.

		Kosovo on 19/04/2013. - RS has also improved its cooperation with EULEX. - RS has made progress in judicial reform, anti-corruption policy, fight against organised crime, independency of institutions, media freedom, anti-discrimination policy, minority protection, and in improvement of business environment. - RS has been actively engaged in fostering good regional relations with Croatia and BiH and has improved its relations with Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Turkey. - 'The Commission therefore recommends that negotiations for accession to the European Union should be opened with Serbia' p. 12. - COM will continue to monitor the implementation of reforms throughout the accession talks.	sustainable improvement in relations with Kosovo' p. 11. - Considering also the progress on other membership criteria and on regional cooperation, COM rather technically recommends the opening of accession talks.	cooperation efforts should earn RS the opening of accession negotiations. - COM highlights that RS must sustain these efforts over time and that it will continue monitoring them.	
4	Štefan Füle (ENLARG COM).	- ENLARG COM Füle is in Belgrade to congratulate RS on the agreement with Kosovo and on the recommendation by COM of opening accession negotiations. - Report by COM and HR/VP was well received by member states. - As next steps, RS must implement the agreement with Kosovo and focus on implementing	- Agreement with Kosovo was a 'historical step'. - EU is full of appreciation and support for RS' achievements on the European path. - Recommendation of opening accession negotiations 'marks a new level of our engagement with Serbia'. - Implementing the provisions set out on the agreement with Kosovo and in the membership criteria,	- The recommendation to open accession negotiations was earned by RS. - This moment was emotional not only for RS and its citizens but also the EU, who remains supportive of welcoming RS in its 'European family'. - The recommendation marks a new moment in the relations between	*Identified narrative(s):* none. - Highlighting the importance of a merit-based enlargement process corresponds with the peace and the geopolitical narrative. - The reference of 'European family' is consistent with the peace narrative, yet

		reforms, particularly on rule of law.	is now crucial 'for the future of Serbia in the European family'. - This moment is not only special for RS but also for the EU: 'It was a very special week not only for you in Serbia, but also for the EU and for me personally'.	RS and the EU, hinting at the fact that something has changed and that the engagement and bond between the two will grow stronger. - Nevertheless, it is crucial that RS continues to implement reforms to progress on its European path.	values are not mentioned nor is there an explicit reference to RS being part of this family.
5	Štefan Füle (ENLARG COM).	- ENLARG COM Füle is in Belgrade to congratulate RS on the agreement with Kosovo and on the recommendation by COM to open accession talks. - RS must now focus on implementing the agreement. - The member states will decide in June 2013 on whether accession negotiations will be opened. Their decision will be based on whether RS has implemented the agreement with Kosovo and made other reforms linked to the membership criteria. - Füle is certain that RS will deliver on reforms.	- Agreement with Kosovo is hailed as a 'major breakthrough'. - The agreement is taken as evidence of the European attitude and values of RS: 'the agreement with Pristina has sent a strong message across Europe about Serbia's European attitude'. 'The deal with Pristina was possible thanks to: determination, courage, willingness to compromise, wisdom and the ability to look into the future, well beyond one electoral term. These are very European virtues'. - Continuing the reform path is also linked with 'Europeanness': 'I am sure we will see another one: the implementation and bringing agreements from paper into practical life. Solving trough issues the European way is not making countries weaker, but stronger. Serbia is stronger now'. - The agreement is presented as paving 'the way for a better	- Enlargement is presented as merit-based process. - The agreement between Belgrade and Pristina is cited by ENLARG COM Füle as evidence that Serbia has a 'European' attitude and that by being willing to conclude this agreement has demonstrated its 'European' values. - Values such as being able to compromise and continuously implement reforms are linked with an advancement on the accession path, providing a link between enlargement and values. - Enlargement is presented as beneficial for RS, contributing to a better future and a stronger RS. - While not necessarily deemed a member of the European family just yet, RS is portrayed as partner of the EU, that is reliable and can be trusted.	*Identified narrative(s):* none. - Highlighting the importance of a merit-based enlargement process corresponds with the peace and the geopolitical narrative. - This document comes the closest to the peace narrative so far, because a link is being established between displaying a 'European attitude' and possessing 'European virtues' and EU membership. - Moreover, RS is presented as a 'partner' of the EU, that can be trusted.

			future for all people of Serbia'. - RS is deemed to be a 'partner' of the EU, who will undoubtedly deliver on reforms: 'I have no doubts that our Serbian partners can deliver on all of this'.		
6	COM President José Manuel Barroso.	- COM recommended opening of accession negotiations with RS on 22/04/2013. - General Affairs Council decided to follow this recommendation on 25/04/2013. - European Council will decide on it during the 27-28 June 2013 summit. - Barroso supports the decision to open accession negotiations. - RS needs to continue engaging in and deepening its dialogue with Kosovo, as well as implementing other reforms, most notably in the area of rule of law. - COM will monitor the progress of reform implementation closely.	- The agreement with Kosovo is a 'historic agreement'. - Opening of accession negotiations is a 'historic decision' not only for RS but for the EU as well. - This decision would mark the start of something new in the relations between RS and the EU which would 'open the door to the next important phase in Serbia's European path'. - EU membership means a better future for Serbian citizens. - Being able to strike a deal with Kosovo testifies the European spirit of RS, the agreement 'reflects the European spirit: we are not weaker because we talk and try to reach compromise; on the contrary – we are stronger because we build bridges'. - It is crucial for EU membership aspirations that RS continues the dialogue with Kosovo and continues to deliver on reforms. - COM is presented as an ally of RS that is committed to welcoming RS in its	- Enlargement is a merit-based process in which RS has earned the right to advance by striking an agreement with Kosovo and delivering on reforms. - COM stands on the side of RS and supports its membership ambitions, which are historic not only for the country itself but also for the EU. - RS has shown to reflect the 'European spirit' because it was able to strike this deal. - In turn, it is rewarded by entering a new phase of relations with the EU, moving closer towards membership, which offers a better future to the country. - Nevertheless, it remains essential that RS continues to deliver on reforms and that it deepens the dialogue with Kosovo.	*Identified narrative(s):* none. - Highlighting the importance of a merit-based enlargement process corresponds with the peace and the geopolitical narrative. - Some connection is drawn yet again between the ability of RS to seek a compromise with Kosovo and navigate sensitive and complex issues to the 'European spirit' of the country.

			circle: 'The Commission stands by Serbia in this European journey. We support the Serbian people realizing their European perspective which they want and they fully deserve'.		
7	Catherine Ashton (HR/VP).	- The European Council has decided to open accession negotiations with RS. - The HR/VP will visit RS next week to discuss with the RS government how the agreements reached in the dialogue with Kosovo can be implemented and how to move the dialogue forward.	- The decision to open accession negotiations is named a 'historic decision'. - Emphasis is being put on the need to implement the agreements reached and to move the 'EU-facilitated dialogue' forward.	- The decision to open accession negotiations is mentioned alongside the progress achieved in the Belgrade-Pristina dialogue, therefore linking advancements in both areas together.	*Identified narrative(s):* none. - Highlighting the importance of a merit-based enlargement process corresponds with the peace and the geopolitical force narrative.
8	Catherine Ashton (HR/VP).	- European Council decided to open accession negotiations at the end of June. - RS has made progress in implementing the provisions of the 19/04/2013 agreement with Kosovo. - The HR/VP will meet the Prime Ministers of RS and Kosovo again before the end of July. - RS has started preparing for the accession negotiations. - The EU has also started preparing the accession negotiations. COM is working on the negotiating framework. - RS must upkeep the implementation of the provisions of the agreement with Kosovo,	- The decision to open accession talks by the European Council is deemed 'historic'. - The merit-based character of EU accession is highlighted, RS is portrayed as having earned this advancement ('A sign of the great achievements of the leadership of Serbia'; 'the team who worked so hard over these last few months'). - The EU rewards countries that have earned the progress on their European path ('All of that work has been acknowledged by every Member State of the European Union`). - Appreciative tone of the HR/VP towards the Serbian government and citizens ('I wanted	- This speech strikes a balance between enthusiastically congratulating RS for its fast progress on signing the agreement with Kosovo and on implementing it. RS is narrated as a country that inspires both EU officials in Brussels and the public worldwide. - The agreement is once again presented as an entry ticket into a better future for RS and its citizens and linked to progress on the EU membership path. - Yet, the HR/VP also alludes to the fact that accession negotiations are a lengthy process that will take time. - The EU is portrayed as being a supportive force,	*Identified narrative(s):* none. - Highlighting the importance of a merit-based enlargement process corresponds with the peace and the geopolitical narrative.

			to express my great respect for your vision, your courage and how I have seen you take what are often painful decisions and I have seen you address difficult political challenges'; 'And I want to pay tribute not just to the leadership here, but to the people of Serbia for the inspiration that you have given not just in this region but all over the world'; 'Mr President, Mr Prime Minister, you are an inspiration'). - Praise for the progress of RS in implementing the agreement with Kosovo is given. - The purpose of agreement and enlargement is better future/life for the people ('I remind all of you that the purpose is to ensure a better life for the people, in particular the people who live in the north'; 'This must be an ongoing process but the process is, as I have said, about ensuring that we support people to a better life'). - The effort of implementing must be continued ('Indeed there will be no summer break for everyone because it is important to show the progress that we want to see if people's lives are going to be better and quickly'). - HR/VP Ashton lowers expectation	which is working with enthusiasm on preparing the accession negotiation framework and which is committed to welcoming RS in its circle.	

			in regard to how quickly accession will unfold ('I was really pleased also to know that Serbia has already started the preparations for the start of the accession negotiations. This takes time. It is a challenging process as you, Mr President, have indicated and it is really good to see that Serbia is getting ready and will be thoroughly prepared'). - there is a reassuring tone about the EU being committed to do its part to support the future membership of RS ('But on the European Union side we have also started the work to prepare for the negotiations. The European Commission is already working on the negotiating framework which is our mandate for the upcoming talks, which needs to be presented to Member States. It takes time too to get that framework ready but officials are doing so with great enthusiasm').		
9	Štefan Füle (ENLARG COM).	- The European Council decided to open accession negotiations on 28/06/2013. - ENLARG COM Füle will travel to RS from 17-18/07/2013 to discuss with RS leadership how the country can set up its structures for the accession talks and to	- The European Council decision is deemed to open a new phase for RS ('The country entering a decisive new phase in its relations with the European Union'). - RS is reminded that it must sustain its efforts when it comes to	- Accession is narrated as merit-based process in which RS has earned the opening of accession negotiations for its commitment to improve relations with Kosovo, its efforts in implementing reforms, and its	*Identified narrative(s):* none. - Highlighting the importance of a merit-based enlargement process corresponds with the peace and the geopolitical narrative.

		confirm that RS remains committed to implementing reforms and the provisions of the agreements resulting from the dialogue with Kosovo. - Accession talks are expected to take years.	implementing the provisions of the agreements with Kosovo, the membership-related reforms in general and that it must continue acting as pivotal actor in the region that promotes reconciliation. - RS has earned the opening of accession talks ('The decision to open accession negotiations is a major achievement for the Serbian leaders and rewards persistent efforts over the last decade'). - A sobering tone is used for setting the expectation straight that accession talks take years ('The negotiations process is demanding and takes years'). - An accession offers benefits for RS ('The European integration process will also from now on become increasingly tangible for the administration, civil society, business people, students, researchers and for Serbian society at large, truly for all citizens of Serbia, in many aspects of their daily lives').	role in regional cooperation. - The opening of accession talks is presented as a 'new phase', which brings RS closer to the benefits of membership. Yet, expectations are lowered by highlighting that accession talks are a lengthy and complex process that will stretch on for the coming years.	
10	COM President José Manuel Barroso.	- COM President Barroso delivers the annual SOTEU address on 11/09/2013 to the Plenary of the European Parliament in Strasbourg. - The GFC hit Europe five years prior. - The EU and its member states are on	- The EU is presented as entity that was under severe stress and crisis in the last five years. But this crisis is being interpreted in strict economic terms, which then evolved also into a social crisis for EU citizens ('These events triggered the	- The EU is being narrated as having been in crisis mode in the last five years. Yet, this crisis is strictly presented as having economic roots which then also led to social implications such as high unemployment. In	*Identified narrative(s):* peace narrative. - The peace narrative clearly emerges from Barroso's SOTEU speech. It is both apparent in its general form (EU as peace project, EU as being a

		the road of economic recovery now. - The EU received the Nobel Peace Prize in 2012.	global financial crisis. It evolved into an unprecedented economic crisis. And it became a social crisis with dramatic consequences for many of our citizens'). - The EU will evolve from this crisis as a transformed entity ('Let's make no mistake: there is no way back to business as usual. […] This crisis is different. This is not a cynical crisis, but a structural one. We will not come back to the old normal. We have to shape a new normal. We are in a transformative period of history'). - The EU is presented as having emerged stronger from the crisis by working together and uniting. - While the EU is on the road of recovery, the economic crisis has not been fully overcome yet ('The resilience of our Union will continue to be tested'). - The EU is a value-based Union ('But our idea of Europe needs to go far beyond the economy. We are much more than a market […] It is about values, and I underline this word: values'). - Europe's war torn past is being mentioned three times and the European project is presented as mean to	no part of the speech is the crisis being narrated as a physical one in terms of security. The EU is portrayed as an actor that has once again managed to emerge from this crisis as a stronger, more united actor. Yet, the speech warns that the crisis is not fully overcome yet and that the EU will have to continue building up its resilience. - The speech explicitly claims that the EU is fundamentally about values, rendering it a value-based community. The wars of the 20th century are mentioned by Barroso in three different instances, implying that the wars have inspired the European project which serves the purpose of overcoming the violent past. In this regard, the Nobel Peace Prize is being cited as having rewarded the EU for its successful project of pacifying the European continent, once again implying that the purpose of the EU is peace. - The European project is narrated as an open project, whose destination and members are not set out from the beginning.	value-based actor, references of the wars of the 20th century and of European integration as tool to overcome them, the Nobel Peace Prize as reward for the EU's peace efforts) and in the application to enlargement policy. The characteristics we expected for the peace narrative in enlargement policy are apparent (enlargement being about promoting peace, about pacifying the WB region, enlargement as a value-based policy, the EU as an open entity). Enough of the expected characteristics were observed to be able to confidently say that the peace narrative can be found in Barroso's SOTEU speech. - There are some traces of the general geopolitical narrative with geopolitics being mentioned for the first time in the documents analysed and Barroso calling for a more balanced approach between idealism and realism, which alludes to the concept of principled pragmatism. Yet, these aspects are

			overcome the violent legacy of the past ('And does everyone still remember just how much Europe has suffered from its wars during the last century, and how European integration was a valid answer?' and 'let us not forget – one hundred years ago – Europe was sleepwalking into the catastrophy of the war of 1914. Next year, in 2014, I hope Europe will be walking out of the crisis towards a Europe that is more united, stronger and open'). - EU that has pacified the European continent ('The European continent has never in its history known such a long period of peace as since the creation of the European Community. It is our duty to preserve and deepen it'). - The Nobel Peace Prize is being mentioned and the EU is presented as a peace project ('Last year's Nobel Peace Prize reminded us of that historic achievement: that Europe is a project of peace'). - Europe is an open entity ('My reply is clear: we all need a Europe that is united, strong and open'). - Enlargement is presented as a story of reconciliation and healing ('Does everyone still realise	- Enlargement is narrated as a story of reconciliation and peace, which serves to heal 'history's deep scars'. A direct link is established between enlargement and promoting peace in the WB. The agreement between RS and Kosovo is being explicitly referenced as an instance where a membership perspective has helped overcome conflict and promoted peace. The EU takes credit for the agreement. - Enlargement policy is narrated as being about values, with the EU itself being a value-based project. - There is also a more pragmatic perspective apparent in one section of the speech, with Barroso calling for the European Parliament to balance out idealism with realism, when the situation requires it. - Geopolitics receive a mention for the first time in the documents analysed and EU interests are being referred to. However, values are mentioned in the same breath and no wider call is made for developing a more geopolitical side of the EU. Nor is the	too weak to talk about the geopolitical narrative as present, and no link is made between geopolitics and enlargement.

			how enlargement has been a success in terms of healing history's deep scars, establishing democracies where no one had thought it possible?'). - Enlargement is directly being linked to the Europe's war torn past as tool to reconcile former enemies and unite them ('Next year, it will be one century after the start of the First World War. A war that tore Europe apart, from Sarajevo to the Somme. We must never take peace for granted. We need to recall that it is because of Europe that former enemies now sit around the same table and work together'). - RS is singled out as instance where enlargement policy has contributed to the promotion of peace and reconciliation. The EU takes credit for the agreement reached between RS and Kosovo ('It is only because they were offered a European perspective that now Serbia and Kosovo come to an agreement, under mediation of the EU'). - The EU and its enlargement policy are both about values ('Safeguarding its values, such as the rule of law, is what the European Union was made to do, from its inception to	geopolitical situation being referenced as a threat to the European project.	

			the latest chapters in enlargement'). - If the circumstances call for it the EU needs to balance its ideals with a more realistic outlook ('I hope the European Parliament will take up this challenge with all the idealism it holds, with as much realism and determination as the times demand of us'). - Geopolitical changes on the international stage are being mentioned – EU values and interests need to be protected and promoted ('In our world of geo-economic and geopolitical tectonic changes, I believe that only together, as the European Union, we can give our citizens what they aspire: that our values, our interests, our prosperity are protected and promoted in the age of globalisation').		
11	Štefan Füle (ENLARG COM).	- ENLARG COM Füle met Serbian Minister in charge of European Integration and Serbian chief negotiator in Brussels to discuss the preparations for the accession talks. - Screening of acquis to start the week after, process is expected to take between 18 and 21 months. - Process will start with screening of Chapter 23 on judiciary and fundamental rights on 25-26/09/2013.	- Enthusiastic tone about the meeting ('Very constructive first meeting'). - Accession negotiations will be a 'new phase of relations between the EU and Serbia'. - EU membership is presented as being beneficial for both Serbian business and its citizens. - RS is reminded of having to sustain its reform efforts. - COM is presented as supportive force that supports the accession of RS	- The focus now is on moving towards the technical steps of setting up the negotiations and of formally launching them. - The benefits of EU membership are being advertised, while a realistic outlook is given with accession talks being expected to stretch on for years.	*Identified narrative(s):* none.

		- COM has submitted its proposal for the negotiation framework on 22/07/2013, which is currently being discussed in the Council and must be endorsed by the European Council. - An Inter-Governmental Conference to formally launch the accession negotiations is expected for January 2014 at the latest.	with policy advice and IPA funds. - Realistic outlook on the length and complexity of accession negotiations is created ('We have a lot of challenges ahead of us'). Use of 'we' that shows that the EU shares the burden of challenges and supports RS on its European path.		
12	Štefan Füle (ENLARG COM).	- The Pride Parade planned for the 28/09/2013 in Belgrade has been cancelled the third year in a row, out of security concerns. - COM expects the Serbian government to take all the necessary steps to investigate the threats of violence and to take measures to ensure that the freedom of assembly and expression are being respected. - The screening of Chapter 23 on judiciary and fundamental rights is expected for the following week.	- Regretful tone about the decision to cancel the parade ('It is a missed opportunity to show respect for fundamental rights'). - Enlargement linked to values ('As Commissioner for the EU Enlargement policy, I am committed to seek from candidate countries that they fully embrace values such as freedom of assembly and freedom of expression that are amongst the core foundations on which the European Union project is built upon). - COM will continue supporting RS in creating a climate of tolerance, respect, anti-discrimination 'in line with the EU Treaties and Charter for Fundamental Rights as well as the June 2013 Conclusions of the Council on Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Intersex (LGBTI) rights'.	- The decision to cancel the Pride Parade is presented as regretful, and as a potential setback in the commitment of RS to fundamental values. - A clear link is established between enlargement and embracing the EU's values in full, with candidate countries being expected to demonstrate these values. - While RS is publicly scrutinised for the decision to cancel the Pride Parade, COM does not punish RS. Instead, ENLARG COM Füle emphasises that COM stands ready to support RS in upholding values such as tolerance, respect, and anti-discrimination. - RS is asked to investigate the threats against the Pride Parade and to take measures to prevent them from happening again.	*Identified narrative(s):* none. - A link is being established between enlargement policy and the EU's values. Arguing that the EU expects candidate countries to fully embrace its values is in line with the peace narrative.

13	COM	- European Council decided to open accession negotiations with RS on 28/06/2013. - COM proposed a framework for the negotiations in July 2013, which must be adopted by the Council and confirmed by the European Council. - COM started the analytical examination of the EU acquis in September 2013. - An Intergovernmental Conference to formally open the accession talks should be held in January 2014 at the latest. - COM presented the annual progress report for RS on 16/210/2013 which accompanies a communication on the enlargement strategy and main challenges 2013-2014. - In the progress report, COM highlights the need for RS to make continuous progress in the normalisation of relations with Kosovo. - The need to sustain the reform momentum regarding the EU membership criteria is pointed out. - RS also needs to stay committed to regional cooperation and reconciliation.	- The progress report is a rather technical document whose technical analysis informs the communication of COM released on the same day, where more detailed conclusions of the status quo of RS on its European path are being drawn. - The tone and structure of the document is technical, with a neutral language being employed. - The document's structure into first reporting on progress achieved in the normalisation of relations with Kosovo, then regarding the political and economic Copenhagen criteria and then on the ability of RS to take on the responsibilities of membership (EU acquis) and on administrative capacity reflects the technical, structured approach of a merit-based logic of enlargement. - In all sections, the document reports neutrally on the achievements and shortfalls of RS, whose track record seems mixed. - Exceptions are the praising tone for the 19/04/2013 agreement between RS and Kosovo which is called a 'landmark achievement' that fundamentally changed the relations between	- This progress report delivers a technical analysis of where RS stands on its path towards EU membership. The overall tone is neutral with both positive developments (e.g. relations with Kosovo, cooperation with the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY), or the CFSP alignment) being praised, while shortcomings are being pointed out (e.g. low gross domestic product (GDP) growth, very high unemployment, very high government budget spending). Without prejudice to the conclusions drawn in the communication accompanying the progress report, the track record of RS seems mixed. - The overall sense emerging from the progress report is that enlargement is strictly merit-based and that both progress and setbacks are scrutinised by COM, with accession having to be earned.	*Identified narrative(s):* none. - Highlighting the importance of a merit-based enlargement process corresponds with the peace and the geopolitical narrative.

			the two countries (p. 6). - The cancellation of the Pride Parade in September 2013 is cited as an instance of the Serbian government not having taken appropriate action to protect LGBTI rights.		
14	COM.	- 20 years ago, the WB region was torn by conflict. - EU gave membership perspective to WB countries at Thessaloniki Summit in 2003. - In 2013, with Croatia the first WB country joined the EU. - Agreement between RS and Kosovo was signed in April 2013 and an implementation plan followed in May 2013, with agreements on telecommunications and energy reached later that year. - European Council decided to open accession negotiations in June 2013. - COM has submitted its proposal for the framework for accession negotiations in July 2013 and has started its analytical examination (screening) of the EU acquis in September 2013, currently focusing on Chapter 23 and 24. The framework follows the new 'fundamentals first' approach, endorsed by the Council in 2011. - The Council needs to adopt the accession	- The overall tone of the document is technical but contains a more emotionally charged language compared to the Progress Report (nr. 12). - The document opens with the sentence 'Twenty years ago, the Western Balkans were torn by conflict' (p. 1) and then establishes a connection with EU membership and the Copenhagen criteria. - The accession of Croatia is cited as 'an example of the transformative power and the stabilising effect of the EU enlargement process and the EU's soft power' (p. 1). - The Copenhagen criteria are presented as being fundamentally value-based ('The Copenhagen criteria reflect the values on which the EU is founded: democracy, the rule of law, respect for fundamental rights, as well as the importance of a functioning market economy', p. 1). - The agreement between RS and Kosovo is	- The communication establishes a link between the conflict-torn past of the WB and EU enlargement creating the implication that EU accession serves as a potential avenue for overcoming past conflict. The membership perspective is narrated as possessing 'healing' powers which can transform the scars of past conflicts into a better future. This transformation of past conflict into peaceful co-existence is referred to as the reason for why the EU was founded. - Croatia's accession to the EU as the first WB country that has gained membership is narrated as having demonstrated both the transforming and the stabilising effect of enlargement. A connection is created to how this affects EU power, put exclusively focuses on how this showcases EU soft power.	*Identified narrative(s):* none. - Highlighting the importance of a merit-based enlargement process corresponds with the peace and the geopolitical narrative. - There are hints of the peace narrative. Firstly, a link is established between overcoming a violent past and the purpose of enlargement, implying that the purpose is pacifying the European continent. The metaphorical language about enlargement as 'healing process' with 'transformative powers' underlines this. Moreover, resolving conflict is narrated as the very reason why the EU was founded, being in line with the peace narrative. Secondly, power is understood exclusively as soft power, with no

		negotiations framework, then the first Intergovernmental Conference can go ahead in January 2014 at the latest. - Overall, COM finds that RS sufficiently fulfils the political Copenhagen criteria, has progressed on the economic criteria, and regarding the obligations of membership has continued its efforts to align with EU legislation. - RS will have to continue the normalisation of relations with Kosovo, the implementation of reforms related to the Copenhagen criteria and will have to remain active in seeking regional cooperation and reconciliation. - In particular, RS must now focus on reforms regarding rule of law (judiciary, fighting corruption and organised crime), public administration reform, independence of key institutions, media freedom as well as anti-discrimination and minority protection. The business environment needs improving, unemployment must be lowered. RS needs to continue the dialogue with Kosovo and remain an active player in regional cooperation.	prominently singled out and labelled a 'historic agreement' which 'is further proof of the power of the EU perspective and its role in healing history's deep scars' (p. 1). Overcoming past conflict is presented as being 'in line with the very principle on which the European Union was founded' (p. 2). - The accession process has become 'more rigorous and comprehensive than in the past' (p. 2). - The accession process is strictly merit-based: 'the process is built on strict but fair conditionality with progress towards membership dependent on the steps taken by each country to meet the established criteria' (p. 2). 'Progress towards membership depends on the steps taken by each country to meet the established criteria, based on the principle of own merits' (p. 3). - With rule of law, an EU value 'is now at the heart of the enlargement process' (p. 2). Rule of law 'is a fundamental value on which the EU was founded. Safeguarding values, such as the rule of law, is what the European Union was made to do' (p. 6). - RS is singled out both as positive and negative example. Positive when it	- The Copenhagen criteria are presented as being fundamentally about values, with some economic considerations mattering too. Rule of law is singled out as a fundamental value of the EU since its foundation which is to be placed at the heart of the accession path, with Chapters 23 and 24 now being opened first. - The progress achieved by RS in 2013 is praised, without the setbacks being spared out. - The accession process is narrated as being strictly merit-based, which favours no candidate country over another. RS is narrated as having earned the opening of accession negotiations especially through the dialogue with Kosovo, but also through key reforms and actively engaging in regional cooperation. RS is thus 'worthy' of progressing on its European path. - Nevertheless, the communication remains realistic about stating that the accession talks will be a demanding phase for RS, in which the country must continue implementing reforms.	reference to how enlargement alters the EU's geopolitical importance or its overall security. Thirdly, the Copenhagen criteria are being presented as being fundamentally about values, with rule of law taking prominence and being presented as being at the heart of the enlargement process. This is reflected in the EU's 'fundamentals first' when it comes to negotiating the EU acquis chapters. - At the same time, this is the first time that in the documents analysed so far, a connection is drawn between enlargement and the stabilising effect this would have for the WB region, thus, referring to security aspects. Yet, the stabilisation and security considerations remain tied to the WB as a region, with no broader connection being made on how a destabilised WB would affect the EU. Power is being mentioned for the first time in the documents analysed, but power is strictly interpreted as EU soft power in

			comes to the agreement with Kosovo, negative for its decision to ban the Pride Parade in September 2013 which is deemed to be 'regrettable'. - The agreement with Kosovo is presented as the condition which earned RS the opening of accession negotiations ('The historic agreement […] creates the conditions for building a common European future for both sides' (p. 12) and 'this paved the way for the European Council decision to open accession negotiations' (p.12)). - The agreement and the efforts of RS to intensify regional cooperation and reconciliation are being seen as contributing to 'stability in a region so recently afflicted by conflict' (p. 13) and to 'overcoming the legacy of the past, thereby minimising the risk of open bilateral issues being politically instrumentalised' (p. 13). - 2013 is hailed as 'a historic year for Serbia on its path to the European Union' (p. 16) with the decision to open accession talks signifying 'the start of a significant new phase in Serbia's relations with the EU' (p. 16). It is a 'landmark' (p.17)		terms of spreading values and contributing to the transformation of the WB. Thus, while we find some concepts related to the geopolitical narrative, they are not narrated in a way that would allude to geopolitical implications of enlargement. - Overall, there are more elements of the peace narrative than of the geopolitical narrative, but the former also remains underdeveloped in some capacities.

			deal kicked off a 'new demanding phase' (p. 17). - RS earned this advancement ('This is a recognition for the progress made on key reforms and the substantial efforts made by Serbia towards normalisation of its relations with Kosovo', pp. 16-17).		
15	COM.	- RS and Kosovo sign the 'First agreement of principles governing the normalisation of relations' on 19/04/2013. - COM recommends the opening of accession negotiations in April 2013. - The European Council decides to open accession talks with RS in June 2013. - The Stabilisation and Association Agreement (SAA) enters into force on 01/09/2013. - COM starts the screening of the *acquis* in September 2013. - COM publishes the progress report on RS on 16/10/2013, which recognises that RS sufficiently fulfils the political criteria, made progress on the economic criteria and continues adopting the EU acquis. - RS is expected to continue engaging in political dialogue with Kosovo and should sustain the momentum of implementing reforms. Moreover, RS should continue to be active in seeking regional cooperation.	- The agreement with Kosovo in April 2013 is praised as having been a 'landmark agreement'. - The agreement paved the for what was a 'historic' year for RS on its path towards EU membership ('2013 was a historic year for the relations between the EU and Serbia with the decision to open accession negotiations on 28 June and the entry into force of the Stabilisation and Association Agreement (SAA) on the 1 September'). - The key findings of the progress report include that RS sufficiently fulfils the political criteria, made progress on the economic ones, and continued the implementation of the EU acquis. - The cancellation of the Pride Parade in September 2013 is cited as instance that shows that political support for LGBTI rights is missing in RS and deemed 'regrettable' and a	- The progress that RS has achieved in 2013 on its path towards EU membership is being narrated as having been earned by the country. Thus, enlargement policy is presented to follow a merit-based logic. RS is praised for its agreement with Kosovo, while COM does not hesitate to call out shortcomings, such as the cancellation of the Pride Parade. The document highlights the need for RS to sustain its current path by continuing to engage with Kosovo, by implementing reforms especially in the area of independence of key institutions and by remaining active as a player that seeks regional cooperation.	*Identified narrative(s):* none. - Highlighting the importance of a merit-based enlargement process corresponds with the peace and the geopolitical narrative.

			‘missed opportunity to show respect for fundamental rights’.		
16	Štefan Füle (ENLARG COM).	- WB was torn by conflicts 20 years ago (from the 2013 perspective). - The Copenhagen criteria were created 20 years ago. - The WB were given a European membership perspective at the Thessaloniki summit in 2003. - European Council decides to open accession talks with RS in June 2013. - COM presents the 2013 enlargement package on 16/10/2013, including the 2013 progress report on RS. - First Intergovernmental Conference on RS accession negotiations is planned for January 2014 at the latest. - RS is expected to continue its dialogue with Kosovo, to implement reforms on the judiciary, on anti-corruption and fighting organised crime, on public administration, the independence of key institutions, media freedom, anti-discrimination, and minority protection as well as remaining active in regional cooperation.	- ENLARG COM Füle highlights that the Copenhagen criteria are still relevant today and that they reflect the EU’s foundational values (‘They reflect the core values on which the European Union is founded: democracy, rule of law and the respect for fundamental rights’). The new fundamentals first approach serves to indicate that ‘rule of law remains at the heart of the accession process’. - The agreement between RS and Kosovo is praised as ‘historic agreement’ that acts as ‘further proof of the transformative power of the European Union perspective’. - Accession is presented as being strictly merit-based by following a ‘strict but fair conditionality’. - 2013 is praised as having been ‘a historic year for Serbia’, in which RS has earned the opening of accession talks by engaging actively and constructively with Kosovo. - A realistic outlook is created by alluding to the fact that a ‘new demanding phase’ has begun in which RS must remain committed to its European path.	- By mentioning the conflict torn past of the WB region and the Copenhagen criteria and the Thessaloniki summit together, the impression is created that the membership perspective has contributed to overcoming the violent past. The agreement between RS and Kosovo is referenced as instance that shows the transformative power of accession. - Values are narrated as being deeply reflected in the Copenhagen criteria, particularly rule of law. - Accession is narrated as being strictly merit-based, in which candidate countries must earn their progress on the European path, while the EU remains fair in its assessments. - Enlargement is presented as being an ‘open’ process, that offers benefits and opportunities for all sides involved.	*Identified narrative(s):* none. - Highlighting the importance of a merit-based enlargement process corresponds with the peace and the geopolitical narrative. - Some traces of the peace narrative can be found when the Copenhagen criteria are being narrated as reflecting the EU’s foundational values, implying that the EU is a value-based actor and that values have a special prominence in the membership conditionality. Secondly, presenting enlargement as ‘open’ can be interpreted as a process that is open for all in which the ultimate objective of joining the EU must be earned through rigorous and committed implementation of reforms. Finally, emphasis is being put on the benefits and opportunities of enlargement, consistent with the peace narrative which sees accession as win-win situation for all the involved parties.

			- The EU accession process is presented as being 'strong and open', where progress depends on merit and which includes 'benefits and opportunities of enlargement'.		
17	Štefan Füle (ENLARG COM).	- European Council decided to open accession negotiations with RS in June 2013. - COM presented its proposal for the negotiation framework on 22/07/2013, the screening process started in September 2013 with Chapter 23 (Judiciary and fundamental rights), Chapter 24 (Justice, freedom and security) and Chapter 32 (Financial control). - The 2013 Progress report on RS was published on 13/10/2013 and reported positive findings. Further progress has also been made in the implementation of the agreements with Kosovo. - The Council will hold the decisive meeting on whether to adopt the accession negotiation framework in December 2013. - RS needs to continue moving forward on its reforms.	- The tone of ENLARG COM Füle is hopeful and implies optimism that the Council will adopt the negotiating framework proposed by COM, so that the Intergovernmental Conference can go ahead. - A realistic outlook is created by highlighting that RS has entered a 'more demanding phase' in which it needs to move decisively forward with reforms. - RS is praised for its 'unprecedented efforts towards the normalisation of its relations with Kosovo'.	- RS is presented as a candidate country that has made strong efforts in 2013 particularly in normalising its relations with Kosovo and has thus earned the advancement towards the accession negotiation stage. - Nevertheless, the accession negotiations are presented as constituting a new phase in the relations between the EU and RS that are more demanding and in which RS must remain committed towards implementing reforms.	*Identified narrative(s):* none. - Highlighting the importance of a merit-based enlargement process corresponds with the peace and the geopolitical narrative.
18	COM, Štefan Füle (ENLARG COM).	- COM has adopted the 2013 national programme for RS under the IPA Instrument worth 178.7 million EUR. - The EU funding will help RS to implement reforms in key areas such as rule of law, public administration,	- 2013 is hailed 'a historic year for Serbia's relations with the EU' by ENLARG COM Füle. - The importance of RS upkeeping its reform momentum is being stressed by ENLARG COM	- 2013 is narrated as having been a historic year for RS, in which the country made considerable progress towards EU membership. - The need for RS to continue implementing key	*Identified narrative(s):* none. - Stressing the benefits of EU enlargement is consistent with the peace narrative, which views accession as a win-win situation

		social inclusion, private sector development, transport, environment, energy, and agriculture. - Including the 2013 IPA Instrument, the EU has now supported RS with a total of 2.6 billion EUR in pre-accession assistance since 2001.	Füle ('It is important that Serbia now uses this momentum and continues to vigorously implement key reforms'). - The IPA Instrument is presented as support tool for RS to achieve these crucial reforms. - The fact that the IPA funding 'directly improve[s] the daily lives of Serbian citizens' is being stressed.	reforms is being highlighted. - The EU is presented as being supportive of Serbian EU membership through offering considerable financial means to help RS implementing reforms that are crucial for advancing on the European path. - The benefits of EU membership for Serbian citizens are being emphasised.	for all parties involved.

B. t_2 - Albania

Nr.	*Actor(s)*	*Chronicle*	*Mimesis*	*Emplotment*	*Narrative(s)*
19	Olivér Várhelyi (ENLARG COM).	- European Council failed to reach a decision on opening accession negotiations with Albania (AL) at 17-18 October 2019 summit. - New ENLARG COM Várhelyi visits AL on his first visit outside the EU. - New COM wants accession negotiations with AL to be opened before the Zagreb summit planned for May 2020. - COM will present new methodology for accession negotiations in January 2020 based on rendering them more credible, more politically driven, more predictable and more dynamic. - A donors' conference for the consequences of the	- The visit to AL is tied to the geopolitical nature of the new COM ('For me, it was a priority to come here very early on in the mandate to reinforce our support for Albania and also to reinforce the geopolitical nature of this new Commission'). - Enlargement and the WB are considered priorities ('As you know, for us, enlargement and the Western Balkans is a priority'). - Enlargement is presented as a mean to increase the presence of the EU in the region ('We want to increase our presence here. We want to have more influence here. We want to be an even more important	- Both continuity and change are narrated in relation between the old and the new 'geopolitical' COM. The new COM agrees with the old COM on the finding that AL has sufficiently fulfilled the membership criteria and that the European Council should open accession talks. But emphasis is being put on the fact that accession negotiations need to become more credible, politically driven, predictable, and dynamic, suggesting that they were not like that in the past. Enlargement is narrated to be a priority of the new COM. - For the first time, a link is established between accession	*Identified narrative(s):* none. - There is a new emphasis on geopolitics, emphasised by the new COM referring to itself as geopolitical COM. While enlargement is not presented as serving geopolitical reasons here, the talk about enlargement as mean to increase the EU's influence and presence in the WB and it being a priority for the EU is new and does point towards elements of the geopolitical narrative.

		earthquake in AL will be hosted by COM President Ursula von der Leyen in Brussels on 17/02/2020.	partner for this region'). - Emphasis is being put on accession negotiations becoming more credible, politically driven, predictable, and dynamic. A sense of urgency is being created ('Bring these countries, much faster, much closer to our own standards'). - Albanians are deemed to be the EU's 'friends'. - AL needs to continue reforms throughout the negotiation process ('It is an absolute necessity not only to continue the reforms, but once we have opened the negotiations, you will see that even more dynamic reforms are going to be necessary so that you can reap the benefits of a more dynamic negotiation methodology'). - AL is praised for having made reform progress on justice and electoral reform. - Emphasis is being put on the EU supporting AL ('We are standing by Albania') after the country experienced an earthquake. The EU supports AL financially and organises a donors' conference in Brussels.	negotiations with a WB country and the impact this has on increasing the EU's influence and presence in the region, suggesting a more interest-driven reading of enlargement policy. - The need for AL to implement continuous reforms is pointed out and AL is praised for having sufficiently adopted some reforms. Yet, no language of 'merit'/'worthiness' is apparent. - AL is presented as a friend of the EU with the EU is standing on AL's side also when it comes to tackling the consequences of the earthquake the country has experienced.	
20	Olivér Várhelyi (ENLARG COM).	- ENLARG COM Várhelyi visited AL as first member of the new COM which took office on 01/12/2019.	- Enlargement is deemed to be a priority of the new COM ('Enlargement is a priority for the new	- Enlargement is narrated as a priority for the new COM, which is presented as being willing to work hard to achieve	*Identified narrative(s):* none. - A sense of urgency calling for an accelerated

		- New COM shares assessment of old COM that AL is ready for accession negotiations. - ENLARG COM Várhelyi expects accession talks to be opened before the Zagreb summit planned in May 2020.	European Commission') and the new COM is ready 'to work even harder' to achieve the integration of WB. - The accession procedure should become faster, safer and more credible to the benefit of both the WB candidate countries and the EU itself. - The new COM expects the members states to greenlight accession negotiations before the Zagreb summit.	progress for the WB's path to EU membership. - There is a new sense of urgency, with ENLARG COM Várhelyi calling for an accelerated accession process, that is safer and more credible. A sense of continuity is created with Várhelyi assuring AL that the new COM shares the opinion of the old COM that the country is ready for accession talks and expects member states to open them soon.	accession process is in line with the geopolitical narrative. There is less talk about AL meriting/being worthy of advancing.
21	Olivér Várhelyi (ENLARG COM).	- ENLARG COM Várhelyi visited the WB on 15/01/2020 as first visit outside of the EU as new Commissioner. - COM is positive that accession negotiations with AL will be opened soon. - COM also works towards supporting the economic development of the WB.	- Visit is interpreted as a signal that granting an EU perspective for the WB will remain a priority also under the new COM. - More leverage and influence in the WB region are presented as key for the new geopolitical COM ('The geo-political (sic) cannot work without bigger leverage, bigger influence in the region').	- The European integration of the WB is presented as priority for the new COM. Increasing the EU's influence in the WB is narrated as being the key for the functioning of the geopolitical COM, thereby, assigning high relevance to this undertaking. - The economic side of accession, namely closing the gap in economic development between the WB countries and the EU member states is also being addressed.	*Identified narrative(s):* none. - Arguing that increasing the EU's influence and leverage in the WB region is key to the functioning of the geopolitical COM as such establishes a strong link between enlargement policy and geopolitical considerations, in line with the geopolitical narrative.
22	COM.	- The European Council gave WB a European perspective at the Feira (2000) and the Thessaloniki (2003) summits. - General Affairs Council in 2019 affirmed the EU's commitment to enlargement as one key policy of the EU. - The Council agreed in November	- Merit-based enlargement policy is presented as not only being in the EU's interest, but as a security interest ('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', p. 1).	- There is a strong geopolitical component in the way the nature of EU accession and the objectives it follows are being narrated. Enlargement is presented as serving the EU's self-interest, including its security interest. - The geopolitical situation of the international order is repeatedly being	*Identified narrative(s):* geopolitical narrative. - Several elements of the geopolitical narrative are present in the communication. Accession is presented as serving the EU's self-interest, including its security interest.

		2019 that the effectiveness of the accession process needs to be examined. - COM delivered the communication 'Enhancing the accession process – A credible EU perspective for the Western Balkans' on 05/02/2020. - In it, COM agrees that effectiveness of accession process needs improving and proposes a forward-looking policy approach to 'reinvigorate' the accession process based on four pillars: 1. More credibility; 2. A stronger political steer; 3. A more dynamic process; 4. More predictability, positive and negative conditionality. - COM also highlights the need to support the market economies of the WB countries and announces the publication of a communication on this matter before the May 2020 Zagreb summit.	- Enlargement is called a 'geostrategic investment' and the increasingly challenging international order is being referenced ('In times of increasing global challenges and divisions, it remains more than ever a geostrategic investment in a stable, strong, and united Europe', p. 1). - Enlargement is presented as being in the EU's own interest and geopolitical competition is being mentioned ('Maintaining and enhancing this policy is thus indispensable for the EU's credibility, for the EU' success and for the EU's influence in the region and beyond - especially at times of heightened geopolitical competition', p. 1). - Enlargement is deemed to increase the EU's own security and prosperity ('A credible accession perspective is the key incentive and driver of transformation in the region and thus enhances our collective security and prosperity', p. 1). - Accession is seen as a 'tool' and linked to economic objectives and stability ('It is a key tool to promote democracy, rule of	referenced, creating a sense of urgency that accession of the WB is now more important than ever given the geopolitical situation. - A cost/benefit calculation is apparent when deeming enlargement an 'investment'. - Accession is narrated as being a mean to an end/tool that secures benefits, rather than an end. - The merit-based character of enlargement policy is being underlined. - The Copenhagen criteria are being narrated as the basis of the accession process, all dimensions of the Copenhagen criteria are presented equally, no dominance of the political criteria is apparent. The fulfilment of the Copenhagen criteria is linked to economic benefits. - Overall, an economic logic is apparent in the document. Values are rarely mentioned and are presented as 'engines of economic integration'.	Accession becomes a 'tool' more than an end to unite European countries. The geopolitical situation is referenced multiple times as a reason why EU membership for the WB countries is needed, creating a sense of urgency. A cost-benefit calculation is apparent, with COM calling the accession of the WB countries a 'geostrategic investment'. The Copenhagen criteria and the merit-based logic of enlargement are being mentioned, which is in line with the geopolitical narrative. - The peace narrative is absent in this communication. European values are rarely mentioned by COM and not narrated as the glue that brings European countries together. Rather values are presented as tools that serve an economic interest and allow for a better business environment. A strong economic focus is apparent in this communication, rather than a focus on values.

			law and the respect for fundamental rights, which are also the main engines of economic integration and the essential anchor for fostering regional reconciliation and stability', p. 1). - The Copenhagen criteria are being indirectly referenced as foundation of the accession process ('A core objective of the European Union's engagement with the Western Balkans is to prepare them to meet all the requirements of membership. This includes supporting fundamental democratic, rule of law and economic reforms and alignment with core European values. This will in turn foster solid and accelerated economic growth and social convergence', p. 2). - The 'need to tackle third country malign influence' is mentioned, without detailing on who these third countries are. - Throughout the document there is a strong economic focus with preparing the WB market economies for integration into the Single Market, with job creation, improvement of the business and investment climate being referenced as key objectives of		

			the accession process, and the fulfilment of the Copenhagen criteria being tied to 'economic growth and social convergence' (p. 2).		
23	COM, Olivér Várhelyi (ENLARG COM).	- COM released proposal for how to make accession negotiations process more effective on 05/02/2020. - The communication proposes ways to make accession negotiations more credible, with a stronger political steer, more dynamic, and more predictable. - COM hopes that its proposal will be endorsed by the member states in parallel with the decision to open accession talks with AL. - COM will support the opening of accession negotiations with AL. - COM will publish another communication on how an economic and investment development plan for the WB ahead of the EU-Western Balkans summit on 6-7 May 2020 in Zagreb.	- ENLARG COM Várhelyi calls the accession of the WB countries a priority for COM ('The European Union enlargement to the Western Balkans is a top priority for the Commission'). - ENLARG COM Várhelyi ensures AL (and North Macedonia) that COM is supportive of accession negotiations being opened with these two countries before the Zagreb summit in May 2020.	- Enlargement is narrated as being a priority for the EU with the communication by COM for how to render accession negotiations more effective indicating that the EU wants to move forward with new momentum, while upkeeping the merit-based character of enlargement policy based on the fulfilment of the Copenhagen criteria.	*Identified narrative(s):* none. - Despite there being a new sense of urgency about the importance of accession of the WB countries, this document does not detail on where enlargement policy being a priority for the EU stems from.
24	COM.	- COM presented its proposal for a revised methodology guiding the accession negotiation process on 05/02/2020. - The proposal is built on the four principles of making accession	- The proposal for a revised methodology is presented as a mean to make accession negotiations more effective, without changing its foundations, which remain the Copenhagen criteria 'which are very	- Enlargement policy is narrated as following a merit-based logic, based on the Copenhagen criteria. The new approach to accession negotiations is presented not as a move away from the Copenhagen criteria,	*Identified narrative(s):* none. - Highlighting the importance of a merit-based enlargement process corresponds with the peace and the

		negotiations more credible, subject to a stronger political steer, more dynamic, and more predictable. - Member states must endorse the proposal in parallel with greenlighting the opening of accession talks with AL (and North Macedonia) ahead of the EU-Western Balkans summit in Zagreb on 6-7 May. COM will then integrate this new methodology when drafting the negotiating frameworks. - COM will present an economic and investment development plan for the WB ahead of the Zagreb summit.	clear, and do not change'. - Accession remains a merit-based process ('There are no shortcuts. It is true that the accession process today is more demanding than in the past'). Making accession negotiations more demanding is justified with creating incentives to help candidate countries reform. - The accession negotiations will focus even more on fundamentals first and rule of law, with reforms in this area setting the overall pace for how quickly the accession process will unfold.	but rather as mean to make accession negotiations more effective. With rule of law, a value still plays the central role in accession talks.	geopolitical narrative. - Keeping the rule of law, as a fundamental EU value, at the core of accession negotiations is in line with the peace narrative. But upholding the rule of law can serve multiple purposes such as an economic logic of improving the business and investment environment.
25	COM, Olivér Várhelyi (ENLARG COM).	- COM published a proposal for a revised accession negotiations methodology on 05/02/2020, making accession negotiations more credible, subject to a stronger political steer, more dynamic, and more predictable. - COM supports the opening of accession negotiations with AL and hopes that member states will decide to do so in parallel to adopting this proposal. - COM will prepare an economic and investment plan for the WB region ahead of the Zagreb summit in May 2020.	- ENLARG COM Várhelyi calls the EU accession of the WB an EU priority ('The European Union enlargement to the Western Balkans is a top priority for the Commission' and 'enlargement is a key political project'). - ENLARG COM Várhelyi refers to accession as following a merit-based logic. - Enlargement to the WB region is called by ENLARG COM Várhelyi a 'geostrategic investment that we all need to make'.	- Enlargement to the WB is presented as being a political project of the EU that has priority, without detailing on where this priority stems from. - Accession of the WB countries is presented as being a 'geostrategic investment', thus, implying costs and benefits that follow from it. No details are provided on what makes such an 'investment' necessary, but a need of urgency is being created by ENLARG COM Várhelyi suggesting that it must be made. - The merit-based character of EU accession is being underlined.	*Identified narrative(s):* none. - Narrating enlargement to the WB as 'geostrategic investment' implies a cost-benefit calculation that corresponds with the geopolitical narrative. No details are given what creates the 'need' to enlarge though. - Highlighting the importance of a merit-based enlargement process corresponds with the peace and the geopolitical narrative.

26	COM President Ursula von der Leyen.	- AL was hit by an earthquake in November 2019 which caused the death of 51 people and created damage in housing and infrastructure that is estimated to be EUR 1 billion. - The EU holds the donors' conference 'Together for Albania' on 17/02/2020 in Brussels. - The EU will contribute with EUR 100 million from its budget to the reconstruction of AL, member states will also contribute.	- AL is presented by COM President von der Leyen as 'belonging' to the European 'family', which is tied to membership prospects ('The whole European Union mobilised for a country that is at the heart of our continent – and that I hope and I am convinced one day will also be part of our Union. The people of Albania know that they belong in our European family – now more than ever' and 'Albania will rise from the ashes of this quake. It will rise as a stronger and safer country, at the core of our European family'). - The word 'we' is used throughout the speech to refer to AL and the EU together. - The value of solidarity is repeatedly stressed by von der Leyen ('This is a story of loss, but it is also a story of heroes. It is a story of solidarity, among Albanians and among fellow Europeans' and 'we have seen that, beyond any political divide, the Western Balkans are united in solidarity').	- AL is narrated as belonging to the European family, with the use of 'we' emphasising that the EU views itself as being on the same side as AL. An optimistic outlook is given by COM President von der Leyen on AL's future EU membership. - The value of solidarity is being stressed, but no connection is made between this value and it being an inherently European value. - The notion of 'united in solidarity' does bear some resemblance with the EU's motto 'united in diversity'. The frequent emphasis on AL having come out of the ashes of the earthquake also resembles the peace narrative's metaphor of the EU having emerged from the ashes of WW2 to some degree, creating a historic parallel.	*Identified narrative(s):* none. - Some metaphors related to the peace narrative are apparent in COM President von der Leyen's speech (European 'family', belonging, 'we'). The resemblance between AL emerging out of the 'ashes' of the earthquake and the storyline of the peace narrative is also evident. Yet, no strong appeals to shared values are being made. While solidarity is frequently mentioned, solidarity is not presented as a European value that unites the EU and AL.
27	Olivér Várhelyi (ENLARG COM).	- AL was hit by an earthquake in November 2019 that created a damage estimated to be almost EUR 1.1 billion. - The EU hosted a donors' conference	- ENLARG COM Várhelyi highlighted that the EU is showing 'solidarity' with AL and that the EU is committed to continue supporting the country ('We are	- The EU is presented as being on AL's side, displaying 'solidarity' and 'commitment'.	*Identified narrative(s):* none.

		in Brussels on 17/02/2020 to raise funding for the reconstruction of AL.	there for you' and 'it is our commitment as EU, EU Member States, the region and the rest of the international community to support Albania in this reconstruction phase. Our presence here today is a clear sign of this commitment').		
28	COM.	- In April 2018, COM first recommended the opening of accession negotiations with AL. - In June 2018, the Council acknowledged the progress by AL and set path to open accession talks in June 2019. - In June 2018, AL was asked to advance some specific reforms related to judicial independence, fighting corruption and organised crime, and improving its track record of proactive investigations, prosecutions, and convictions. - In May 2019, COM repeated its recommendation to open accession talks with AL. - In June 2019, the Council postponed the decision to October 2019. - In October 2019, the European Council decided to revisit the matter before the EU-Western Balkans summit in May 2020.	- In rather technical language, over nine pages, COM makes a case that its 2019 recommendation to open accession negotiations with AL is still valid. - Regarding the areas which were of concern for the Council, AL has continued to make progress. It has advanced the process of re-evaluating judges and prosecutors and continued to implement a judicial reform. It has established specialised bodies to fight and investigate corruption and organised crime and has increased the investigation, prosecution, conviction of related crimes achieving tangible results. - Moreover, AL has been cooperative in tackling unfounded asylum applications by Albanian nationals in EU member states and in their readmission; has implemented an electoral reform; and has shown 100% alignment	- AL is narrated as country that has met all the conditions for the opening of accession negotiations already since 2019, having even upgraded its track record of implementing reforms in recent months, and, thus, earning the step of progressing towards accession talks. The entire document is rather technical and neutral, no strong emotional language of AL being 'worthy' and having been left in the waiting room is apparent. COM does not put any blame on the Council's decisions to postpone the decision to open accession talks, nor is a sense of urgency being created.	*Identified narrative(s):* none. - Highlighting the importance of a merit-based enlargement process corresponds with the peace and the geopolitical narrative.

		- On 02/03/2020 COM released a report to update on the progress achieved by AL between the Council conclusions in June 2018 until March 2020. - COM repeats its assessment that the conditions for opening accession negotiations with AL are met.	with the EU in CFSP matters. - In neutral and technical language, the report concludes that 'consequently, the bases of the Commission's 2019 recommendation to open accession negotiations with Albania remain valid' (p. 8).		
29	COM, Olivér Várhelyi (ENLARG COM).	- COM recommended opening of accession negotiations with AL in April 2018. - The June 2018 Council set the path to open accession talks with AL if the country achieves reforms in certain key areas. - COM repeated its recommendation in May 2019. - The Council in June 2019 postponed the decision to October 2019, which is when the European Council decided to revisit the matter ahead of the EU-Western Balkans summit in May 2020. - On 02/03/2020 COM repeated the recommendation to open accession talks with AL. - The General Council is expected to decide on the matter and on the proposal for a revised accession negotiations methodology ahead of the Zagreb summit. - COM will present an economic	- COM presented its update on the progress achieved by AL in addressing rule of law issues in the key areas set out by the Council in June 2018. In rather technical language the document reports that the country has achieved 'further tangible and sustainable results'. Thus, COM regards its May 2019 recommendation as still valid and hopes the General Affairs Council will follow it. - ENLARG COM Várhelyi says that both AL and North Macedonia have 'stepped up their work and delivered further tangible and sustainable results in the key areas identified in the Council Conclusions of June 2018' and that he hopes the member states will follow the recommendation by COM.	- By tying the renewed recommendation to open accession negotiations with AL to the finding that the country has implemented tangible reforms, a merit-based understanding of enlargement policy is being promoted. AL is being presented as fulfilling the conditions it must fulfil. No strong appeal is made for the member states to follow this recommendation, and no sense of urgency is created either.	*Identified narrative(s):* none. - Highlighting the importance of a merit-based enlargement process corresponds with the peace and the geopolitical narrative.

		development and investment plan for the WB ahead of the Zagreb summit and will deliver more detailed findings on AL in its annual enlargement package later in the year.			
30	Olivér Várhelyi (ENLARG COM).	- The member states chose against opening accession negotiations with AL in October 2019. - AL has continued to implement reforms between October 2019 and March 2020. - On 25/03/2020, member states have greenlighted the opening of accession talks with AL (and North Macedonia). - COM will now work on drafting the negotiating framework for AL quickly, which could be presented alongside the annual enlargement package in May 2020.	- The impression is created that the EU is going through a difficult time without detailing on what makes the current times difficult (‘These are very challenging times and I think that Europe now shows that when it decided something it really means it. It means that we are ready to make strategic decisions even in difficult circumstances. I think that this is very important and should be spread all over Europe and all over the Western Balkans. It shows our determination: we set a goal and we will implement it, even if it is difficult’). - AL has continued to implement reforms despite being denied the opening of accession negotiations in October 2019 (‘We saw a failure in October to agree and this was perceived as a failure in the two countries. But fortunately, they made a very sober and difficult choice to continue and to accelerate the reforms on all	- ENLARG COM Várhelyi welcomes the decision by the member states to open accession negotiations with AL (and North Macedonia). The decision is narrated as being particularly important given the difficult circumstances Europe faces, without elaboration being given on what these difficult times consist of. The impression is created that the opening of accession talks demonstrates the EU’s credibility by showing that the Union can stick to its promises. - Enlargement is narrated as following a clear merit-based logic, where each stage depends on fulfilling specific criteria. AL was denied the opening of accession talks in October 2019 which is called a ‘failure’ by ENLARG COM Várhelyi, implying disagreement with the decision that member states took back then. Yet, AL continued delivering on reforms and, thus, ‘earned’ the entry into this new stage of the accession process. The conditionality are ‘strict but fair’ and	*Identified narrative(s):* none. - Highlighting the importance of a merit-based enlargement process corresponds with the peace and the geopolitical narrative.

			political levels for the Europe's path. That determination has now borne fruits today.') - AL has earned the opening of accession talks given the merit-based logic of accession ('Albania has come a very long way, and we have seen in October how far Member States considered the country to be away from the accession negotiations. But today, given the accelerated and very tangible results the country has delivered on fighting organised crime, illicit asylum claims, judicial reform, the Member States have considered now the conditions to be met to open accession negotiations. This is a major development, something that was completely impossible to think about after last October'). - Enlargement policy is a merit-based policy based on clear conditionality ('Conditions are strict but fair' and 'these conditions are conditions for membership. These conditions are prerequisites of accession. So these conditions will not go away'). - COM supports AL on its accession path ('We will	are what ultimately sets the pace for how quickly AL will enter actual accession negotiations. The impression is created that AL has its fate in its own hands, being supported by COM. Yet, a contradiction is apparent between the 'failure' of the member states to open accession talks in October 2019 despite AL having fulfilled the criteria, and the insistence by ENLARG COM Várhelyi that conditionality is 'strict but fair' and that 'it is on merit'. - COM is presented as being supportive of AL entering accession negotiations as quickly as possible, thus, working hard to get the negotiating framework ready as soon as possible.	

			certainly work very hard with Albania to make this happen'). - AL will need to step up its reform efforts in this 'new' stage. - COM will work hard and quickly to get the negotiating framework ready ('We plan to put this on the table of the Council as fast as we can'). - When the actual accession negotiations will be opened depends on AL fulfilling the conditions, implying a merit-based logic ('At this stage there is no specific date, this is an on merit process' and 'it is all dependent on the conditions that are being met by both countries. It is on merit. There is nothing else that matters in this, And dates were not set for that reason').		
31	COM, COM President Ursula von der Leyen, Olivér Várhelyi (ENLARG COM).	- On 25/03/2020 the Council has decided to open accession negotiations with AL (and North Macedonia). - COM welcomes this decision. - The European Council still needs to endorse the decision by the Council, which is expected to happen on 26/03/2020. - COM will start to work on the negotiating framework. - Before the first Intergovernmental Conference, AL is expected to make further reform	- COM 'welcomes the Council's decision to open accession negotiations with Albania' hinting at a supportive stance by COM. - Accession is presented as merit-based process in which AL delivered what it had to, and now the EU fulfils its side of the promise (COM President von der Leyen: 'The European Union delivers on its promise. North Macedonia and Albania did what was asked of them	- The decision to launch accession talks with AL is presented as a matter of credibility. AL continued to deliver on the reforms it was asked to conduct, and with this decision, the EU now fulfils its side of the promise. - The decision is narrated by ENLARG COM Várhelyi also as a sign of commitment of the EU to the WB region and to the future of this region within the EU. - The decision is also narrated as corresponding with the EU's own	*Identified narrative(s):* geopolitical narrative. - The decision to open accession negotiations with AL is narrated as being in the EU's 'geostrategic interest' and hailed by ENLARG COM Várhelyi as a 'geopolitical decision'. Moreover, the statement by COM President von der Leyen that this decision makes the EU 'bigger and

		progress in the areas of electoral and judicial reforms and the fight against organised crime and corruption.	and they have continued making progress in the reforms needed' and ENLARG COM Várhelyi: 'Opening of accession talks sends a loud and clear message not only to the two countries, but to the Western Balkans as a whole. It reaffirms and delivers on the EU's commitment to the European perspective of the region: its present is with the EU and its future is in the EU'). - The decision is being linked by both von der Leyen and Várhelyi to advancing the EU's geostrategic interest and turning the EU into a 'bigger and stronger' player (COM President von der Leyen: 'Today marks the start of the journey to a bigger and stronger European Union. And this decision is in the European Union's geostrategic interest' and ENLARG COM Várhelyi: 'Today's decision confirms the geostrategic importance of the Western Balkans and demonstrates that Europe is willing and able to take geopolitical decisions even in these trying times of corona virus pandemic'). - COM 'will begin the necessary preparatory work immediately' for	'geostrategic' self-interest, making the EU 'bigger and stronger' according to COM President von der Leyen. While it is unclear what the EU's geostrategic interest is exactly and how this decision makes the EU stronger, there is a clear geopolitical logic apparent in the argumentation of both COM President von der Leyen and ENLARG COM Várhelyi.	stronger' implies a change in power relations through enlargement policy, in line with the conception of the geopolitical narrative. - It is also striking that no value-based appeals are being made, nowhere is AL being presented as belonging to the EU based on shared values, as we would expect from the peace narrative, pointing towards its total absence from this document.

			drafting the negotiating frameworks.		
32	HR/VP Josep Borrell.	- On 02/03/2020 COM has repeated its recommendation to open accession negotiations with AL as part of its updated progress report. - On 25/03/2020 the Council decided to open accession negotiations with AL (and North Macedonia). - HR/VP Borrell welcomes this decision. - The first Intergovernmental Conference can be held with AL as soon as the European Council has endorsed the decision by the Council.	- The Council decision to open accession talks with AL is presented as acknowledgement of 'the determination of Albania and North Macedonia to advance on the EU reform agenda' with both countries having 'delivered tangible results, fulfilling the conditions identified by the June 2018 Council for the opening of accession negotiations'. - Enlargement is presented as following a merit-based logic with the decision of the Council being put into direct relation with the reform progress achieved by AL ('In light of the progress achieved on reforms and the fulfilment of the conditions set unanimously in June 2018, the Council, subject to endorsement by European Council members, decided to open accession negotiations with Albania'). - HR/VP Borrell also points towards the merit-based logic stating that the decision is a 'recognition' of the progress achieved by AL ('A recognition of the significant progress and the crucial reforms that the	- Enlargement is narrated as a merit-based process in which AL has earned the opening of accession negotiations through having advanced on its reform agenda. The Council's decision is thus an 'acknowledgement' or 'recognition' of the reform progress achieved by AL. - HR/VP Borrell sees the decision by the Council to open accession talks with AL also as a recognition of the 'geostrategic importance' of the WB region, implying that this decision supports the EU's interests in the region. Indeed, HR/VP presents the decision not only as good news for AL and the WB region, but also for the EU itself, implying that it serves EU interests. - There is talk about 'completing' the EU, thus, implying that EU enlargement can reach a final form and limit. WB is perceived by HR/VP Borrell as clearly being an integral part of the EU with the latter being unable to be 'complete' with the WB still missing. - The EU and WB are facing difficult times with the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. The EU is presented as standing firmly on the side of its WB 'friends' and supporting them.	*Identified narrative(s):* none. - Highlighting the importance of a merit-based enlargement process corresponds with the peace and the geopolitical narrative. - Stating that opening accession talks with AL shows a recognition of the 'geostrategic importance' that the WB region has for the EU points towards geopolitical reasonings in line with the geopolitical narrative. Another element of the geopolitical narrative present here is the notion of 'completing' the Union, indicating that there are limits to the widening process of the EU. WB is presented as an integral part of the EU without whom the Union cannot be 'complete'. - It is also striking that no value-based appeals are being made, nowhere is AL being presented as belonging to the EU based on shared values, as we would expect from the peace

			countries have undertaken'). - HR/VP Borrell supports the decision calling it 'good news for both countries, the rest of the region and the entire European Union' and congratulates his 'Western Balkans friends'. - HR/VP Borrell implies that geostrategic interests guided the decision ('The Member States' decision to finally start accession negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia is proof of the geostrategic importance of the region'). - HR/VP Borrell refers to the Union not being 'complete' without the WB ('The European Union is not complete without the Western Balkans'). - HR/VP Borrell implies that enlargement policy follows a merit-based logic ('It is an acknowledgment of these countries' efforts to implement significant reforms on their accession path'). - The decision weighs more according to HR/VP Borrell given the 'trying times' the EU is facing with COVID-19. - The EU is presented as standing firmly on the side of the WB ('The European Union stands by the		narrative, pointing towards its total absence from this document.

			Western Balkans and will continue to support the region also in this difficult time').		
33	Olivér Várhelyi (ENLARG COM).	- The EU has agreed to open accession negotiations with AL. - Both the EU and AL are currently facing the COVID-19 pandemic. - AL will have to continue delivering reforms especially on rule of law and fundamentals.	- ENLARG COM Várhelyi calls the decision to open accession talks with AL 'a historic moment' for AL. AL 'should be proud of what you achieved. It marks a milestone on your EU journey'. - AL has earned this step by having 'worked hard to advance the EU reform agenda and achieved impressive results'. - AL is expected to continue this reform momentum especially when it comes to rule of law and fundamentals, which is where accession negotiations will start first. - The EU is presented as standing firmly on AL's side in this time of 'unprecedented global crisis for citizens, societies and economies'. The EU stands 'by the Albanian people in its reconstruction efforts after the earthquake as well as in addressing the coronavirus crisis'. - COM supports AL to 'move forward together on your path to EU membership'. - AL is a 'close partner' of the EU ('The EU is currently working intensively on how to help our closest	- AL is presented as having earned its 'historic moment' of advancing to the accession negotiations stage by having delivered 'impressive' reform results. Thus, the implication is being created that enlargement policy follows a merit-based logic. AL is expected to continue delivering reforms. - Both the EU and AL are presented as currently undergoing an 'unprecedented' health crisis. The EU is narrated as reliable partner who tries to help its 'closest partners', including AL, in dealing with this crisis. - COM is presented as being supportive of AL on its path towards EU membership.	*Identified narrative(s):* none. - Highlighting the importance of a merit-based enlargement process corresponds with the peace and the geopolitical narrative.

			partners, like your country, to tackle the impact of this crisis').		
34	HR/VP Josep Borrell.	- Both the EU and AL are currently facing the COVID-19 pandemic. - The EU has decided to open accession negotiations with AL (and North Macedonia). - AL is expected to continue implementing reforms. - EU has approved EUR 38 million in immediate assistance in dealing with the pandemic for the WB region and has reallocated EUR 374 million for the post-pandemic economic recovery of the region. AL is set to receive EUR 4 million in support of its health sector and EUR 47 million for its economic recovery, alongside the EUR 1 billion raised at the donors' conference in February 2020 for the reconstruction after the November 2019 earthquake.	- The EU and AL are facing a health crisis ('A very difficult time lies behind all of us, with the Coronavirus pandemic and its global consequences dominating the headlines and our thoughts' and 'we are all fighting an unseen crisis and its consequences'). - The crisis has 'overshadowed' the 'important decision' of the EU opening accession talks with AL. Accession talks are presented as 'good news for the two countries, the Western Balkans and for all of Europe'. The EU has shown that it can act on its 'priority policies' even whilst 'addressing a global crisis'. - Enlargement is presented as a merit-based policy in which AL has done its part and now the EU has fulfilled its part of the promise ('We have asked a lot from both countries, and they fulfilled it. Now, the EU also made the right step on its side. It is an encouraging message that hard work and real leadership on both sides leads to results'). - The EU is presented as	- The EU, AL and the rest of the world are narrated as currently being under crisis, facing a severe health crisis with the COVID-19 pandemic. The EU is presented as an actor that despite being caught up in the crisis does not forget about its 'priority policies' of which enlargement of the WB is part. The decision to open accession talks with AL is presented as good news for AL, the wider WB region who can be inspired and encouraged by this example, and the EU itself. - Enlargement policy is presented as merit-based policy, in which AL has fulfilled its reform tasks and the EU now has delivered on its side of the promise by launching the accession negotiations. AL is expected to continue its reform efforts in a profound way. - The EU is narrated as being incomplete if the WB are not part of it. - Throughout the document, HR/VP Borrell makes strong appeals to show solidarity. The EU is presented as actor that shows support to the WB by supporting it financially. The word 'we' is used when making these calls to display solidarity, yet	*Identified narrative(s):* none. - Highlighting the importance of a merit-based enlargement process corresponds with the peace and the geopolitical narrative. - The notion of the EU being 'incomplete' without the WB region points towards the geopolitical narrative. Yet, no other aspects of that narrative are present. - While solidarity as value features heavily in this document, no connection is being established between the display of this value and accession. HR/VP Borrell does not claim that solidarity is a European value, nor does he make the argument that it is a value shared by both the EU and AL that serves as a base for enlargement.

			incomplete without the WB ('By making this important decision in such trying times, the EU moved forward on a truly important policy matter and it sent an important signal and clear message to the Western Balkans: the European Union is not complete without the Western Balkans'). - AL is expected to continue delivering on reforms ('With the start of the accession negotiations, a lot of work now lies ahead of us and the opening of accession talks was just a first step of an intense process. Profound social, political and economic reforms need to happen before the step to full membership'). - AL (and North Macedonia) can 'encourage' the rest of the region to deliver on outstanding reforms, to the benefit of the citizens of WB. - An appeal to show solidarity is being made ('We have to demonstrate what European and global solidarity means' and 'solidarity cannot be just a word that we use without any kind of commitment. Solidarity has to be proven by actions' and 'the Western Balkans can count on the solidarity of	solidarity is not being presented as an inherently European value or as a value that unites the EU and AL as common characteristic. - The EU's involvement in the WB region as investment and trade partner, as well by being a donor, is being emphasised by HR/VP Borrell.	

			the EU. And not only in times of crisis' and 'this is a time to get serious on solidarity and cooperation. We need to work hand-in-hand, in solidarity, supporting each other, as nobody is able to deal with the current situation alone'). - Emphasis is being put by HR/VP Borrell on the EU being the main donor, investor and trade partner of the WB ('These are important facts that demonstrate the EU's involvement in the region').		
35	COM, HR/VP Josep Borrell.	- The European Council has decided to open accession talks with AL (and North Macedonia) on 26/03/2020. - AL, the EU and the rest of the world are currently facing the coronavirus pandemic. - On 28/03/2020 AL has sent 30 doctors to Italy to support the country's hospitals. - AL has also helped the EU with repatriation efforts of EU citizens stranded in AL. - The EU helped AL by sending over EUR 50 million in support for its health sector and the socio-economic consequences of the crisis.	- AL is praised as 'an example of European solidarity against the coronavirus' with the country deciding to send 30 doctors to Italy to 'support its heavily hit neighbour'. This is deemed to be 'an act of solidarity and friendship' by the EU. AL supporting the repatriation of EU citizens stranded in AL is seen as 'another tangible example of the concrete solidarity that Albania is providing in time of need'. - HR/VP Borrell says that 'solidarity is at the heart of the values of the European Union'. - The representation of COM in AL posted on x that 'the solidarity shown demonstrates another good reason that Albania enters	- AL is narrated as having displayed an important act of solidarity through sending its doctors to support its neighbour Italy in need. - HR/VP Borrell argues that solidarity is the key value of the EU, implying that the EU is a value-based entity. This is further confirmed by referring to solidarity as the 'common value that gave birth to the EU', implying that, firstly, the EU is a value-based entity, and secondly, that solidarity is one of its key values. - The narration is created that through its display of solidarity in times of need, AL has proven that it should become a member of the EU, implying that sharing values is at the heart of the accession process.	*Identified narrative(s):* peace narrative. - The peace narrative is apparent both in its general version (the EU as an entity that was born out of the value of solidarity and that is characterised by this value) and in its application to enlargement policy (accession talks with AL can be justified through AL having displayed one of the EU's foundational values, namely solidarity). - Highlighting the importance of a merit-based enlargement process corresponds with the peace and the

			the European Union as soon as possible. Their spirit of solidarity and vicinity that are demonstrating with these people here is precisely that common value that gave birth to the EU (sic)'. - Enlargement is presented as merit-based with the EU's decision to open accession talks 'acknowledging the progress made and crucial reforms implemented by both countries'. - HR/VP Borrell 'welcomes' this decision as 'an important decision for the region and the entire European Union'.	- Enlargement is presented as merit-based process in which AL has earned the advancement towards the accession negotiations stage by implementing reforms. This decision is deemed to be important both for AL, the WB, and the EU itself.	geopolitical narrative.
36	Olivér Várhelyi (ENLARG COM).	- COM presented the revised methodology for accession talks in February 2020. - The European Council decided to open accession negotiations with AL in March 2020. - The EU has helped the WB with EUR 3.3 billion to address immediate needs of the health sector and support the socio-economic recovery of the region. - The WB countries have supported the EU member states with medical staff and equipment. - At the EU-WB summit in Zagreb in May 2020, COM wanted to present its proposal for an economic and investment plan for the WB region.	- The COVID-19 pandemic is presented as a severe crisis for the EU, the WB region, and the world at large. - The EU is presented as having sticked to its priorities despite the crisis, stating that COVID-19 'did not throw this carefully laid out plan around: it did not change our aim, ambition or determination'. - The pandemic is presented as calling for global cooperation to overcome it together ('With global action and by working with partners'). - The COVID-19 crisis has caused the EU to display 'unprecedented	- The EU and the WB are narrated as currently being under a severe health crisis, that also has strong socio-economic consequences. - The EU is presented as an actor that despite facing this crisis is determined to stick to its priorities, including the WB, a region which is presented as being at the heart of Europe. - The crisis caused both the EU and the WB to engage in 'unprecedented' acts of solidarity with one another, implying that their bond has strengthened in these challenging times. - ENLARG COM Várhelyi relates the solidarity shown by the WB with the decision to grant a European perspective	*Identified narrative(s):* none. - There are some elements of the peace narrative, namely the claim that the WB region is 'at the heart of Europe' and the connection made between WB having displayed solidarity and the confirmation that this means that the future of the WB is within the EU. Yet, these elements are not very pronounced, nor is there any claim that solidarity is a fundamental EU value that is shared by the WB countries and that, thus, serves as

		- The Zagreb summit will now be held online, and the plan will only be presented in the second half of 2020. - The plan will support the economic recovery of WB, helping the region to modernise its economies, will boost growth, and support the digital and green transformation.	solidarity' regarding the WB, both in financial terms and by including the region in its procurement programme for medical equipment and other relief measures. In turn, WB is presented as also having shown solidarity towards the EU ('At the same time, the EU appreciated the support it got from the Western Balkans partners with medical personnel and equipment'). - COVID-19 is related to EU accession of the WB countries ('The COVID-19 pandemic confirmed clearly that the future of the Western Balkans is in the European Union' with the WB being a 'region at the heart of Europe'). - The WB countries need to continue focusing on reforms, with the economic and investment plan helping the region financially to carry out reforms. Through reform steps a 'truly united European continent' can be created. - The EU and WB will come out of this crisis together ('Together we will overcome this crisis and come out stronger').	to the region, arguing that this proves that the decision is right and that the future of the region is within the EU. - COVID-19 relief funding is being related to the countries carrying out reform steps, including improving their neighbourly relations and conducting reforms in the area of rule of law, establishing a connection between the funding and enlargement criteria. - The EU is presented as firmly standing on the side of WB by arguing that the two will emerge from this crisis 'together' and 'stronger'.	justification for accession. - No elements of the geopolitical narrative are apparent in this document.
37	Olivér Várhelyi (ENLARG COM).	- In 2020, EU decided to open accession negotiations with AL (and North	- ENLARG COM Várhelyi argues that the COVID-19 crisis showed the importance of	- The COVID-19 health crisis is narrated as having demonstrated the value of international	*Identified narrative(s):* none.

		Macedonia) and to revise the methodology for accession negotiations. - At the virtual EU-WB, member states endorsed COM's plan to present an economic and investment plan for the WB in autumn 2020. - ENLARG COM Várhelyi delivered a speech about the EU's efforts to support the WB during the COVID-19 emergency at a meeting of the leaders of the member states of the Central European Initiative (CEI). - The EU together with international financial institutions supports the immediate needs of the WB and the recovery of the region with EUR 3.3 billion.	international cooperation ('The COVID-19 pandemic confirmed clearly that we can work together, we can find common solutions, we can rely on each other' and 'the COVID-19 pandemic confirmed very clearly the need for European and international cooperation'). - The EU is presented as having sticked to its priorities despite the crisis ('Let me take the example of the European Union's relationship with the Western Balkans: The crisis did not diminish our ambitions'), COM even started working harder. - The EU showed 'a real spirit of solidarity' towards the WB. - The WB are presented as also having sticked to their European ambitions ('I am pleased to say that the countries in the region also did not let go, sticking firmly to their EU commitments'). - The WB are presented as a 'region at the heart of Europe', with the economic and investment plan aiming to 'bring the region closer to the EU'. - The WB must continue sticking to conducting reforms. - The merit-based character of	and European cooperation, based on mutual displays of solidarity. The crisis is presented as being an opportunity for all to emerge from it more united and stronger. - The EU is narrated as an actor that even in troubled times sticks to its commitments and priorities, having shown real solidarity towards the WB, a region deemed to be at the heart of Europe, while the financial funding provided by the EU and international financial institutions to support reform efforts aims to bring the region also closer to the EU, implying a distinction between what is narrated as 'Europe' (with the WB already being at its heart) and the 'EU' (to which WB is expected to move 'closer') not always apparent in other documents. - The WB are presented as having sticked to their European ambitions. The need for continuous reforms is being stressed. - Enlargement is narrated as merit-based policy, in which candidate countries have the pace of accession in their own hands. Implementing reforms quickly means that accession negotiations will also move forward more quickly.	- There are some elements of the peace narrative, namely the claim that the WB region is 'at the heart of Europe' and the connection made between WB having displayed solidarity and the confirmation that this means that the future of the WB is within the EU. Yet, these elements are not very pronounced, nor is there any claim that solidarity is a fundamental EU value that is shared by the WB countries and that, thus, serves as justification for accession. - No elements of the geopolitical narrative are apparent in this document.

			enlargement policy is emphasised through ENLARG COM Várhelyi stating that implemented reforms mean that 'we will also be able to move faster in the accession negotiations'. - The crisis is being presented as an opportunity for all sides ('I am very hopeful that the current crisis will be used as an opportunity across the board: the first signs are certainly promising, and we need to build the momentum with a good combination of recovery and reform efforts as well as proper support and cooperation'). - The EU and the WB can move out of this crisis together and stronger ('This means that we can also recover together and come out of the crisis stronger').		
38	Genoveva Ruiz Calavera (Director for the WB at COM).	- AL has worked towards implementing a judicial reform in recent years. - The EU has opened accession negotiations with AL in 2020. - A member of the Appeal Chamber of AL is currently being investigated and was suspended from office. - AL now needs to continue implementing reforms related to judicial institutions.	- AL is presented as having worked hard towards creating an independent, accountable, and impartial judiciary, with the judicial reform being deemed 'fundamental for the future of Albania'. - The Director for the WB at COM warns all parties in AL not to instrumentalise the current investigations against a member of the Appeal Chamber	- AL is praised on the one hand for what the country has achieved on its path to reform its judiciary already, while at the same time, the country is warned to continue these efforts. In particular, the Director for the WB at COM focuses on pointing out the danger of political parties instrumentalising the judiciary reform and, thereby, derailing it. - The present time is narrated as being	*Identified narrative(s):* none.

			and to refrain from actions aimed at derailing the full implementation of the judicial reform. The investigations are presented as 'concrete evidence that the system has started to function effectively'. - The current stage is presented as being 'crucial' for the future of AL in the EU ('Crucial phase for the progress of the country on the European integration path' and 'the months ahead will be crucial in the context of the opening of EU accession negotiations' and 'these are decisive times for advancing the European aspirations of Albania and its citizens'). - AL is asked to continue its reform efforts of which the 'implementation of the judicial reform will be key. And this is not only about getting the technical work done, it's about political commitment' and 'clear and concrete achievements in the implementation of the justice reform must continue now with more determination and commitment than ever'. - The EU supports AL and is committed to welcoming the country within its Union ('The EU is	crucial for AL on its path towards EU membership, in which it is of uttermost importance that AL keeps up its reform efforts, particularly in the area of judicial reform. - The EU is presented as an actor that is supportive of AL that wants to welcome AL in its Union.	

			firmly committed to support this process so that the people of Albania can benefit from the reform and take pride in its achievements, as the country advances on its European integration path').		
39	Olivér Várhelyi (ENLARG COM).	- In 2020 EU opened accession negotiations with AL (and North Macedonia) and revised the methodology guiding the accession negotiations. - On 06/05/2020 the EU-Western Balkans summit was held. - The EU together with international financial institutions supported WB with EUR 3.3 billion to address immediate needs and the recovery after the COVID-19 pandemic. - COM will present its proposal for an economic and investment plan in autumn 2020.	- ENLARG COM Várhelyi refers to the COVID-19 pandemic as 'unprecedented challenge'. - The crisis is presented to have proven the strength of the relation between the EU and the WB countries ('It proves once again the strength of the partnership between the European Union, its Member States and the Western Balkans'). Indeed, the relation between the EU and WB is presented as having reached 'new heights' in the last few months, with the decision by EU leaders to revise the accession negotiation methodology, open accession negotiations with AL (and North Macedonia) and the plan for an economic and investment plan. The EU has also adopted an 'unparalleled package of measures to support the Western Balkans' during COVID-19. - Regional cooperation is presented as 'crucial	- COVID-19 is narrated as an unprecedented challenge for both the EU and WB. The crisis is presented as having resulted in strengthened ties between the EU and WB, with important milestones being reached in 2020 despite the pandemic.	*Identified narrative(s):* none.

			for economic recovery' of the WB region.		
40	HR/VP Josep Borrell, Olivér Várhelyi (ENLARG COM).	- The Council conclusions of March 2020 referred to an electoral reform in AL as one of the key conditions to open accession negotiations. - The political parties in AL have reached a political agreement on an electoral reform. - HR/VP Borrell and ENLARG COM Várhelyi have released a joint statement on the political agreement for an electoral reform in AL on 05/06/2020. - The Parliament of AL still needs to adopt the electoral reform.	- HR/VP Borrell and ENLARG COM Várhelyi congratulate AL on having reached the political agreement for implementing an 'important' electoral reform, which is expected to make the electoral process more transparent, increase its integrity, and to gradually make the electoral administration less politicised. The step is praised as an 'important achievement that will benefit the citizens of Albania'. - HR/VP Borrell and ENLARG COM Várhelyi interpret this as a step 'moving Albania one step closer to its EU future' and view this as a positive sign that AL will continue implementing reforms also in the future ('This bodes well for future progress on reforms needed on Albania's EU path').	- The political agreement for implementing an electoral reform in AL is praised by the HR/VP Borrell and by ENLARG COM Várhelyi. The step is seen as positive signal on AL's commitment to implement reforms, which in turn is linked to advancing on the country's European path, implying a merit-based logic guiding the accession process. - AL's future in the EU is narrated as a certainty, that is more a matter of time than a question of if.	*Identified narrative(s):* none. - Highlighting the importance of a merit-based enlargement process corresponds with the peace and the geopolitical narrative.
41	Olivér Várhelyi (ENLARG COM).	- COM proposed a revised methodology for accession negotiations in February 2020. - The Council decided to open accession negotiations with AL (and North Macedonia) in March 2020. - Both the revised methodology and the decision to open	- COM is presented as a 'geopolitical' actor who is willing to act accordingly ('For our geopolitical Commission, full engagement with our neighbours is a top priority' and 'these are not just words, we have translated them in action'). - WB is presented as 'a region at the	- COM is narrated as possessing a geopolitical character, which it upheld also during the COVID-19 pandemic, and which translates to its actions. The WB are a priority area for this geopolitical COM. - While WB is a region at the heart of Europe, measures are needed to bring the region closer to the	*Identified narrative(s):* none. - The reference of a 'geopolitical COM' points towards the geopolitical narrative, yet no other elements of this narrative are present, with the document nowhere implying that accession

		accession negotiations were endorsed by the European Council. - COM together with international financial institutions supported the WB with EUR 3.3 billion to address the COVID-19 pandemic and the recovery thereafter. - In May 2020, at the Zagreb summit, COM was tasked to prepare an economic and investment plan for the WB region. - COM will present the plan in autumn 2020. - In the week of the 18/06/2020, COM will propose the draft negotiating frameworks for AL (and North Macedonia), alongside an update on the progress made by both. - COM will assess the reform progress achieved by WB candidate countries in the annual enlargement package in autumn 2020.	heart of Europe and surrounded by Member States'. - The EU is committed to the WB, with EU leaders at the Zagreb summit having 'not only reiterated our strong solidarity with the region in the crisis, but also reaffirmed the region's European perspective and sent a message of enhanced engagement on the EU side'. - Enlargement is explicitly referred to as being 'merit-based'. - WB is expected to continue delivering reforms, with reform progress dictating the pace of accession negotiations ('To progress on their EU path, the Western Balkans need to continue to deliver on reforms. Further work is required on the rule of law, fight against corruption and organised crime as well as on fundamental freedoms and human rights. Faster tangible results on reforms mean moving faster in accession negotiations'). - The economic and investment plan for the WB intends to 'bring the region closer to the EU'.	EU, implying a distinction being made between Europe/the EU. WB moves closer to the EU through implementing reforms, with enlargement being strictly merit-based. - The EU is presented as being a committed partner of the WB, which is willing to step up its engagement in the region to support the region on its path towards EU membership.	follows a geopolitical logic. - No elements of the peace narrative are present either. With solidarity a value is referenced, but the document does not claim that this is a foundational value of the EU that unites it with the WB, serving as the foundation for enlargement policy. While the WB are narrated as 'a region at the heart of Europe' the fact that the WB countries need to move closer to the EU, implies that their starting points are somewhere different, potentially implying some (acquired) difference. - Expressing that enlargement policy is merit-based is consistent with both the peace and the geopolitical narrative.
42	Olivér Várhelyi (ENLARG COM).	- COM presented a revised methodology for accession	- The annual Balkan Barometer for 2020 shows that while 59% of respondents want their WB	- The WB are narrated as region for whom the 'uncertainty' on whether its European	*Identified narrative(s):* none.

		negotiations in February 2020. - In March 2020, member states decided to open accession negotiations with AL (and North Macedonia). - In April 2020, COM, together with the European Investment Bank (EIB), supported WB with a package of EUR 3.3 billion to address the COVID-19 crisis. - In May 2020 the Zagreb summit took place, where an economic and investment plan for the WB was announced, which will be presented by COM in autumn 2020. - ENLARG COM Várhelyi presented the annual Balkans Barometer on 24/06/2020, a survey showcasing the opinion of WB citizens on the EU. - COM will present the negotiating framework for AL in the coming days. - COM will report on the progress of AL as part of the annual enlargement package, which will be presented in autumn 2020. - The WB countries must continue implementing reforms.	country to become an EU member state, 26% believe that this will never happen. ENLARG COM Várhelyi relates this to 'the uncertainty about the European perspective of the region after several inconclusive discussion on opening accession negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia'. With the decision reached in March 2020 to open accession talks this 'is now a thing of the past'. - The EU is presented as being committed to welcoming the WB in its circle ('EU leaders sent a strong signal, reaffirming the region's European perspective, confirming enhanced engagement'). This should 'convince doubters that the EU is serious about the European perspective of the Western Balkans and considers it as one of its main priorities'. - ENLARG COM Várhelyi highlights that the WB countries are expected to continue their reform efforts ('To progress on their EU path, the governments of the region need to continue to deliver on reforms'). - Enlargement is presented as merit-based ('Faster	perspective will ever become a reality has vanished with the opening of accession negotiations with AL (and North Macedonia). - The EU is presented as supportive of WB's path towards EU membership, being willing to step up its engagement with the region and offering financial assistance. The WB region is called a priority area for the EU, with the EU intending to bring the WB 'closer' to itself. - Enlargement policy is presented as following a merit-based logic, in which the WB countries have it in their own hands how quickly they will move towards joining the EU. The pace of accession depends on the pace of reforms.	- Expressing that enlargement policy is merit-based is consistent with both the peace and the geopolitical narrative.

			tangible results on reforms will not only mean moving faster in accession negotiations, as underlined in the enhanced enlargement methodology, it is also what citizens expect'). - With the economic and investment plan the EU intends to 'bring the region closer to the EU'.		

C. t_3 – Bosnia and Herzegovina

Nr.	*Actor(s)*	*Chronicle*	*Mimesis*	*Emplotment*	*Narrative(s)*
43	COM President Ursula von der Leyen.	- The European Council endorsed COM's recommendation to grant candidate status to BiH in December 2022. - COM President von der Leyen is in Sarajevo to meet with Borjana Krišto, Chairwoman of the Council of Ministers of BiH. - BiH has made reform progress since December 2022. - The EU seeks to bring the economies of the WB and its own economy closer together through the 'Investment Plan for the Western Balkans' initiative worth EUR 30 billion. - The EU has also put forward a 'Growth Plan for the Western Balkans' which opens the Single	- COM President von der Leyen claims her last visit to Sarajevo a year ago came at 'a crucial time' and the decision by the European Council to grant candidate status 'a historic day. It was a very emotional day and a very important day for your country, but also for the European Union'. - The EU is presented as standing firmly on BiH's side and supporting its membership ambitions ('So here I am to again re-emphasise and reassure you that we stand by your side and how much we want you to progress, as Bosnia and Herzegovina, towards the European Union' and 'again, we are here to support you'). - COM President von der Leyen presents EU membership as certainty by claiming that BiH's future is in	- BiH is narrated as a country that has made good reform progress since having been granted candidate status on what was 'a historic day' for the country. The EU is narrated as somebody that stands firmly on BiH's side and wants to welcome the country in its Union. The key to membership is presented as implementing reforms which in turn determine the pace of accession. - Cooperation and unity are being presented as solutions for problems of any kind, having helped the EU and WB to together overcome the 'severe energy crisis', without providing detail on what the roots of this crisis were.	*Identified narrative(s):* none. - Highlighting that enlargement policy is merit-based is consistent with both the peace and the geopolitical narrative. - There is an element of the peace narrative in both its general variant and in its applied form to enlargement policy with COM President von der Leyen claiming that values are at the core of the EU and at the core of enlargement policy. Values are presented as the *sine qua non*e of enlargement, with the EU being unable/unwilling to accept backsliding tendencies on its common values.

		Market in seven sectors to WB businesses, seeks to complete a Common Regional Market between the WB countries, supports reforms to create a level playing field for companies, and is supported by investments.	the EU (‘Therefore, my first message is basically re-emphasising that Bosnia and Herzegovina's future is in the European Union and how much we want to have you as a full member of the European Union, and how strong our support on your path forward towards this goal is’ and ‘Bosnia and Herzegovina's future is in the European Union as a single, united and sovereign country’). - Enlargement is presented as following a merit-based logic by relating the reform progress BiH has made in 2023 with moving forward on the accession path (‘This will make you move forward with the accession process and bring you closer to the European Union’). - BiH is praised for the reform progress it has achieved on the 14 key priorities, for having stood on the EU’s side during the ‘severe energy crisis’, and for having displayed excellent cooperation with the EU in general. - Cooperation is presented as solution to overcome difficulties of any kind (‘This shows that: If we are closing the ranks, standing together, speaking as one, moving forward as one, we can overcome any difficulty’). - Values are being presented as being at	- Values are being narrated as being both at the core of the EU itself and at the core of its enlargement policy. Values are presented as *sine qua non* with the EU being unable or unwilling to accept ‘backsliding on our common values’.	

			the core of enlargement policy ('What we cannot accept is a backsliding on our common values, or divisions, in any part of your country. We all know– and you said it – there is the respect of the constitutional order, of the founding freedoms and of civil society are at the core of the EU values and essential on the European path').		
44	COM.	- BiH applied for EU membership in February 2016. - COM presented its opinion in May 2019, finding that it will recommend the opening of accession negotiations once BiH has reached the necessary degree of compliance with the membership criteria and with 14 key priorities covering democracy, rule of law, fundamental rights, and public administration reform. - COM recommended the granting of candidate status in 2022, and in December 2022 the European Council endorsed this recommendation. - On 08/11/2023, COM presented the annual progress report for BiH as part of the annual enlargement package.	- The report presents in technical and neutral language the reform progress made by BiH in 2023. - The main takeaway is that BiH made limited progress despite the positive momentum created by receiving candidate status. - Regarding the political criteria, positive results included holding elections in October 2022 with a coalition being formed thereafter in record speed. Strategies were adopted on fighting organised crime, terrorism, and on migration management as well as an updated risk assessment for anti-money laundering and fighting terrorism. Laws were passed on the integrity of the judiciary, on torture prevention, on foreigners, and on freedom of access to information. - Developments at the Republika Srpska entity undermine the overall positive	- As typical for progress reports, the content is presented in rather technical and neutral language. BiH is presented as a country that has made some reform progress over the course of 2023, but who did not use all the potential that the momentum of receiving candidate status in December 2022 could have created. This is presented as being largely because of BiH being a fragmented country, where positive reform steps at the state level were undermined by serious setbacks at the level of the Republika Srpska entity. Here the tone of the document shifts, by deeming these developments as 'regrettable' and an 'undeniable major step backwards' (p. 4).	*Identified narrative(s):* none. - Overall, the document in its entirety upholds the importance of a merit-based enlargement process based on the Copenhagen criteria, by going through these criteria, split into the different clusters and chapters of the EU *acquis*, one by one and providing detailed analysis of the state of preparation of BiH for each. - Highlighting the importance of a merit-based accession process is consistent with both the peace and the geopolitical narrative.

		- The overall finding is that while BiH has made some positive reform steps at state level, these were undermined by negative developments in the Republika Srpska entity, limiting the overall reform progress. - BiH received EUR 45.5 million in 2022 under IPA III.	development at state level. The entity called for constitutional judges to resign and passed a law decreeing that decisions by the Constitutional Court will not be implemented by Republika Srpska. Criminal penalties for defamation were introduced 'representing a major step backwards in the protection of fundamental rights' (p. 4). A draft law was passed which targets civil society groups as 'foreign agents' which if finally adopted 'would further undermine the effective functioning of democracy and would mark another regrettable and undeniable major step backwards' (p. 4). - Regarding the economic criteria, BiH is presented as being in an early stage of preparation when it comes to establishing a functioning market economy with the internal market being fragmented, unemployment being very high, and labour out-migration persisting. The economic performance of BiH is presented as being below its potential. BiH is presented as being between an early stage and some level of preparation when it comes to dealing with the competitive pressures	- Overall, the impression is being created that BiH is far away from the next step, the opening of accession negotiations, with the country only fulfilling two out of the 14 key priorities for opening accession negotiations, which were established already seven years prior, in February 2016.	

			and market forces of the EU. - Regarding taking on the obligations of EU membership, BiH is presented as being in an early stage and some level of preparation, with only limited progress having been made on most EU *acquis* chapters during the reporting period. - BiH is presented as having some level of preparation when it comes to CFSP alignment, having significantly improved its alignment with HR/VP statements and EU Council decisions from 80% in 2022, to 98% in August 2023. This increase includes alignment on statements related to the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine. Yet, some problems with implementing restrictive measures persist, including not banning flights from Russia and broadcasting Russian state-sponsored media. - From the 14 key priorities, BiH currently fulfils two completely. These are the provisions on ensuring the functioning of the SAA Parliamentary Committee and the abolishment of the reference to the death penalty in the Constitution of the Republika Srpska, including the creation of a national preventive mechanism against		

			torture and ill-treatment. The other 12 priorities are currently not met.		
45	COM.	- In February 2016, BiH applied for EU membership. - In May 2019, COM presented its opinion (*Avis*) which identifies 14 key priorities for the opening of EU accession negotiations. - In October 2022, COM recommended to grant candidate status to BiH on the understanding that a number of steps are taken. - In December 2022, the European Council granted candidate status to BiH. - On 08/11/2023 COM presented the annual progress report for BiH as part of the annual enlargement package. - BiH received EUR 45.5 million in 2022 under IPA III.	- The document summarises in rather neutral and technical language the main reforms of BiH in 2023. - Regarding the political criteria, elections were held in October 2022. A strategy to fight organised crime, an updated risk assessment and an action plan on anti-money laundering and on combating terrorism financing were adopted, as well as strategies and action plans on migration and terrorism. - Developments in the Republika Srpska entity (calling for resignation of constitutional judges, non-implementation of constitutional rulings) are being called out. - Some progress is reported when it comes to CFSP alignment, with BiH having 'significantly improved its alignment with EU foreign policy'. Some authorities in Republika Srpska, however, argued in favour of a neutral stance towards Russia 'contesting the country's alignment with EU statements and obstructing the full implementation of restrictive measures against Russia'. - Regarding the economic criteria, BiH is at an early	- The document summarises in rather neutral and technical language the main findings of the annual progress report for BiH in 2023. - BiH is presented as a country that made some positive reform progress, but whose overall track record was undermined by negative developments and setbacks in the Republika Srpska. - BiH is presented as a country that still has considerable progress to make. The report creates the impression that BiH could not fully seize the positive momentum that the granting of candidate status could have created, with limited to no progress having been made on most chapters of the EU *acquis*.	*Identified narrative(s):* none. - Overall, the document in its entirety upholds the importance of a merit-based enlargement process based on the Copenhagen criteria, by going through these criteria, split into the different clusters and chapters of the EU *acquis*, one by one and providing detailed analysis of the state of preparation of BiH for each. - Highlighting the importance of a merit-based accession process is consistent with both the peace and the geopolitical narrative.

			stage of preparation when it comes to establishing a functioning market economy and at an early stage with some level of preparation when it comes to being able to cope with the competitive pressures and market forces of the EU. - The country is presented as being in between an early stage and some level of preparation when it comes to the obligations of membership, with COM calling for the country to step up its alignment with the EU *acquis.* Limited to no progress was made on most chapters during the reporting period.		
46	COM.	- In November 2022, a WB Summit of the Berlin Process took place. - In December 2022, the first EU-WB Summit held in the WB region (Tirana/AL) took place. -BiH received candidate status by the European Council in December 2022 on the understanding that the country implements the steps specified in the Commission's October 2022 communication on enlargement policy. - The EU adopted an Energy Support Package for the WB in December 2022 to decrease the dependence of the region on	- In its 2023 communication on enlargement, COM states that 'the enlargement agenda gained new momentum in June 2022' (p. 4) and that 'significant developments have taken place on the EU enlargement agenda in the past year' (p. 16). The present time is called a 'historic window of opportunity' (p. 16) which should be used by enlargement countries to 'strongly bind their future to the European Union' (p. 16). The EU, in turn, must also respond 'to the call of history' (p. 15). COM is presented as being ready to accelerate the accession process 'to make sure that the next enlargement is a	- COM presents enlargement as a policy area that has gained new momentum in 2022. Using this restored momentum is presented as being imperative so that the 'historic window of opportunity' is not left unused. Referring to the new momentum as 'call of history' does bear some resemblance to the peace narrative, where enlargement is presented as moral obligation of the EU. - COM narrates itself as an actor that supports enlargement countries and that is willing to increase the speed	*Identified narrative(s):* geopolitical narrative. - There is clear evidence for the geopolitical narrative with multiple of its elements being presented. Enlargement is narrated by COM as serving a geopolitical purpose and as being in the EU's own interest, including its security interests. The EU is presented as an actor that has stepped up its role on the international stage following the start of the Russian war of aggression implying altered power constellations.

		Russian fossil fuels. - A Berlin Process summit was held in Tirana/AL in October 2023. - At the informal European Council summit in Granada, Spain, held in October 2023, EU leaders adopted the 'Granada declaration' and reinstated their commitment to enlargement. - On 08/11/2023 COM presented its annual enlargement package, containing the individual progress reports of the enlargement countries and the 2023 communication on enlargement. - On 08/11/2023 COM also presented a new 'Growth Plan for the Western Balkans' to unleash the region's economic potential and support the region in meeting the economic membership requirements. - On 08/11/2023 COM recommended the opening of accession negotiations once the necessary degree of compliance with the membership criteria is achieved. - COM will provide an update on the progress of	catalyst for progress' (p. 16). - Despite COM's readiness to accelerate the accession process, the merit-based character of enlargement is repeatedly stressed throughout the document ('Accession is and will remain a merit-based process fully dependent on the objective progress achieved by each enlargement partner', p. 2; and 'credible and irreversible reforms on the fundamentals are crucial for enlargement countries to secure progress on their respective EU accession paths', p. 8). Merit-based enlargement is linked to security and prosperity ('A credible, merit-based prospect of EU membership is the key driver of transformation and thus enhances our collective security and socio-economic prosperity', p. 2). - The Copenhagen criteria are mentioned by COM as the 'cornerstones' of enlargement policy. The political dimension of the Copenhagen criteria is the only dimension that receives a special mention on the first page of the communication. - Enlargement is presented as contributing to stability, peace, and prosperity ('EU enlargement is a	of the accession process. At the same time, the importance of a merit-based enlargement process is repeatedly highlighted by COM throughout the document. The reform pace of candidate countries is presented as being the decisive factor for the pace of accession negotiations. - The Copenhagen criteria are presented as the foundation of the accession process. Special prominence is given to the political dimension of the Copenhagen criteria and the importance of CFSP alignment, which narrated by COM as an important 'signal' of a country's European orientation in the current geopolitical context. - Enlargement policy is narrated by COM as a policy that serves multiple purposes. Stability, peace, and prosperity are mentioned by COM alongside one another, in addition reconciliation is also referenced. Other statements by COM imply that enlargement also serves a	Moreover, there is talk about enlargement being a 'geostrategic investment' and about 'completing' the Union, with the latter implying that enlargement has its limits. The merit-based character of enlargement is highlighted repeatedly, with the Copenhagen criteria serving as foundation. In line with the geopolitical narrative, CFSP alignment is given prominence and being interpreted as a sign of the European orientation of candidate countries. Overall, there is a strong narration that enlargement follows a geopolitical logic and that the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine has sparked the new momentum in enlargement matters. - There are also some elements of the peace narrative in enlargement policy apparent. Interestingly, these elements are interwoven with the elements of the geopolitical narrative. This includes statements like enlargement serving the purpose of creating peace, reconciliation, *and* stability (as well as prosperity). Enlargement is narrated as

		BiH by March 2024 at the latest.	driving force for long-term stability, peace and prosperity', p. 2). COM also claims that enlargement contributes to reconciliation and stability ('It is essential for fostering reconciliation and stability on the European continent', p. 2). - Enlargement is deemed a 'geostrategic investment'. At the same time, a reference to common values is being made and enlargement is called a 'tool' to promote EU values ('EU membership is a geostrategic investment in a strong, stable and united Europe based on common values. It is a powerful tool to promote democracy, the rule of law and respect for human rights', p. 2). - COM cites the Granada declaration where EU leaders stated that enlargement is a 'geo-strategic (sic) investment in peace, security, stability and prosperity' (p. 4) and highlighted that the EU also needs to conduct internal reforms to ensure it is 'ready for a further enlarged Union' (p. 16). - The Russian war of aggression against Ukraine is referenced by COM for having demonstrated the geopolitical importance of enlargement ('The geopolitical	geopolitical purpose. - Enlargement is presented by COM as a 'geostrategic investment' in a stronger EU, while common values are mentioned in the same sentence as the common foundation of the Union. Enlargement is called a 'tool' which serves the purpose of promoting EU values. - The Russian war of aggression against Ukraine is linked by COM to the new momentum of enlargement policy, claiming that the war has demonstrated the 'importance' of enlargement. - Enlargement is narrated by COM to serve the EU's own interests, including its security interests, as well as political and economic interests. These interests are put into direct connection with the Russian war in Ukraine. - The EU is presented by COM as an actor that has strengthened its global role and taken on more international responsibility following the start of the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine.	geostrategic investment that serves to promote EU values, creating a link between elements of the geopolitical narrative and the peace narrative. Candidate countries are reminded of the importance to promote and uphold EU values, implying that a logic of shared values is apparent in the accession process. Labelling advancing enlargement policy the 'call of history' bears resemblance to the idea that enlargement is a moral obligation for the EU. Overall, the elements of the peace narrative are less pronounced than those of the geopolitical narrative and mainly show up in connection with the latter. - Highlighting the importance of a merit-based accession process is consistent with both the peace and the geopolitical narrative.

			significance of EU enlargement was further underlined in 2022, when Ukraine, the Republic of Moldova and Georgia applied to become EU members in the wake of Russia's unprovoked and unjustified war of aggression against Ukraine', p. 2). The war 'has impacted enlargement countries' (p. 4) by creating major economic and social challenges for them and turning EU accession into a 'strategic choice' (p. 2) for these countries. - Enlargement is presented as serving the EU's own interests, including the Union's security interests and these interests are connected with the current geopolitical context ('A firm prospect of EU membership for the Western Balkans, Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia is in the EU's very own political, security and economic interest and essential in the current geopolitical context', p. 15). - CFSP alignment is prominently mentioned on the first page of the communication with COM arguing that 'alignment with the EU's common foreign and security policy is a more significant signal than ever of shared values and strategic orientation in the new geopolitical context' (p. 2). COM related	- COM calls for a 'completion' of the EU, implying that enlargement policy has its limits that will eventually be reached. - Values are presented as playing an important role in the enlargement process, with candidate countries being expected to promote and uphold EU values, which are also interpreted as evidence for their commitment to a European future. Enlargement is presented by COM as a 'tool' that serves the goal of promoting and upholding EU values. - COM presents BiH as a country that on the one hand has made reform progress in 2023 in some areas, whose efforts, however, were undermined by negative developments in the Republika Srpska, resulting in an overall mixed track record. COM calls on BiH to make further reform progress, particularly on the 14 key priorities outlined by COM in its opinion on BiH's application for EU membership in 2019. Nevertheless, COM does	

			the increased importance of CFSP alignment with the current geopolitical situation ('Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine has further underlined the need for unity and solidarity among the EU and its closest partners and thus the importance of common foreign and security policy (CFSP) alignment in the enlargement process', p. 6) - The EU is presented by COM as an actor that has increased its international role in the context of the new geopolitical situation brought about by the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine ('In a rapidly changing geopolitical environment, the EU has demonstrated it is ready to rise to the occasion by strengthening its stance at the world stage', p. 15; and the 'EU has assumed more international responsibility', p. 4). - COM talks about the need to 'complete' the EU, saying that internal reforms are needed 'to complete the European Union' (p. 5) and that the EU 'must now work on accelerating EU enlargement and completing our Union' (p. 15). - COM also presents enlargement as a 'powerful tool' to promote EU values ('In line with the aim of the Union to promote peace, its	recommend the opening of accession negotiations once BiH has reached the necessary degree of compliance with the membership criteria and states that it will deliver an updated progress report by March 2024 at the latest.	

			values and the well-being of its peoples, EU enlargement continues to be a powerful tool to promote democracy, the rule of law and respect for fundamental rights', p. 15). Enlargement countries are expected to 'embrace and promote EU values firmly and unequivocally' (p. 2). - COM again cites the Granada declaration of the European Council which states that 'enlargement is a driver for improving the economic and social conditions of European citizens, reducing disparities between countries and must foster the values on which the Union was founded' (p. 16). - Regarding BiH, COM calls the receiving of candidate status in December 2022 'an important step in maintaining the momentum of the enlargement process' (p. 2). COM mentions the October 2022 general elections in BiH that led to a quick formation of a coalition government, with the Council of Ministers declaring advancing on the European path and the implementation of reforms related to the 14 key priorities as priorities. Strategies on terrorism, organised crime, money laundering, and migration as well as		

			several draft laws on reform-related topics were adopted. The CFSP alignment of BiH has significantly increased which is interpreted by COM as being an important confirmation of the country's EU orientation. The implementation of sanctions, however, remains a challenge for BiH. - The negative developments in the Republika Srpska are called out by COM. The reintroduction of criminal penalties for defamation is called a 'major step backwards in the protection of fundamental rights' (p. 7), while the final adoption of a law targeting civil society groups as 'foreign agents' 'would mark another regrettable and undeniable major step backwards' (p. 7). The laws by Republika Srpska decreeing to not implement rulings of the Constitutional Court are also condemned by COM as unlawfully. Moreover, COM also calls out the Republika Srpska for its relationship with Russia. - COM finds that 'overall, further efforts are required for Bosnia and Herzegovina to fulfil the 14 key priorities set out in the Commission Opinion on its EU membership application and the steps specified in the Commission		

			recommendation for candidate status' (p. 20). Yet, COM 'recommends the opening of EU accession negotiations with Bosnia and Herzegovina, once the necessary degree of compliance with the membership criteria is achieved' (p. 21) and says it will provide an update on BiH's progress by March 2024 at the latest.		
47	COM President Ursula von der Leyen.	- On 08/11/2023 COM adopted its annual enlargement report, consisting of the individual country progress reports and a communication on enlargement. - COM recommends that accession negotiations with BiH should be opened once the necessary degree of compliance with the membership criteria is being reached. - COM will report on the progress made by BiH in March 2024.	- COM President von der Leyen calls enlargement a 'vital policy for the European Union' claiming that this has been her main message from the first day of her mandate. - COM is presented as recognising the progress made by BiH in 2023 regarding 'a number of positive political and legal steps'. COM President von der Leyen specifically names the swift entry into office of the new Council of Ministers, the commitment of political parties to the accession goal, and the progress in the fight against organised crimes, money laundering, and terrorism. Yet, COM also notes 'with concern the various unconstitutional laws adopted by the representatives of the Republika Srpska entity'. - There is talk about 'completing' the EU ('Completing our	- BiH is narrated as a country that has made some reform progress but whose track record is undermined by the unconstitutional laws that were passed by the Republika Srpska, causing COM to recommend the opening of accession negotiations only once the necessary degree of compliance with the membership criteria has been achieved. - COM President von der Leyen talks about 'completing' the EU and justifies it by referencing 'history' and it being the 'natural horizon' of the EU. Completing the EU is tied to a 'geopolitical' logic, as well as an economic one. - Both geography and values as well as history are being presented by COM President von der Leyen as	*Identified narrative(s):* geopolitical narrative. - The geopolitical narrative is apparent in the press statement by COM President von der Leyen, with many of its elements on display. Enlargement is narrated as contributing to increasing the EU's own security and stability, implying some degree of self-interest being at play. COM President von der Leyen calls enlargement an 'investment', implying some trade-off logic. There is talk about 'completing' the EU, showing that enlargement is narrated as possessing clear limits. Moreover, enlargement is narrated as impacting international power constellations by increasing the EU's

			Union is the call of history, it is the natural horizon of the European Union'). - BiH is presented as sharing geography, history, and common values with the EU ('We all know that geography, history, and common values bind us'). - Finishing enlargement is presented as following an economic and geopolitical logic ('So, completing our Union also has a strong economic and geopolitical logic'). - Enlargement is presented as win-win situation for all parties involved in economic and stability terms ('If you look at the history of the last enlargement rounds, you see that they have shown that there are enormous benefits both for those countries which access the European Union and the European Union itself. Basically, we all win. You can see that for the new members, their citizens and businesses, there is access to our four freedoms, access to our Single Market, citizens can travel, businesses have new markets. And all of this is a powerful lever to increase prosperity and therefore stability in these countries'). - Enlargement also offers tangible benefits for the EU defined mostly in	shared foundation between the EU and the candidate countries, including BiH. - Enlargement is presented as win-win situation for all parties involved. The benefits for the candidate countries are mostly defined by COM President von der Leyen in economic and stability terms, whereas the benefits for the EU are defined in predominately economic terms. - COM President von der Leyen calls enlargement an 'investment in our security'. Enlargement is narrated as increasing the security of the EU by shielding candidate countries from 'foreign interference' and thus increasing the stability of the EU neighbourhood. Enlargement is also deemed to have direct implications for international power constellations, with COM President von der Leyen stating that it gives the EU 'a stronger voice in the world', is a 'powerful lever' to increase the stability of the EU neighbourhood and increases EU leverage as a trade partner.	own standing and leverage on the international stage. - Some elements of the peace narrative are also on display here. Enlargement is presented as having contributed to establishing peace, and peace is presented as something that makes the EU 'special' in line with the peace narrative. Moreover, enlargement is presented as a win-win situation for all parties involved, creating a slight discrepancy to the 'investment'/trade-off logic applied by COM President von der Leyen here as well. Interestingly, many of the elements of the peace narrative are interwoven with aspects of the geopolitical narrative. This is apparent when values and geography are referenced by Com president von der Leyen as uniting ties between the EU and candidate status. It is also apparent when COM President von der Leyen talks about 'completing' the EU as a 'natural' horizon, thus, implying enlargement is a natural evolution as argued in the peace narrative.

			economic terms (‘But for the European Union itself, the advantages are also very clear and impressive. The expansion of our Single Market brings economies of scale for our businesses, increases our competitiveness and therefore the strength of our Single Market. Our history of enlargement has been an unprecedented economic success story. But if you also look at the global attractiveness of the European Union, enlargement has increased it. And it has, of course, also increased our leverage as a trading partner. For example, the common purchasing of gas at 27 makes a huge difference for the success in this area’). - COM President von der Leyen calls enlargement ‘an investment in our security’ and links enlargement to the international order and to power considerations (‘Enlargement is also an investment in our security. Because integrating new members in the European Union also shields them from foreign interference, and it therefore stabilises our neighbourhood. In times where we see the rules-based international order increasingly called into question, of course a larger and stronger European	- Enlargement is presented as ‘a driver for peace and prosperity’, with peace and prosperity being identified by COM President von der Leyen as elements that make the EU ‘special’. - Throughout the press statement, there is also a strong economic logic apparent that is used by COM President von der Leyen to sell the benefits of enlargement for both the candidate countries and the EU.	

			Union gives us a stronger voice in the world'). - Enlargement is related to peace and the latter is presented as something that makes the EU special ('In sum, enlargement is a unique opportunity both for the countries aspiring to join the European Union and, of course, for us. It is a driver for peace and prosperity that make our Union so special').		
48	COM, COM President Ursula von der Leyen; HR/VP Josep Borrell; ENLARG COM Olivér Várhelyi.	- BiH received candidate status by the European Council in December 2022. - On 08/11/2023 COM has adopted the 2023 enlargement package containing the individual progress reports for the enlargement countries and the 2023 communication on enlargement. - COM recommends that accession negotiations with BiH should be opened once the country has reached the necessary degree of compliance with the membership criteria. - COM will provide an update on the reform progress made by BiH at the latest in March 2024.	- COM highlights the importance of a merit-based enlargement process ('Accession is and will remain a merit-based process, fully dependent on the objective progress achieved by each country'). Special attention is given in the reports on the reforms of the fundamentals of the enlargement process and on providing clear guidance to the enlargement countries for the reform priorities ahead. - COM President von der Leyen calls enlargement 'a vital policy for the European Union'. - Enlargement policy is presented by COM President von der Leyen as a win-win situation for all parties involved by creating benefits for all ('Past enlargements have shown the enormous benefits both for the accession countries and the EU. We all win').	- Enlargement policy is presented as a key policy of the EU, which follows a merit-based logic and offers benefits for all parties involved, including the EU itself. - Enlargement is narrated to be an 'investment' in the EU's own security, prosperity, and peace, suggesting that enlargement also serves the EU's own interests. - There is talk about 'completing' the EU, suggesting that enlargement has its limits. Moreover, completing the EU is linked to a 'geopolitical logic', suggesting that geopolitics drive this need to complete the Union. This is also implied by ENLARG COM Várhelyi calling enlargement countries to use	*Identified narrative(s):* geopolitical narrative. - The geopolitical narrative clearly emerges from this document with multiple of its elements being presented. Most explicitly, enlargement is deemed to be a 'geopolitical project'. The new momentum in enlargement policy is being directly linked to the 'new geopolitical momentum' which would offer an opportunity to 'complete' the EU, suggesting that enlargement has clear limits. Moreover, enlargement is presented as an 'investment' in security, peace, and prosperity, suggesting some trade-off relation. CFSP alignment is being referenced as being 'more important than

			- COM President von der Leyen also talks about 'completing' the EU as 'the call of history, the natural horizon of the EU' and says that 'completing our Union, also has a strong economic and geopolitical logic'. HR/VP Borell also talks about 'completing' the EU as 'investment' ('Completing our Union is the best investment in peace, security and prosperity for our continent'). - HR/VP Borrell calls EU membership a 'strategic choice' for enlargement countries and says that the 2023 enlargement package is 'historic' with 10 countries being lined up for EU membership. - HR/VP Borrell suggests that CFSP alignment is 'more significant than ever' and that it indicates shared values ('Alignment with the EU's common foreign and security policy is a more significant signal than ever of shared values and strategic orientation'). - ENLARG COM Várhelyi says that 'enlargement is firmly back on the agenda' and calls enlargement a 'geopolitical project for Europe'. He calls for an acceleration of the accession process to use the 'new geopolitical momentum' ('To grasp this new	this 'new geopolitical momentum'. Enlargement is explicitly being called 'a geopolitical project'. CFSP alignment is presented as being more important than ever and as being indicative of a country's strategic orientation as well as its values. - BiH is presented as a country that has experienced this new momentum in enlargement policy by having received candidate status. However, the narration is that BiH was unable to fully seize the potential of the new dynamic by reforms at the state-level being undermined by negative developments in the Republika Srpska entity, creating an overall mixed track record, with BiH being called to make further progress on key reforms.	ever' and as indicative of a candidate country's strategic orientation. - There are also some elements of the peace narrative present, namely the fact that enlargement is presented as win-win policy for all sides involved, offering clear benefits all. In connection to the geopolitical narrative, enlargement is presented as an 'investment' into peace, suggesting that peace is among the purposes of enlargement. Finally, CFSP alignment is regarded to also tell something about a candidate country's 'shared values'. - Highlighting the merit-based character of enlargement is in line with both the peace and the geopolitical narrative.

			geopolitical momentum, we must accelerate the enlargement process that will continue to be driven by credible reforms on the fundamentals'). Várhelyi states that there has been significant progress by candidate countries in recent months, including BiH, 'which clearly show that commitment and determination pay off'. He says that the EU will increase its engagement with the WB and that enlargement countries are expected to focus on the outlined reforms. - BiH is presented by COM as a country for whom the receiving of candidate status has created a 'much-needed positive dynamic', with further efforts being needed. The negative developments in the Republika Srpska entity are being called out by COM.		
49	HR/VP Josep Borrell.	- BiH received candidate status in December 2022. - On 08/11/2023 COM presented the annual enlargement package for 2023, including individual progress reports focusing on the implementation of fundamental reforms and providing guidance for the reforms ahead. - COM recommends that accession	- Enlargement is presented as a merit-based process with the implementation of reforms, particularly in the areas of rule of law and fundamental rights being 'at the core' of the process and determining 'the pace of EU accession negotiations'. - HR/VP Borell calls the 2023 enlargement package a 'historic enlargement package' and a 'major step forward'. - HR/VP Borrell refers to 'completing'	- Enlargement is narrated as a merit-based process in which the reform progress of enlargement countries determines whether they will be rewarded by entering the next stage of the accession process and sets the overall pace of accession negotiations. In this context, BiH is presented as a country that has	*Identified narrative(s):* geopolitical narrative. - The geopolitical narrative is evident in this document. There is talk about 'completing' the EU, implying that enlargement has its clear limits. Enlargement is considered an 'investment' in peace, security, and prosperity, thereby implying some cost-benefit calculation, with a

		negotiations with BiH should be opened once the country has reached the necessary degree of compliance with the membership criteria. COM will provide an update on the progress made by BiH at the latest in March 2024. - On 08/11/2023 COM also presented the proposal for a new 'Growth Plan for the Western Balkans' which supports reforms and investment in the region with EUR 6 billion in grants and loans. - As a next step, the Council will consider the recommendations made by COM.	the EU as an 'investment' in peace, security, and prosperity ('Completing our Union is the best investment in peace, security and prosperity for our continent') and says that candidate countries face a 'strategic choice' in whether to become EU member states or not. - CFSP alignment is considered a 'more significant signal than ever of shared values and strategic orientation in the new geopolitical context' by HR/VP Borrell, with the Russian war of aggression in Ukraine that 'further underlines the need for unity and solidarity among the EU and its closest partners and thus the importance of a common foreign and security policy (CFSP) alignment in the enlargement process'. - The 2023 enlargement package also points out the risk of hybrid threats such as FIMI, disinformation, and cyberattacks which 'remain a political and security challenge for the enlargement countries', having increased significantly since 2022. 'As the Russian full-scale invasion in Ukraine developed, so did the spreading of different Kremlin narratives in the enlargement	made reform progress, but that still needs further efforts to enter accession negotiations. The conditional recommendation of opening accession negotiations by COM should function as a 'positive signal' that creates incentives for the political leadership of the country to advance reforms, to the benefit of the citizens of BiH. - Enlargement is narrated by HR/VP Borrell as an effort to 'complete' the Union, implying that enlargement has its clear limits. Moreover, enlargement is deemed to be an investment, including in security, but also in peace and prosperity. Candidate countries must make a strategic choice in whether to commit themselves to a European future or not. CFSP alignment is given particular importance in the accession process, and this prominence is related to the 'new geopolitical context' in which CFSP alignment indicates 'shared values' and 'strategic	security interest being apparent. CFSP alignment is being highlighted as being particularly important and this is directly related to the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine. Additionally, this document also points out the Russian threat of FIMI, disinformation, and cyberattacks in the WB region, again implying a strong security logic underlying the conception of enlargement. - There are a few references to the peace narrative, which, however, remain weak. First, enlargement is deemed an 'investment' also in peace, creating some interaction between the language of the geopolitical narrative with the purpose of enlargement policy as understood by the peace narrative. Second, CFSP alignment is presented as being indicative also of 'shared values', implying that shared values are a factor in enlargement policy. Finally, peace is pointed out as one of the benefits of enlargement, again implying that enlargement can contribute to pacifying the European continent.

			countries, with varying results'. - HR/VP Borrell states that he has always supported BiH ('Since I became EU High Representative/Vice-President, I have worked to ensure that Bosnia and Herzegovina can count on the EU'). - The recommendation by COM to open accession negotiations with BiH after further reforms is called by HR/VP Borrell a 'positive signal' which can 'drive positive changes, which citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina deserve' including living 'in dignity, peace, justice and prosperity'. HR/VP Borrell says it is now on the leadership of BiH to 'grasp this opportunity and deliver on the key priorities and EU reform agenda'.	orientation'. The Russian war of aggression against Ukraine is mentioned and directly related to the increased significance of CFSP alignment. Russia is also narrated as a source of hybrid threats which compromise a 'political and security' challenge' for enlargement countries, including the WB region. - HR/VP Borrell presents himself as always supported BiH and calls on the leadership of BiH to 'grasp this opportunity' and by implementing reforms making the lives of BiH citizens better, thereby highlighting the benefits of enlargement.	- Highlighting the merit-based character of enlargement is in line with both the peace and the geopolitical narrative.
50	COM.	- On 08/11/2023 COM has adopted a new 'Growth Plan for the Western Balkans' based on four pillars: 1. Enhancing economic integration with the EU's single market, 2. Boosting economic integration within the WB through the Common Regional Market, 3. Accelerating fundamental reforms including the fundamentals	- COM calls enlargement 'a key policy of the European Union'. - EU membership of the WB countries is presented by COM as serving the EU's own interest ('Full EU membership for the Western Balkans is in the Union's very own political, security, and economic interests', p. 1). - The Russian war of aggression against Ukraine is presented as evidence by COM for the 'need' of enlargement as a 'geostrategic	- Enlargement policy is presented as a key policy for the EU, with the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine having demonstrated that enlargement is needed as a 'determined geostrategic investment in a stable, strong and united Europe'. Enlargement is presented by COM as serving the EU's own interests, including its security interests,	*Identified narrative(s):* geopolitical narrative. - The geopolitical narrative is clearly evident in the communication, with COM stating that enlargement serves the EU's own interests, including also its security interests. The need for enlargement as 'geostrategic investment' is tied by COM to the Russian war of aggression of

		cluster and supporting the WB countries on their path towards EU membership, 4. Increasing financial assistance to support reforms through a 'Reform and Growth Facility for the Western Balkans' with payments being conditioned on fulfilling fundamental reforms, particularly socio-economic reforms. - The European Parliament and the Council will now have to decide whether to adopt the proposal before the WB countries will be invited to submit their Reform Agendas, which will be consulted, assessed, and adopted by COM.	investment' ('Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine illustrates once again the need for a determined geostrategic investment in a stable, strong and united Europe', p. 1). - The Russian war of aggression is presented to have significantly pressured the economies and societies of the WB countries and as having posed 'risks to their stability' (p. 1). - The Russian war of aggression has demonstrated the 'need' to bring the WB countries closer to the EU ('The need to bring them closer to the EU and to accelerate their accession process, based on EU-related reforms in the countries, has never been clearer than it is today', p.1). - The plan is presented by COM as opportunity to increase the visibility and awareness of EU support in the WB region among WB citizens. - Economic convergence is deemed 'an essential element in getting the WB countries closer to the EU' (p. 1), with the current level and speed of convergence being 'not satisfactory' (p. 1) and 'holding back their progress on the EU track' (p. 1). Thus, there is a need 'to jump-start and incentivise' (p. 1) the WB countries'	with the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine also having posed risks for the WB countries. There is a newfound sense of urgency with COM stating that the 'need' to bring the WB countries closer to the EU 'has never been clearer than today'. - The plan is presented by COM as an opportunity to achieve the objective of bringing the WB countries closer to the EU, while also speeding up the pace of the accession process. Yet, COM makes it clear that accession must remain merit-based by tying funding for reforms and investments to the implementation of prior agreed upon reforms that are based on the recommendations of the 2023 Enlargement Package. The WB countries are called by COM to not let this 'opportunity' go to waste by delivering tangible reform results already by the coming year.	Ukraine, which has posed risks to the stability of the WB countries and has made their accession a 'need' that has been never clearer. A sense of urgency is created by COM by repeatedly highlighting the importance to 'accelerate' the accession process, without, however, undermining its merit-based nature, which COM upholds throughout the document. - A merit-based nature of the accession process is also in line with the peace narrative, but beyond highlighting that enlargement creates benefits for all parties involved, no elements of the peace narrative are present.

			preparation for EU membership through making the benefits of membership being felt early and directly by the citizens. The objective is 'to enable partners to step up reforms and investments to significantly accelerate the speed of the enlargement process and the growth of their economies', p. 1). - COM claims that the plan builds on the existing enlargement methodology and creates more incentives to 'speed up accession negotiations' (p. 2), with reforms remaining essential for moving ahead in the accession process. COM also states that 'speed is now of the essence and the objective is for the growth plan to start making a real difference already next year' (p. 2). - The plan intends to support WB countries in focusing 'on their common future as members of the EU and to overcome bilateral challenges that unfortunately consume too much energy in the region and hold it back' (p. 3). - COM calls the plan a 'bold offer to the region' (p. 9) and calls for the WB countries 'to meet this offer with resolute efforts' (p. 9). - The plan is being presented by COM as serving the EU's own		

			interests by ensuring the integration ‘of well prepared and economically stronger countries’ (p. 9). - COM calls for the WB and the EU to jointly ‘seize this opportunity to accelerate progress on the accession path’ (p. 9).		
51	COM, COM President Ursula von der Leyen, HR/VP Josep Borrell, ENLARG COM Olivér Várhelyi.	- On 08/11/2023 COM has adopted a new 'Growth Plan for the Western Balkans' including a proposal to set up a ‘Reform and Growth Facility’ of EUR 6 billion in grants and loans for the 2024-2027 period to support economic growth in the WB region and boost socio-economic convergence with the EU. - The European Parliament and the Council will have to consider the proposal for the Reform and Growth Facility. - The WB countries will then be invited to submit their individual Reform Agendas which will be consulted, assessed, and adopted by COM.	- The ‘Growth Plan for the Western Balkans’ is presented by COM as an initiative that aims to bring some of the benefits of EU membership to the WB countries already before they join to ‘boost economic growth and accelerate much needed socio-economic convergence. The objective should be to enable partners to step up reforms and investments to significantly accelerate the speed of the enlargement process and the growth of their economies’. - Economic convergence is perceived as ‘an essential element in getting the Western Balkans countries closer to the EU’ but is currently being experienced by COM as ‘not progressing fast enough’. The potential of the initiative is called ‘extraordinary’ by COM President von der Leyen. - One pillar of the plan is to accelerate fundamental reforms, with HR/VP Borell stating that the plan provides ‘an	- The new ‘Growth Plan for the Western Balkans’ is presented as an initiative that aims to bring the region closer to the EU by offering tangible benefits already before the countries have joined the EU. Bridging the socio-economic gap between the WB and the EU is presented as being in the EU’s own interest. The plan possesses a strong reform emphasis tied to the intention to accelerate the accession process, while keeping it merit-based by tying payments under the Reform and Growth Facility to the completion of reforms as set out by COM in the annual enlargement package.	*Identified narrative(s):* none. - Highlighting the merit-based character of enlargement is in line with both the peace and the geopolitical narrative.

			incentive for achieving progress on relevant fundamental and socio-economic reforms' by being rewarded by gaining 'access to the Single Market even before enlargement', stating that this is 'in the interest of the EU as a whole'. ENLARG COM Várhelyi also highlights that the plan is 'a unique catalyst to accelerate the real socio-economic integration in the region' allowing the region to prepare for the competition of the single market in advance to then 'reap the benefits of their EU membership from the first moment'.		
52	ENLARG COM Olivér Várhelyi.	- On 08/11/2023 COM adopted it annual enlargement package for 2023, containing the individual progress reports for the ten enlargement countries. - On 08/11/2023 COM also proposed a new 'Growth Plan for the Western Balkans' which includes a 'Reform and Growth' facility worth EUR 6 billion in grants and loans. - On 08/11/2023 ENLARG COM Várhelyi presented the enlargement package and the Growth Plan for the WB to the European Parliament Committee for	- ENLARG COM Várhelyi says that the candidate status for BiH has brought 'much needed dynamism' with the new government having endorsed a set of draft laws and strategies that signify reform progress. BiH has also made progress in CFSP alignment and has 'significantly improved its alignment with EU foreign policy' according to Várhelyi who says that there has been 'a long list of positive developments over the past year'. - ENLARG COM Várhelyi 'encourages the political leaders and all authorities to continue the positive track-record, to redouble efforts to address all remaining key priorities' with	- BiH is narrated as a country which has made considerable reform progress over the course of 2023, with the increased alignment with EU foreign policy receiving a special mention by ENLARG COM Várhelyi. BiH is being encouraged to keep up this positive reform progress and is asked to intensify its efforts. Compared to previous documents analysed, the negative developments in the Republika Srpska entity are not being mentioned by ENLARG COM Várhelyi.	*Identified narrative(s):* none. - Highlighting that enlargement policy is merit-based is consistent with both the peace and the geopolitical narrative.

		Foreign Affairs (AFET) and the European Parliament plenary, delivering the same speech (analysed here). - COM recommends the opening of accession negotiations with BiH once the country has achieved the necessary degree of compliance with the membership criteria. - COM will deliver an update on the progress made by BiH in March 2024 at the latest.	COM being 'ready' to update on the progress made by BiH by March 2024. - ENLARG COM Várhelyi presents the Growth Plan for the WB as initiative to boost growth in the WB and to support the region's socio-economic convergence with the EU so that the socio-economic gap will have closed 'by the end of this decade' and that WB countries can enjoy the benefits of the single market already before joining. - The plan is presented as initiative 'to help our partners speed up the reforms' and to 'help our Western Balkans partners to accelerate fundamental reforms, including the rule of law and democracy'. ENLARG COM Várhelyi highlights that 'our partners need our support' and that the plan 'will create the right conditions for our regional partners to become members of the Union'.	- The Growth Plan for the WB is presented as an EU effort to speed up the accession process of the WB by creating stronger reform incentives, particularly for socio-economic reforms and reforms related to the fundamentals. While the intention to accelerate the accession process is repeatedly being stressed, there is no indication that this means turning away from the merit-based character of the accession process. On the contrary, ENLARG COM Várhelyi highlights that funding under the Reform and Growth facility is tied to the delivery of previously agreed upon reforms.	
53	ENLARG COM Olivér Várhelyi.	- On 08/11/2023 COM presented its annual enlargement package for 2023, including the progress reports for the individual enlargement countries. - Alongside the enlargement package, COM also presented a new 'Growth Plan for the Western Balkans' including a 'Reform and	- ENLARG COM Várhelyi calls the 2023 enlargement package 'a very strong powerful response' to the 'assignment made by the European Council, namely, to accelerate the enlargement process' with now ten countries being considered for EU membership. This shows that 'there is clear progress on the ground' and that	- The 2023 enlargement package is presented by ENLARG COM Várhelyi as a step towards accelerating the enlargement process, as COM was tasked with by the European Council, with the Growth Plan for the WB presenting a new, bold approach to drive socio-economic	*Identified narrative(s):* none. - Highlighting that enlargement policy is merit-based is consistent with both the peace and the geopolitical narrative. - There are minor references to elements of the peace narrative (democracy and rule of law being deemed 'key

		Growth' facility worth EUR 6 billion to promote economic growth and strengthen the socio-economic convergence between the EU and the WB.	'never before we have seen EU membership being such an important driver for countries around the European Union'. - The new Growth Plan for the WB is presented by ENLARG COM Várhelyi as a 'completely new and bold approach' to close the socio-economic gap between the EU and the WB. - A gradual integration of the WB countries into the single market is presented by ENLARG COM Várhelyi as 'a real benefit for the both of us' that can give a boost to the WB region 'that they need, and a boost that we need as well'. - The EU is presented as an actor that is 'of course happy to help' the WB countries to meet the obligations of EU membership and to accelerate reforms ('We are ready to provide more support to accelerate this common work'). - In return for helping, ENLARG COM Várhelyi says that the request of the EU is that 'this should also contribute largely to the stability, security and prosperity of the region as such'. - ENLARG COM Várhelyi also says that 'difficult, complex reforms' will be needed 'including, also, the areas of the	reforms forward as well. Enlargement is presented as beneficial for all parties involved, with the EU being supportive of welcoming the WB countries in its Union. - Enlargement is deemed by ENLARG COM Várhelyi to be able to contribute to the stability and security of the WB region, as well as to prosperity. - The merit-based character of enlargement is being upheld throughout the document, with ENLARG COM Várhelyi creating a realistic perspective of hard and difficult reforms being required. Rule of law and democracy are called 'key conditions' for European integration.	conditions' of European integration, implying that shared values guide the process) and of the geopolitical narrative (accession as a driver for regional stability and security of the WB region in the EU's own interest). Neither of these elements is strong enough to argue convincingly that the full narrative is present in this document.

			fundamentals, the rule of law, democracy, as these are key conditions for any integration into the European Union'. These difficult reforms are presented to provide benefits for the citizens of BiH.		
54	COM President Ursula von der Leyen.	- On 08/11/2023 COM has presented the annual enlargement package for 2023, consisting of the individual progress reports for the enlargement countries and a communication on enlargement. - On 08/11/2023 COM has also proposed a new 'Growth Plan for the Western Balkans', including additional funding of EUR 6 billion for the WB region channelled through a new 'Reform and Growth' facility. - For BiH, COM recommends that accession negotiations should be opened once the country has achieved the necessary degree of compliance with the membership criteria. - COM will provide an update on the reform progress made by BiH at the latest in March 2024. - On 08/11/2023 COM President von der Leyen	- COM President von der Leyen states that there is new momentum in the enlargement process, with enlargement countries being 'ready to work even harder to join our Union'. - COM President von der Leyen claims that all the different enlargement countries 'share one feeling. They feel that they belong in the European Union'. - The enlargement countries face a 'strategic choice' of whether to join the EU or not ('It is every country's responsibility to turn the page and make the strategic choice for Europe'). - The EU too, feels a new sense of urgency 'to unite our European family' says COM President von der Leyen ('And here in the Union too, there is a new sense of urgency to unite our European family'). - This new sense of urgency is related to reasons of stability and security with COM President von der Leyen calling enlargement a 'geopolitical interest' of the EU ('Today, it is clear that the	- Enlargement policy is presented as a policy area in which a new sense of urgency exists, that is shared by the enlargement countries working harder to join the EU and the EU being aware that enlargement is needed and getting ready to adjust itself for new member states. COM President von der Leyen calls this a 'rebooted' approach to enlargement, where roadblocks and vetoes are a thing of the past. At the same time, the merit-based logic of the accession process has not changed, enlargement countries need to deliver on reforms to progress on their path towards the EU. This merit-based character is reflected in the 'more for more' logic of the new Growth Plan for the WB. - Enlargement is narrated by COM President von der Leyen as being 'in the common interest' of both	*Identified narrative(s):* geopolitical narrative. - The geopolitical narrative clearly emerges from COM President von der Leyen's speech, with multiple elements being present. Most explicitly, enlargement is called a 'geopolitical interest' of the EU by having stability and security implications and by turning the EU into a 'stronger' global actor. COM President von der Leyen also mentions the need to 'complete' the EU, in line with the geopolitical narrative's idea of accession having its clear limits. - There is some language that belongs to the peace narrative with COM President von der Leyen talking about 'uniting our European family' and enlargement countries feeling like they 'belong' to the EU. Beyond these metaphors, however, no connection is made

		presented the European Parliament Plenary the 2023 enlargement package.	stability of every country in our continent of course also affects our own stability. Their security is our security. And if our Union is not fast enough in bringing candidate countries closer, others will fill the vacuum. It is in our geopolitical interest to complete our Union to make it stronger than ever.'). Thus, 'enlargement is in our common interest'. - COM President von der Leyen also names economic reasons for 'completing' the EU ('And it is not only about geopolitics, it is also, of course, about the economy. The completion of our Union will make the new Member States' economies grow'). - The need to 'complete' the EU is emphasised by COM President von der Leyen a second time ('So, we must seize this moment of opportunity to advance as much as possible towards the completion of our Union'). - The EU is presented as becoming stronger on the international stage through enlargement ('It will also make our Single Market grow, making Europe an even more attractive and stronger partner on the global stage'). - COM President von der Leyen claims that a reboot of enlargement policy is needed ('I have	the enlargement countries, who face a 'strategic choice' and the EU. For the EU enlargement is presented as being 'a geopolitical interest' by contributing to the stability and security of the enlargement countries which affects the EU's own security and by making the EU a stronger and more important actor on the global stage. 'Completing' the EU is also justified by COM President von der Leyen with economic reasons, while the promotion of values is not being mentioned.	between enlargement and values, and enlargement is not presented as being based on shared values or as promoting the EU's values. Overall, the elements of the peace narrative are too weak to allow for an identification of it in this document. - Highlighting the merit-based character of enlargement is in line with both the peace and the geopolitical narrative.

			deeply believed that we needed to reboot the enlargement process, in particular with the Western Balkans. Roadblocks and vetoes were hampering progress towards the European Union'). This also includes internal reforms ('We, the European Union, also need to lay the necessary internal groundwork and reforms'). The new enlargement package 'can and must be a driver of change'. - Enlargement remains merit-based ('Instead, we should look at every country and how it is able to advance on the accession path based on its own merits. Every new achievement should lead them closer to us'). - The new Growth Plan for the WB follows a 'more for more' logic in line with the merit-based logic of accession ('You open your borders in your Common Regional Market, we open our Single Market in seven very important sectors. You do the reforms for a level playing field for your companies to access the Single Market, we come with investment to help you implement these reforms'). - BiH is presented by COM President von der Leyen as a country that has made 'a number of positive political and legal steps' in 2023, 'but		

			we also note with concern the various unconstitutional laws adopted by the representatives of the Republika of Srpska entity'.		
55	COM President Ursula von der Leyen.	- On 08/11/2023 COM has adopted its annual enlargement package for 2023, consisting of the individual progress reports for the enlargement countries and a communication on enlargement. - In it, COM recognises the reform progress made by BiH, while calling out negative developments in its Republika Srpska entity. - COM recommends that accession negotiations with BiH should be opened once the country has reached the necessary degree of compliance with the membership criteria.	- COM President von der Leyen repeatedly emphasises the need to 'complete' the EU citing historic, economic, and geopolitical reasons ('Completing our Union is the call of history' and 'completing our Union has a strong economic and geopolitical logic'). According to her, there is a need 'to complete our Union to make it stronger than ever'. - Enlargement is presented as being in the EU's own interest, with COM President von der Leyen claiming that enlargement 'is a chance for the present EU of 27 Member States' and 'we all win', with the latter being related to enlargement having been 'an economic success story'. - Enlargement is presented as an opportunity for the EU to become a stronger international player, while failing to act is presented as a risk for the EU ('In times where we see the rules-based international order increasingly called into question, of course a larger and stronger European Union gives us a stronger voice in the world' while failure to act 'would create a	- COM President von der Leyen presents the 'completion' of the EU as an opportunity for the EU, with inaction in the field of enlargement policy being a risk for the Union. The need to complete the EU is justified by citing historic, economic, and geopolitical reasons, with the latter including the opportunity to make the EU 'stronger than ever' with a 'stronger voice in the world', implying that enlargement alters power constellations and renders the EU more powerful. In turn, a failure to act is deemed a risk that would create a vacuum that with certainty 'will be filled by others', without any specification being provided who these others are.	*Identified narrative(s):* geopolitical narrative. - There are several elements of the geopolitical narrative apparent here including the need to 'complete' the Union including out of geopolitical reasons to not create a 'vacuum' filled by other political actors. Enlargement is presented as being in the EU's self-interest, by turning the Union into a more powerful global actor that has 'a stronger voice' in the world.

			vacuum that others will fill'). - BiH 'has also marked important political and legal progress, despite worrying unconstitutional measures adopted by the representatives of the Republika Srpska entity'.		
56	COM VP and COM for Democracy and Demography Dubravka Šuica.	- In 1993, the European Council created the Copenhagen criteria as benchmarks for the accession process, which were refined further by the European Council in Madrid in 1995. - On 08/11/2023, COM presented its annual enlargement package for 2023, containing ten individual progress reports and a communication on enlargement. On the same day, a new 'Growth Plan for the Western Balkans' was also presented by COM. - In it, COM recommended that accession negotiations with BiH should be opened once the country has reached the necessary degree of compliance with the membership criteria.	- COM VP Šuica stresses the importance of the Copenhagen criteria as basis of the accession process ('They constitute a central element of our enlargement policy and remain a key pillar of our policy' and 'the criteria must be met for accession' and 'the Copenhagen criteria have stood the test of time. They capture the essence of what a candidate country needs to do in order to prepare its political, economic and legal system for EU membership' and 'we must continue building our joint future on these criteria'). - COM VP Šuica highlights that the economic criteria are equally as important as the political criteria and the new Growth Plan for the WB seeks to strengthen the economic preparation of the candidate countries from the WB region ('A functioning market economy and the ability to cope with competitive pressure and market forces within the EU are equally important as	- COM VP Šuica highlights the importance of the Copenhagen criteria as the foundation of the EU accession process throughout this document, stressing how these criteria have stood the test of time and must remain the pillar of enlargement policy. It is in this light that the call for the WB countries to accelerate their respective reforms should be interpreted, with COM VP Šuica underlining that enlargement will remain merit-based. Nevertheless, a sense of urgency is apparent in the document with COM VP Šuica calling on the Parliament to adopt the Reform and Growth facility quickly without wasting time. The document does not narrate further on where the urgent need to advance the enlargement policy stems from.	*Identified narrative(s):* none. - Highlighting that enlargement policy is merit-based is consistent with both the peace and the geopolitical narrative.

			democratic institutions'). - The Copenhagen criteria are presented by COM VP Šuica as 'expression' of the values of the EU which include also a functioning market economy and the ability to take on the obligations of membership ('But most importantly, they are an expression of the foundation and values on which the EU is built: the existence of institutions guaranteeing democracy, the rule of law, human rights and respect for and protection of minorities, the existence of functioning market economies and the ability to take on the obligations of membership'). - The Growth Plan for the WB is presented as 'unique opportunity' for the WB to conduct 'targeted reforms accelerating their path towards EU membership'). - There is a sense of urgency apparent with COM VP Šuica stressing that the European Parliament should adopt the Reform and Growth facility of the Growth Plan for the WB quickly 'as we have no time to waste'.		
57	ENLARG COM Olivér Várhelyi.	- On 08/11/2023 COM has presented its annual enlargement package including individual	- ENLARG COM Várhelyi calls the current COM a 'geopolitical Commission' who has put enlargement back on the agenda	- ENLARG COM Várhelyi presents COM as a 'geopolitical Commission' which has put enlargement 'on	*Identified narrative(s):* none. - While there are clear references to the geopolitical narrative, not

		progress reports for the ten enlargement countries and a communication on enlargement. - COM recommends the opening of accession negotiations for BiH once the country has reached the necessary degree of compliance with the membership criteria. - On 08/11/2023 COM has also presented a new 'Growth Plan for the Western Balkans' based on four pillars 1. Integration into the EU single market even before full accession; 2. Regional integration through the Common Regional Market based on EU standards and rules; 3. Acceleration of accession reforms; 4. A Reform and Growth facility worth EUR 6 billion.	('This Geopolitical (sic) Commission has put enlargement policy back on the highest political agenda of Europe'). 2023 is called a 'landmark year' in enlargement policy with ENLARG COM Várhelyi praising COM for having achieved a lot in a short time, with the current 'unprecedented time' being referenced ('We have come a long way in only a few months, we all understand that we live in unprecedented time'). - Enlargement is presented as a 'geostrategic investment' in peace stability and security ('Today, the EU enlargement agenda represents, more than ever, a clear and necessary geostrategic investment in long-term peace, stability, and security of our European continent'). - The Growth Plan for the WB is presented as a 'very innovative, very serious offer' and 'will create the right conditions for our regional partners to join the EU'. - COM is presented as willing to 'continue to do all we can to speed up the process' with the Growth Plan showing that 'real integration can be accelerated on the ground'. - ENLARG COM Várhelyi now calls on the authorities of the WB countries to	the highest political agenda' implying that enlargement is a priority area for COM. ENLARG COM Várhelyi also highlights the progress that has been achieved on the enlargement agenda in 2023, highlighting that COM is committed to work towards speeding up the accession process, while candidate countries are called to make sure that they do their side of the tasks by carrying out reforms, with the new Growth Plan for the WB being presented as major opportunity. - Enlargement is narrated to be a 'geostrategic investment' in stability and security but also peace 'more than ever', again implying a sense of urgency.	enough elements are visible to fully identify it as narrative. Yet, the geopolitical direction is apparent when COM is called a 'geopolitical Commission', and enlargement is presented as a 'geostrategic investment' into security and stability. - There is one reference to enlargement also being a 'geostrategic investment' into peace, beyond this, the EU's values or a value-driven nature of the enlargement process are not being mentioned.

			‘seize the momentum, advance on the necessary reforms, and move forward on your respective paths towards the European Union’.		
58	HR/VP Josep Borrell.	- On 28/11/2023 HR/VP Josep Borrell participated in a meeting of the NATO Foreign Affairs ministers.	- HR/VP Borrell highlights the importance of the WB region for the EU, in particular stating that the WB’s stability, prosperity and foreign policy alignment is a ‘vital importance’ for the EU (‘You know how important is the Western Balkans for the European Union (sic). Many members of the European Union are engaged on this region and some states of the Western Balkans are candidates to the European Union. So, their stability, their prosperity and their alignment with our foreign policy is of vital importance for us’). - The EUFOR Althea military operation of the EU in BiH is called by HR/VP Borrell the ‘flagship of our missions in the Western Balkans’, with the recent renewal and longevity of the mission showing its importance for the international community. - HR/VP Borrell calls on the people of BiH to use the current opportunity of this ‘geopolitical moment’ to advance on the enlargement path (‘We have to ask the people of Bosnia	- The WB region is narrated by HR/VP Borrell as an area whose stability and prosperity are of ‘vital’ importance for the EU, implying some self-interest of the EU in ensuring this region is stable and prosperous. Moreover, HR/VP Borrell specifically mentions the importance of foreign policy alliance of this region. HR/VP Borrell also calls on the people of BiH to use this opportunity to advance on the country’s EU path, with the current momentum being related to a ‘geopolitical moment’ which implies that geopolitics are a driver of the need to enlarge the EU and to speed up the accession process.	*Identified narrative(s):* none. - While there are clear references to the geopolitical narrative, not enough elements are visible to fully identify it as narrative. Yet, it becomes clear from the document that the acceleration of the accession process of the WB countries is understood by COM to be in line with the EU’s own interests, as the region’s stability, prosperity and foreign policy orientation are considered of ‘vital’ importance for the EU. Moreover, the current momentum in enlargement policy is attributed to geopolitics, without however, providing more details.

			and Herzegovina to avoid any kind of divisive attitude, to join forces in order to take advantage of this geopolitical moment, in which enlargement is becoming a key issue for the future of the European Union and for the future of the Western Balkan countries').		
59	ENLARG COM Olivér Várhelyi.	- In 2022 BiH received candidate status by the European Council. - On 08/11/2023 COM recommended the opening of accession negotiations with BiH once the country has reached the necessary degree of compliance with the membership criteria. - COM will update on the progress of BiH in March 2024 at the latest. - On 05/12/2023 ENLARG COM Várhelyi participated in the second High-Level Political Forum between COM and BiH.	- ENLARG COM Várhelyi repeatedly praises the reform progress achieved by BiH under the new Council of Ministers, elected in 2022 saying that 'we have seen huge progress in the reforms' and that the candidate status for BiH has led to reform results 'we have not seen before in Bosnia and Herzegovina'. ENLARG COM Várhelyi, thus, calls the decision to give candidate status to BiH 'the right choice to make'. - Next to reforms related to the judiciary, freedom to access of information, foreign policy alignment is mentioned by ENLARG COM Várhelyi ('We have seen also a different approach when it comes to CFSP alignment or when it comes to following our EU foreign policy where we have a very high level of alignment on both sides'). - ENLARG COM Várhelyi is clear that key reforms are required ('We are convinced that Bosnia and	- ENLARG COM Várhelyi focuses on the reform progress achieved by BiH which is deemed to have been unprecedentedly big, confirming that the decision to give candidate status to the country has been right. The progress made by BiH in CFSP alignment and foreign policy alignment is specifically mentioned by ENLARG COM Várhelyi. Overall, the merit-based process of enlargement is highlighted, by ENLARG COM Várhelyi making clear that further progress will be needed on key reforms to open the actual accession negotiations, while BiH is being presented as a 'committed' candidate country that works hard to achieve this objective.	*Identified narrative(s):* none. - Highlighting that enlargement policy is merit-based is consistent with both the peace and the geopolitical narrative.

			Herzegovina can do more. We are convinced that Bosnia and Herzegovina can do better'). The reform progress shown is 'very good news for Bosnia and Herzegovina' and has also encouraged COM to be more committed than ever ('This has been a major encouragement also for us here in Brussels to see, that the work continues, the commitment is stronger than ever, and this is why we need everybody in Bosnia and Herzegovina now to deliver on that').		
60	COM President Ursula von der Leyen.	- On 08/11/2023 COM presented its annual enlargement package for 2023. In it, COM recommends to open accession negotiations once the country has reached the necessary degree of compliance with the membership criteria. - On 08/11/2023 COM also presented the proposal for a new 'Growth Plan for the Western Balkans' worth EUR 6 billion based on four pillars: 1. Opening the EU single market in seven sectors for the WB countries; 2. Completing the Common Regional Market between the WB countries; 3. Creating a level	- COM President von der Leyen praises the good discussions at the EU-WB summit which included the state of play of enlargement. - COM President von der Leyen says that accession negotiations are only 'one part of our effort to bring the Western Balkans closer' with the other part being the economy. COM President von der Leyen says that the WB economy currently stands at 35% of the EU economy and that 'there is a lot of untapped potential' which the EU tries to unlock through the Growth Plan for the WB, which was welcomed by many ('There is a lot of praise for the new Growth Plan').	- COM President von der Leyen focuses mainly on the ways to bring the WB region closer to the EU other than accession negotiations, primarily economic means. The Growth Plan for the WB is cited as having major potential to unleash economic growth in the WB region and close the socio-economic gap between the EU and the WB countries.	*Identified narrative(s):* none.

		playing field through reforms; 4. Supporting investments through a 'Reform and Growth' facility. - On 13/12/2023 an EU-Western Balkans summit was held, after which COM President von der Leyen gave a press statement.			
61	COM President Ursula von der Leyen.	- On 14/12/2023 the European Council has decided to endorse the recommendation made by COM on 08/11/2023 to open accession negotiations with BiH once the country has reached the necessary degree of compliance with the membership criteria. - On 15/12/2023 COM President von der Leyen gave a press statement following the conclusion of the European Council meeting.	- COM President von der Leyen calls the enlargement-related decisions by the European Council clear 'steps forward on enlargement' saying that 'this will be a landmark in our common history'. - COM President von der Leyen says that the EU is committed to the future of the WB countries in the EU ('And we have strongly reiterated our collective commitment to a future where all six Western Balkan partners are part of our Union') with the EU 'living up to its promise' by taking steps forward. - COM President von der Leyen also says that there have never been 'stronger or more compelling' reasons to enlarge ('The reasons for enlargement today have never been stronger or more compelling'). - COM President von der Leyen calls enlargement an 'investment' in stability, security, prosperity, and democracy and relates it to the	- COM President von der Leyen presents the EU as an actor that is committed to enlargement and that is living up to the promises it made by having taken another leap forward at the European Council meeting on 15/12/2023. - Enlargement is being presented as something that is urgently needed, with the reasons for enlargement never having been 'stronger' or more 'compelling'. This urgency is related to the multiple crises the EU is currently experiencing, which turn enlargement into an 'investment' necessary to make. - COM President von der Leyen narrates enlargement as an investment in stability and security, but also an economic investment in prosperity, and a value-related investment in	*Identified narrative(s):* none. - There are some elements of the geopolitical narrative that, however, remain too weak and few. Most notably, COM President von der Leyen calls enlargement an 'investment' in stability and security and relates the need for enlargement to the multiple crises the EU is currently experiencing. - There are some elements of the peace narrative, that also remain too weak and few. Firstly, COM President von der Leyen references the 'common history' of the EU and the enlargement countries. Secondly, enlargement is also deemed to be an investment in one of the EU's foundational values, namely democracy.

			current crises the EU is experiencing ('The reasons for enlargement today have never been stronger or more compelling. In a world shaken by multiple crises, it is an investment in stability and security of our continent. But of course, it is also an investment in prosperity for our continent. And it is a big investment in democracies that stand tall and united').	democracy to 'stand tall and united'.	
62	COM President Ursula von der Leyen.	- In 2022, BiH was granted candidate status. - In October 2023, COM presented the new 'Growth Plan for the Western Balkans'. - In December 2023, the European Council decided to open accession negotiations with BiH once the country has reached the necessary degree of compliance with the membership criteria. - COM will provide an update on the reform progress made by BiH in March 2024.	- COM President von der Leyen calls the candidate status for BiH 'a big step forward' and the decision by EU leaders to open accession negotiations once the necessary degree of compliance has been reached a 'historic decision'. - BiH is praised by COM President von der Leyen for having 'demonstrated your commitment to the EU accession path' and for having aligned completely with the EU's foreign policy ('First of all, let me praise and thank Bosnia and Herzegovina for fulfilling and aligning 100% with the foreign policy of the European Union. This sends a very clear and strong message'). - Enlargement is presented as following a merit-based logic ('The more you deliver, the more convincing you are, and the better it	- BiH is narrated as a country that has taken big steps forward in enlargement recently, earning the country first candidate status and then the opening of accession negotiations once the country has reached the necessary degree of compliance with the membership criteria. The complete alignment of BiH with the EU's foreign policy receives a special mention by COM President von der Leyen and narrated as showing the country's commitment to the EU. - Enlargement is presented as following a merit-based logic, where BiH has its fate in its own hand and can advance on the accession path by delivering on	*Identified narrative(s):* none. - Beyond the special attention being given to the importance of foreign policy alignment as sign of commitment to a European future, no other elements of the geopolitical narrative are apparent in this document. - Highlighting the merit-based character of the EU accession process corresponds both to the peace and the geopolitical narrative.

			is, the more you help me to produce a report that reflects this movement forward'). - BiH has it in its own hands how quickly it will advance on the accession path ('It is in Bosnia and Herzegovina's hands to embrace the path you have chosen'). The Growth Plan is designed by COM in a way that no other WB country can block its neighbours ('It is only your decision to move forward towards the integration of the Single Market'). - BiH needs to continue implementing reforms ('There is more work to be done') especially regarding the 'fundamentals' of EU accession, namely democracy and rule of law. - The Growth Plan is presented as an opportunity for the prosperity of BiH ('It is a huge opportunity to increase the prosperity of this country' and 'it is a big step forward for the prosperity of your country, and to create perspectives in the country for the youth'). This is presented as also being in the EU's economic interest ('It is our common interest that our businesses do well'). - The EU is presented as being supportive of EU membership for BiH ('The idea that the future of	reforms, especially on those related to the 'fundamentals'. - The EU is narrated as an actor that supports and benefits from BiH's EU membership, with the Growth Plan being an instrument to increase the economic performance of BiH, contributing to the country's prosperity.	

			Bosnia and Herzegovina is in the European Union as a single, united and sovereign country. That is our common goal, and that is what we are working for').		
63	ENLARG COM Olivér Várhelyi.	- In November 2023, COM presented its proposal for a 'Growth Plan for the Western Balkans' aimed at 1. Bringing the WB countries closer to the single market; 2. Deepening the region's economic integration; 3. Accelerating reforms; 4. Increasing funding for the WB. - The Growth Plan is accompanied by a 'Reform and Growth' facility worth EUR 6 billion which in turn complements the EU's 'Economic and Investment Plan' for the WB, which is expected to mobilise around EUR 30 billion in the coming years. - In December 2023, EU leaders decided that accession negotiations with BiH should be opened once the country has reached the necessary degree of compliance with the membership criteria. - The six WB partners are currently preparing their Reform Agendas	- ENLARG COM Várhelyi states that EU enlargement to the WB and beyond has gained 'new momentum' and calls the decision to open accession negotiations with BiH once the country has reached the necessary degree of compliance with the membership criteria 'historic'. - The Growth Plan is presented by ENLARG COM Várhelyi as an opportunity for the WB countries 'to benefit from advantages of EU membership prior to full accession'. - ENLARG COM Várhelyi invites the WB countries 'to show strong political commitment' to 'implement the strongly needed essential reforms'. The WB partners are called 'to seize these opportunities' that the Growth Plan offers.	- Enlargement is narrated as a policy area which has gained new momentum, with the decision to open accession negotiations with BiH once the country has reached the necessary degree of compliance with the membership criteria being presented as a 'historic' decision. - Enlargement is narrated as following a merit-based logic, where BiH is called to use the opportunities offered by the Growth Plan by conducting socio-economic reforms and reforms related to the 'fundamentals' of the accession process.	*Identified narrative(s):* none. - Highlighting the merit-based character of the EU accession process corresponds both to the peace and the geopolitical narrative.

		for the Growth Plan, which consist of 1. socio-economic reforms and 2. reforms related to the fundamentals of the accession process.			
64	COM.	- COM found in its Opinion in 2019 on BiH's application for EU membership that accession negotiations should be opened once the country has reached the necessary degree of compliance with the membership criteria, in particular the Copenhagen political criteria and identified 14 key priorities in this regard. - On 13/12/2022 the Council decided that BiH should receive candidate status on the understanding that the eight steps included in COM's recommendation to grant candidate status of 2022 are taken. The Council also highlighted the need to move forward on all 14 key priorities. - On 15/12/2022 the European Council endorsed the Council conclusions of the 13/02/2022 and granted candidate status to BiH. - In its 2023 communication on enlargement, COM found further efforts by	- The report presents BiH as a country that has made progress on the implementation of the reforms regarding the eight steps identified by COM in 2022. These steps include inter alia progress in judicial reforms, the prevention and fight against corruption and organised crime, improvements in border and migration management and in the asylum system, the prohibition of torture and ill-treatment, as well as guaranteeing the freedom of expression and of the media and the protection of journalists. On all the eight steps, BiH is reported to have made progress, with some leftovers still being needed to address (e.g. ensuring the functioning of the asylum system). - COM points out that the 'political leadership to the strategic goal of European integration was taken forward by important reforms and have brought positive results'. This 'dedication' and 'commitment' by the political leadership of BiH is 'highly welcomed'. - Despite the positive reform steps being	- In this report COM updates in rather neutral and technical language on the reform progress that BiH has achieved between November 2023 and March 2024, specifically on reforms related to the political dimension of the Copenhagen criteria. BiH is presented as a country that has made considerable reform progress and that, thus, has 'earned' the opening of accession negotiations which COM recommends the Council should open. Nevertheless, COM does not shy away from calling out negative developments in the Republika Srpska entity either. Particular attention is given to highlighting that BiH has reached 100% alignment with the EU's CFSP and this is interpreted as a sign of shared values and strategic orientation that are more significant than ever given	*Identified narrative(s):* none. - The report is a rather technical document which does not promote any elements. There are some links to the geopolitical narrative with COM emphasising the 100% alignment achieved by BiH on the EU's foreign policy and interpreting this as a sign of shared values and strategic orientation that is deemed to be more important than ever given the geopolitical circumstances. - Regarding the peace narrative, the political dimension is presented as having played a particular significant role in COM's original opinion (*Avis*) on BiH's application for EU membership, which was issued in 2019. Moreover, CFSP alignment is interpreted by COM as a sign of 'shared values'. Beyond that, no reference to shared values or to a value-driven nature of enlargement policy is being made.

		BiH to fulfil the 14 key priorities and the eight steps and recommended the opening of accession negotiations once BiH has reached the necessary degree of compliance with membership criteria. COM stated it would update the Council on BiH's progress at the latest in March 2024. - In December 2023 the European Council followed COM's recommendation and decided that accession negotiations with BiH would be opened once BiH has reached the necessary degree of compliance with membership criteria. It tasked COM to report on the progress of BiH by March 2024 with the view to make a decision. - On 12/03/2024 COM presented its report which updates on the progress made by BiH between 08/11/2023 and March 2024. - With a view on the progress made by BiH, COM recommends the opening of accession negotiations.	taken, COM also highlights 'the need for Bosnia and Herzegovina to deliver on the necessary reforms' with some developments existing that 'are going against the positive momentum'. COM points out that as reported in the 2023 annual progress report the Republika Srpska entity continues to not recognise decisions of the Constitutional Court, has adopted a law at first instance that would curtail the accountability of political representatives and has adopted at first instance a draft law on referendums and civic initiatives that would provide the legal basis for a separate electoral administration in the Republika Srpska entity. Moreover, COM also mentions the adoption at first reading of a draft law by Republika Srpska that would target civic actors as 'foreign agents' which would 'mark a step backwards'. - Despite these setbacks, COM finds that 'the general commitment to the country's EU path has translated into tangible results. This has to be continued with resolute steps to finalise key reforms in the upcoming period in line with EU rules and standards'. - COM specifically mentions that BiH	the 'geopolitical' context.	- Highlighting the merit-based character of the EU accession process corresponds both to the peace and the geopolitical narrative.

			‘has reached and maintained full alignment with the EU Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP)’ calling this a ‘more significant signal then (sic) ever of shared values and strategic orientation in the new geopolitical context’. - Finally, COM concludes that ‘in light of the results achieved since 2022 the Commission considers that Bosnia and Herzegovina achieves the necessary level of compliance with the membership criteria. Therefore the Commission recommends to the Council to open accession negotiations’ and recommends that the Council adopts the negotiating framework once BiH has taken ‘further steps in line with the Commission’s report’, with COM being ready to report on these steps.		
65	COM, COM President Ursula von der Leyen, HR/VP Josep Borrell, ENLARG COM Olivér Várhelyi.	- In December 2022, the European Council granted candidate status to BiH. - In November 2023, COM recommended that accession negotiations with BiH should be opened once the country has reached the necessary degree of compliance with the membership criteria. - In December 2023, the	- BiH is presented as a country that has made significant reform progress between November 2023 and March 2024 (‘The public commitment of the political leadership to the strategic goal of European integration was taken forward by important reforms and have brought positive results’ and the country ‘has shown strong commitment to move forward on long pending reforms’). These reforms	- BiH is narrated by COM as a country that has made considerable reform progress in recent months, with the significance of the reforms achieved in a year being greater than the progress made over the course of a decade. In this vein, BiH becomes a country that has very much ‘earned’ the next step on the accession path, namely the	*Identified narrative(s):* none. - There are some elements of the geopolitical narrative present, with enlargement being deemed to be a ‘geostrategic investment’ into the security of the European continent. Moreover, CFSP alignment is presented as being particularly important in these times of ‘geopolitical turmoil’. Yet, these

		European Council endorsed this recommendation by COM and tasked COM with delivering an update on the progress made by BiH in March 2024 at the latest. - On 12/03/2024 COM presented an updated report on the progress made by BiH and recommended that accession negotiations with BiH should be opened. Additionally, COM recommended that the negotiating framework should be adopted once BiH has delivered additional reforms, on which COM is ready to report.	include a law on the prevention of conflict of interest, a law on anti-money laundering and countering terrorist financing, improvement of the judicial and prosecutorial system, fighting corruption, organised crime, and terrorism and improving migration management. COM President von der Leyen says that BiH 'has taken impressive steps forward. More progress has been achieved in just over a year than in a whole decade' with ENLARG COM Várhelyi stating that the 'candidate status brought much-needed dynamic which needs to continue'. - COM also mentions BiH achieving and maintaining full alignment with the EU's CFSP as a 'positive step and crucial in these times of geopolitical turmoil'. - Enlargement is presented as a merit-based process in which BiH has 'earned' the opening of accession negotiations through reforms ('In light of the results achieved since 2022, the Commission considers that Bosnia and Herzegovina has achieved the necessary level of compliance with the membership criteria'). ENLARG COM Várhelyi's statement that 'The country's commitment to the	opening of accession negotiations. COM underlines that the country must upkeep the current reform momentum it has. - The EU is presented as an actor who is supportive of BiH's EU membership, ensuring BiH that its 'door is fully open' and that it views the country's future as part of the European 'family'. - At the same time, enlargement is also narrated to be serving the EU's own interests by being a 'geostrategic investment' in times of 'geopolitical turmoil' that contributes to prosperity and security. The full CFSP alignment achieved by BiH is mentioned by COM as a crucial signal in the times of geopolitical upheaval.	elements are too few and weak to qualify for an identification of the geopolitical narrative. - Regarding the peace narrative, there is one reference to the European 'family'. Beyond this, no elements of the peace narrative are evident. Strikingly, no claims are being made about BiH possessing the same values as the EU or about the role that values play in the accession process. - Highlighting the merit-based character of the EU accession process corresponds both to the peace and the geopolitical narrative.

			EU path has translated into tangible results and the opening of negotiations is a fair acknowledgement of the delivery of an unprecedented critical mass of reforms' reflects this merit-based logic. - COM is clear on the fact that more reforms will be needed by BiH (HR/VP Borrell: 'the positive dynamic on Bosnia and Herzegovina's reform path needs to continue' and ENLARG COM Várhelyi: 'this should incentivize further reforms in line with EU rules and standards on Bosnia and Herzegovina's EU path'). COM President von der Leyen also states that 'of course more progress is necessary to join the Union but the country is showing that it can deliver on its membership criteria and on its citizens aspirations to be part of our family'. - COM presents itself as being committed to welcoming BiH in the Union (COM President von der Leyen: 'the future of Bosnia and Herzegovina lies in our Union'; HR/VP Borrell: opening accession negotiations with BiH 'is sending an important message of support to all their citizens' and is a 'clear signal of to the country's EU perspective';		

			ENLARG COM Várhelyi 'our message is clear. The EU's door to Bosnia and Herzegovina is fully open'). - ENLARG COM Várhelyi calls enlargement a 'geostrategic investment into prosperity and security ('Enlargement is more than ever a geostrategic investment in our shared prosperity and security in the entire European continent') and says BiH should 'seize this historic opportunity'.		
66	COM President Ursula von der Leyen.	- In December 2022, BiH was granted candidate status by the European Council. - In November 2023, COM recommended the opening of accession negotiations once BiH has reached the necessary degree of compliance with the membership criteria. - In December 2023, the European Council endorsed COM's recommendation and tasked COM with providing an update of BiH's progress at the latest in March 2024. - On 12/03/2024 COM presented an updated report on BiH and recommended that accession negotiations should be opened. Moreover, COM	- COM President von der Leyen claims that COM has changed its approach to the WB towards a more proactive, supportive stance ('In these years, we have shifted gear in our approach to the region. We have realised that it is not enough to just wait for the Western Balkans to move closer to us. It is not enough to say the door is open. We must also take responsibility and support their path towards our Union in any possible way'). - COM President von der Leyen says that the new report is a 'factual analysis' of the latest reform progress by BiH which 'draws a very clear picture' with BiH having taken 'impressive steps forward' ever since the country received candidate status. COM President von	- BiH is presented as a country that has made considerable reform progress over the course of the past year and has thus 'merited' the opening of accession negotiations. The country's full alignment with the EU's CFSP is emphasised first by COM President von der Leyen and is being considered particularly important, given the geopolitical turmoil. BiH is expected to continue delivering on reforms with the EU being narrated as an actor that is deeply supportive of welcoming BiH in its 'family', and which has recently adopted a more proactive and supportive approach towards	*Identified narrative(s):* none. - There are some elements of the geopolitical narrative present here, with the prominence and importance that is being attributed to full CFSP alignment in times of 'geopolitical turmoil'. Thus, CFSP alignment is presented as being particularly important in a context related to geopolitics. Beyond this, no elements of the geopolitical narrative are present here, not qualifying for an identification of the narrative as such. - The only reference to the peace narrative is the mention of a European 'family'. Beyond this, no value-based claims are being made, nor

		recommended that the negotiating framework should be adopted once BiH has delivered more reform progress.	der Leyen says that 'more progress has been achieved in just over a year than in over a decade'. - COM President von der Leyen specifically mentions CFSP alignment, with it being the first reform progress by BiH that she mentions ('First, Bosnia and Herzegovina has now fully aligned with our foreign and security policy, which is crucial in these times of geopolitical turmoil' and then 'second, the country is adopting important laws'). CFSP alignment is being related to the 'geopolitical turmoil' of the current time. - Other reforms mentioned are BiH's improved migration management, its cooperation with the ICTY, and a new peacebuilding steering committee having become operational. - COM President von der Leyen highlights that BiH must continue with its reforms to become part of the EU 'family' ('Of course, more progress is necessary to join our Union. But the country is showing that it can deliver on its membership criteria, and on its citizens' aspiration to be part of our family'). - COM President von der Leyen stresses that the EU is supportive of and committed to	the WB region, with the goal to bring the region closer to the EU.	is peace mentioned as purpose of the enlargement process. - Highlighting the merit-based character of the EU accession process corresponds both to the peace and the geopolitical narrative.

			welcoming BiH in the Union ('The message coming from Bosnia and Herzegovina is clear. So our message must be clear too. The future of Bosnia and Herzegovina lies in our Union').		
67	COM President Ursula von der Leyen.	- On 21/03/2024 the European Council has decided to open accession negotiations with BiH.	- COM President von der Leyen states that she welcomes the EU leaders' 'historic' decision to open accession negotiations with BiH. - Enlargement is presented as following a merit-based logic with COM President von der Leyen saying that BiH 'has taken impressive steps towards our Union' and that more progress has been achieved in a little more than a year than in over a decade. - Among the progress mentioned, full CFSP alignment is emphasised first ('Bosnia and Herzegovina is now fully aligned with our Common Foreign and Security Policy'), other progress mentioned is the adoption of 'important' laws, progress in migration management, and advances in dialogue and reconciliation efforts. - COM President von der Leyen hopes that BiH will maintain its reform momentum ('So I hope that the decision today will lead to even more progress').	- BiH is being narrated as a country that has made significant reform progress over the past year and that has, thus, 'earned' the opening of accession negotiations. - CFSP alignment is given prominence among the reforms achieved. BiH is expected to use the opening of accession negotiations as another incentive to continue with reforms and to even redouble its efforts.	*Identified narrative(s):* none. - The only reference to the geopolitical narrative here is the importance that is assigned to CFSP alignment. - Highlighting the merit-based character of the EU accession process corresponds both to the peace and the geopolitical narrative.