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EU ENLARGEMENT POLICY BETWEEN THE CHRONOLOGICAL PRECEDENCE OF THE WESTERN BALKANS AND THE GEOPOLITICAL URGENCY IN THE EASTERN NEIGHBORHOOD: A REALIST PERSPECTIVE^{1,2}

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ABSTRACT

This study adopts a realist approach to explore how geopolitical factors influence the European Union's (EU) decision to expand into neighbouring regions of strategic importance or vulnerability to major powers' influence. It specifically examines the obstacles posed by the absence of a unanimous stance on „pre-scheduled” accessions, as seen in the earlier „eastern enlargement” rounds. It is argued that the present geopoliticized EU enlargement policy seems to be guided by realist factors, although it is characterized by an incongruity between strategic rhetoric and strategic actions. This inconsistency between expressed intentions and actual measures is more evident in the Western Balkans than in the Eastern neighbourhood. Through the selected, broadly set realist elements – groupism, egoism and power-centrism – the EU's foreign policy strategy and behaviour are examined, searching for a gap between the discursive and practical domains in both regions. The research considers that the EU's response has not predominantly been strategic but rather tactical, reflecting the enlargement policy's longstanding deficiencies, coupled with the urgent need to extend commitments to the eastern partners facing immediate security threats. Such tendencies are disadvantageous for the Western Balkans, which became a lower priority for the EU despite its chronological precedence in the enlargement domain. While ideally, both enlargement regions should be granted an „accession timetable” along with on-ground democratic reforms, the authors highlight that due to differing geopolitical dynamics and pressure, the outcomes for the two regions may either diverge in terms of potential favouring of the new candidates or, perhaps more likely, converge – meaning that the accession of either region might be postponed once the geopolitical urgency subsides.

KEYWORDS: enlargement policy, Eastern partnership, strategy, interest, threats.

INTRODUCTION

EU enlargement policy was once considered the most efficient foreign policy instrument, especially after the Big Bang enlargement (Dimitrova and Elitsa Kortenska 2019), while the EU has been referred to as a soft power by possessing a power of attraction (Aggestam 2016, 432), and/or a transformative power (Börzel and Lebanidze 2017; Grabbe 2006, 2014; Leonard 2005) although the sources of its transformative power have been disputed (Hyde-Price 2008, 31). Nowadays, after the largely unsuccessful enlargement story with the Western Balkan countries and the long-held EU's refusal to offer the Eastern Partnership (EaP) countries a membership perspective, the potential of enlargement policy to remain a robust foreign policy instrument was significantly damaged. Given the sudden geopolitical emergency after the war in Ukraine started in 2022, the EU has reacted by employing its once-successful instrument to show support

and more strongly influence its neighbouring EaP region. This reaction contrasted with the EU's earlier stances in the context of the 2008 Georgian war and the 2014 Crimea crisis, when the EU was reluctant to impose far-reaching measures against Russia's expansionist goals. At the time, the Member States could not achieve a common group/EU stance on two chief aspects in that regard: (1) punitive measures against Russia; (2) ways to integrate the eastern partners. During those periods, in realist terms, egoist concerns in bilateral economic, political, and other domains with Russia largely affected the behaviour of some Member States, thus preventing a more stringent and profound course against Moscow (as well as a more supportive one for the eastern partners). However, unlike the crises in 2008 and 2014, when the 2022 invasion started, the Member States did back the EU's actorness by both introducing over a dozen packages of unprecedented sanctions against Moscow and by officially including the eastern partners in the enlargement policy. Individual member states' concerns about the cooperation with Russia and enhancement of the enlargement agenda were left aside in favour of EU groupism, but also power-centrism, as the EU as a block started asserting its power by competing with Russia in the eastern neighbourhood.

EU-Russian relations have been strained since the early 2000s, as manifested by the inability to replace the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA) before its expiration in December 2007, despite the years of negotiations (Haukkala 2015, 31; Medvedev 2008, 215–216). That period was marked by momentous events such as the second eastern enlargement (Romania and Bulgaria in 2007), the recognition of NATO membership prospects of Ukraine and Georgia, and the subsequent 2008 Georgian war. Through establishing its neighbourhood policy in 2004 and a specific Eastern Partnership dimension in 2009, the EU aimed to engage with its new geographical neighbours. The formation of these policies was closely tied to the interests of the Member States (hereinafter also: MS), including the eastern ones, which had been influenced by Soviet policies in the past. The new Member States now sought to promote Europeanization and encourage their neighbours to distance themselves from Russia, as they have done themselves. However, from the inception of these policy changes, a complex interplay has unfolded between the EU's pursuit of strategic cohesion and the individual preferences of its Member States. While countries like Poland advocated for Ukraine's EU accession bid and its distancing from Russia in the form of a realist-style competition (Szeptycki 2021), others such as Germany attempted to strike a balance between drawing the eastern partners closer and maintaining comprehensive economic ties with Russia—one of its largest trade partners. The EaP thus represented the least common denominator of all Member States'

interests: to approximate to the eastern neighbourhood without severing ties with Russia.

Whereas the Western Balkans (WB) was meanwhile affected by the enlargement stalemate, the 2022 invasion resulted in further development of the strategic narratives and some less convincing changes concerning the strategic actions towards this particular region. Thus, we argue in this paper that a compelling realist action did not follow the EU's geopolitical/strategic, realist narratives. However, some differences in this regard exist between the EU's approach towards the WBs on one hand and the EaP countries on the other. These differences stem mainly from the geopolitical urgency created after February 2022 and the prioritisation of the EU's and Member States' security interests.

Fundamentally, strategic narratives and strategic actions are both pivotal in the context of realist foreign policy. Narratives primarily concentrate on moulding perceptions and rationalising actions, whereas actions encompass tangible measures aimed at bolstering the actor's power, security, and sway. These two aspects frequently operate harmoniously, with narratives legitimising and offering a backdrop for the strategic actions. However, sometimes the two aspects are dissonant. The authors argue that the current EU enlargement policy appears to be driven by realist considerations, albeit marked by a lack of compatibility between the strategic discourse and strategic activities. Our secondary argument is that the lack of coherence between discourses and actions is more pronounced in the Western Balkan candidates when compared to the eastern partners, where a greater alignment seems to exist in this regard.

The paper is organised in the following way: we first start with the theoretical framing of our argument and some conceptual delimitations. In the next section, we analyse the EU's foreign policy narratives by examining its foreign policy instruments, strategies, and some of the most prominent statements of the European officials, and we juxtapose them with the EU's action towards the two regions. We argue that the EU's long-standing narrative building aimed to present the Union as a proper geopolitical power has been directed primarily at its Member States to embolden them to take more decisive action and a more united stance. However, The EU representatives' realist rhetoric employing power competition, self-centred, strategic vocabulary was not followed by proper action to secure the EU's interests in the neighbouring regions. We conclude with a discussion of the results and the possible consequences for the enlargement regions of the lack of proper or strategic EU action.

THEORY AND METHODS

Analysing the EU's foreign policy through realist accounts instead of the commonly used liberalism approach in studying the EU's transformative role in its nearby regions may appear unconventional. Although liberalism helps explain a good part of the EU's foreign relations, we believe that realist accounts can help complement our understanding of the EU's global and regional actions and its conception as an international actor or power. As we do recognise that realism is a broad approach encompassing at least several theories and many propositions (Schmidt 2007; Wohlforth 2016, 44) about the nature and functioning of international relations, we consent that typically, a realist approach would deal primarily with the Member States' foreign policies, strategies, their interests, and power relations instead of analysing the EU's foreign policy. However, nation-states are not the only relevant actors in the international arena, and even realism cannot avoid this fact. The European Union, as a polity, is an actor willing to pursue its (or shared Member States') interests, exert influence and project power in the international arena. Thus, we will seek the three elements of realism (or broad realist approach), namely groupism, egoism and power-centrism (Wohlforth, 2016, pp. 36, 41-42) in the EU's foreign policy strategy and behaviour. We will argue that a gap exists between what has been formally proclaimed (or desired) and its practical implementation.

The mentioned three aspects of the realist approach play a role in formulating the conditions, policies and supporting outcomes in the enlargement domain, especially when the geo-politicised context in Europe is taken into account. Nevertheless, we argue that these aspects have played a role more in the EU's narratives than in its actual deeds.

First, in realist theory, the idea of groupism suggests the necessity of humans to align or act in groups in order to survive (Wohlforth 2016). Within groups emerges a "we-feeling", and all others that do not belong to the group are perceived as outsiders. Sovereign nation-states have represented such a group for most of the last two centuries; nowadays, other polities and alliances step-in to play that role. The European Union could be imagined as such a grouping with the authority it possesses within its borders over citizens who see themselves as separated from outsiders not belonging to their group. Although the EU is not as internally coherent as nation-states are, it aims to play a global actor role, influencing the world outside its territory. Despite its non-centralised nature, in academic and policy circles, the EU has long been recognised as a single, global, foreign policy actor or a power (Howorth 2010; Leonard 2005; Manners 2002; K. E. Smith 2003; M. E. Smith 2011) more or less independent from its Member States.

However, even though the EU Member States have pooled their sovereignty, the emergence of the EU did not compensate for the role of the nation-state as a grouping in terms of the realist theory. In the international arena, these two types of groupings compete for power and influence, and both the EU and its Member States claim authority for foreign (and security) affairs. Member States still aim to pursue their national interests despite the existence of the EU, its foreign policy or common positions they jointly take on certain matters. As we shall see, this competition between the two types of groupings, i.e. the EU and the (member) states, and the usual divergence or incompatibility of their interests often lead to the EU's underperformance as an international actor, which is also visible in its immediate neighbourhood. The authors, therefore, deploy the realist approach, which offers a pertinent contribution to understanding such tension stemming from states' inherent nature to prioritise their own interests and security, even within the context of a supranational entity like the EU.

Nevertheless, to use Hoffmann's terminology (Hoffmann 1966), some sort of combination of both the logic of divergence and the logic of convergence (Hill 1997, 6) is at play in the EU's foreign policy. It is undeniable that the EU Member States are often compelled to search for consensus to reach a common position on a certain foreign policy issue. Enlargement policy decision-making is certainly one such example in which unanimity or consensus remains the rule, even for the less important decisions. By observing the history of enlargement policy, this consensus has been reached more than once. In the EU of 27 Member States, during the bargaining, where each state aims to maximise its gains and move the consensus closer to its ideal position, they often resort to coalition building with the states of similar interests.

Thus, *groupism* can also refer to the relatively stable coalitions of Member States whose cohesion is based on some common objectives, concerns, or features. Hix, for example, claims that coalition-building in the Council is more probable among the states with similar political objectives and interests and mentions several usual bilateral or multi-lateral alliances like, France-Germany axis, Benelux group or the "cohesion block" (Greece, Spain, Ireland and Portugal) (1999, 71). Strezhneva (2020, 9), while referring to Peters and Pierre, points out the EU's specific decision-making, which is transnational, non-centralised and draws from Member States' support; likewise, different levels of governance are characterised by "opaque bargaining", which is sometimes marked by bilateral or group trade-offs, to find a consensus or elevate efficiency in a supranational domain. These coalitions, *inter alia*, also aim to influence the enlargement policy, its dynamics and activities. A commonly quoted instance is the

Višegrad Group, which generally supports the enlargement policy, albeit with some differences regarding the priorities of EU enlargement. Second, when it comes to power-centrism, as already mentioned, the EU is often referred to as a global power. The EU aimed and often managed to exert influence on other international subjects on many occasions, although there are numerous examples of its misfortunate (in)action. The conceptions of the EU as a power have not always been realist (or they have less often been realist), especially those referring to the EU as a “soft” or normative power. However, such a conception is only the first precondition to using realist accounts for understanding its foreign policy.

While present in other theoretical explanations, the notion of power is central to the realist understanding of world politics despite the differences in defining power within this school of thought (Schmidt 2007, 43-44). Power is an elusive concept, and we do not intend to provide a new or extensive definition as it falls out of the ambition of this paper and is already done elsewhere (Berenskoetter and Williams 2007; Nye 2004). Sufficient for our purposes in this paper, we employ the concept of power not in terms of the resources that the EU or its Member States possess (e.g. military forces, financial resources, demography or territory) but in terms of relational power, i.e. its ability to influence other actors. We will try to show how power plays a part in the EU’s foreign policy narratives and actions, especially regarding its enlargement policy and EaP. We will argue that in the WB and the EaP countries, the EU has neglected its soft power, i.e., its power of attraction (Nye 2004, 6) to its values, norms, and institutions, and increasingly relied on hard power through coercion, sanctions and conditionality (sticks and carrots). More recently, power competition with other global actors started taking place. The EU has been using its alliances (such as with NATO) and shaping its enlargement and EaP policies to balance the power of Russia and not simply to preserve its “pacific union with similar liberal societies” (Doyle 2016, 73). After the war in Ukraine started, the EU’s power games became not only more prominent, but the EU started to openly support a side in the war by providing financial and armaments assistance and by expressly changing its stance towards the region’s EU and NATO membership perspective. Freudlsperger and Schimmelfennig (2023, 844-45) classified the invasion as a boundary shock that challenged the EU’s identity, security and autonomy, through which the Union reacted through “external rebordering” and distancing from the attacker, on the one hand, and opening *vis-à-vis* Ukraine, on the other. As we will show, strategic competition and power politics received special attention in the EU’s recent Strategic Compass but also in other enlargement and EaP-related documents. Such a strategy would belong to a typical realist foreign policy rather than a liberal one or one of non-intervention.

Third, when it comes to egoism or self-interest, the EU has been criticised for not being able to aggregate its common interest and that the Member States' national interests (especially security interests) prevailed over the general EU interest. As Majone (2009, 16) rightly notes, "The structural flaw of EU foreign policy is the pretension to be one of the players at the table of world politics without having first reached a common understanding on what ought to be treated as vital European interests". No matter how successful in its pursuit of self-interest and how the Member States reached a consensus for action, we cannot deny that there have been many occasions when the EU expressed its foreign policy priorities and/or acted *with the aim of pursuing* its interests. Although highly dependent on the compatibility with the Member States' national interests and approval for action (and sometimes even competing with these), the EU's interests cannot be comprehended as non-existent or a simple sum of the national interests. The common understanding of the EU's interests is generated through consensus formation among Member States. However, the idea of appropriate action or timing for pursuing such common interests is not always widely shared, especially when perceived as incompatible with other national priorities. Often, the sluggishness of the EU's decision making (or consensus-building) makes it respond ineffectively to urgent events, making it look incapable of pursuing or acting in its self-interest.

In addition, this self-interest or egoistic behaviour of the EU existed even on occasions when it seemed that the action was altruistic or ethical in nature, i.e., aimed at spreading liberal norms and ideas, for example, in the case of the 2004 "Big Bang" enlargement. The EU's enlargement policy in the Western Balkans and nowadays in EaP countries, although enmeshed with the ideas of liberal values promotion, has been used as an instrument to create a regional order that would be conducive to peace and stability and secure the EU's borders, trade, and energy supply paths. In other words, the enlargement policy had to serve the EU's and its Member States' interests to be possible.

Egoism also refers to the fact that EU Member States, governed by their national objectives, aim to prioritise them over the broader, supranational interests or over what Hyde-Price (2008, 32) termed "Member States' shared second-order normative concerns". In practice, that might lead to unfavourable developments for the enlargement policy. Member States sometimes instrumentalise their position and the power asymmetry to their favour to introduce additional requirements for the candidate countries on their EU path.

The three elements hypothesised by the realist theory – groupism, power-centrism and egoism – can be found in both the EU' and its Member States' foreign policy narratives and actual action, although to a different

degree. In the next section, we present our findings regarding this realist rhetoric and action towards the two regions, now both encompassed by the EU enlargement policy.

First, we aimed to examine the elements of a realist discourse in the EU's official foreign policy strategies and the statements of the EU and, to a lesser degree, MSs' representatives. By the EU's foreign policy strategies, we mean relevant strategies developed to deal with the actors, regions and situations outside the EU's borders, particularly those strategies and documents directed to its immediate neighbourhood – the EaP and the WBs countries. Broadly speaking, the strategies in question concern the documents in the timeframe between the Thessaloniki summit (2003), on the one hand, and the decisions taken since 2022 in Brussels (especially concerning the eastern partners, while reflecting on their previously vague partnership with the EU over the past decade). The authors largely consult documents with specific political weight, such as the European Commission opinions or annual progress reports, Council conclusions, and partnership agreements. Based on these documents, the authors follow the thread that, in the case of the WB, these acts appear to demonstrate less ambition towards full integration as time went by, whereas in the case of the EaP, the significance of these countries appeared to become more visible, especially since 2022 when their membership perspective was also recognized. The invasion marked a significant change in terms of EU discourse and approach towards the EaP. The authors aimed to identify some narrative changes in those regards, during the specified periods, especially since the Euro Maidan onwards.

Nonetheless, considering the broad scope of such an approach, methodological limitations are imminent. Conducting comparative overviews of the two distinct regions, throughout non-overlapping periods, with some diverging challenges, and through some different types of EU instruments (neighbourhood policy vs. enlargement policy, for instance) was occasionally difficult and perhaps genuinely impossible to achieve. For the sake of the length of this paper, it is quite possible that some very important aspects were insufficiently addressed in order to put greater emphasis on the general argument of this paper. Namely, our intention was not to measure or even ascertain the prevalence or degree of realist rhetoric, nor to rank the countries nor regions in that regard. Our primary intention was to track the phenomenon of geopoliticization of narratives, and how it achieved strategic traits over time, especially in the eastern neighborhood. In that regard, we hope that our findings compensate for the likely methodological deficiencies.

As Diez and Manners argue, a normative power Europe would be “attempting to construct non-hierarchical relationships” and represent

the *other* in their discourses either as different or as abject. Contrary to such representations would be those that portray the other as an existential threat/securitisation, inferior, or violating universal principles (Diez and Manners 2007, 184–85). In analysing the strategies and statements, we looked for either the former two (“non-hierarchical” portrayals) or the latter three (“confrontational” ones). Consequently, we argue that the EU and the MSs’ representatives have increasingly used the last three kinds of rhetoric, showing aspects of groupism, egoism, and power-centrism. These have become more prominent since the early 2000s when the EU started building its capacities for influencing the global order, and especially since the mid-2010s and its ever-increasing power competition with other global actors in specific regions such as the Balkans and the EaP countries.

Second, we examine whether there is an instrumentalisation of narratives at stake, whereby the terminology and discourse not only reflect on the changed priorities in the wake of security threats and related activities but also depict the altered strategic resolve of the European Union concerning the enlargement domain. While some features of that resolve can be observed, such as the recognition of a European perspective for eastern partners, the lack of comprehensive pre-accession strategies for current EU applicants (or their notable differences compared to those in CEE) (Van Elsuwege 2008, 254) paints a pessimistic picture for both “old” and “new” candidates. Nevertheless, the authors employ discourse analysis to determine how these narratives shape perceptions of political developments and how they are utilised to assume as much political significance as possible (Somers 1994).

In that context, the EU uses the geopolitical backdrop to present itself as a strategic force and a primary actor in the continent, which is also reflected in the enlargement policy, nominally perceived as a strategic tool to enhance and evolve European security. In other words, enlargement is examined as a method to improve peace prospects and stability by minimising potential risks and escalations from the geographically adjacent regions of Eastern Europe. Narratives play a significant role in this regard. At the same time, strategic decisions, such as establishing a schedule for further EU accessions, are not only missing but are not even being adequately discussed at a high-political level.

The framing approach might be useful to depict how the EU’s discourse is arranged to assume a greater impact on public political perceptions by emphasising certain aspects while marginalising others (Entman 1993). Through proper or desired framing, the geopoliticization of narratives (presented as strategic, even though they may be more responsive or tactical) influences not only the discourse but also decision-making. Although the EU institutions intend to depict alignment between the

narrative and decision-making aspects (both “framed” as strategic, profound, far-reaching, and altering), they appear to be more disparate than it originally meets the eye. In that regard, the geopoliticization of the narrative part might serve as a smoke-screen to obscure the lack of actual strategic decision-making, exemplified by the absence of a clear strategy, instruments, and a range of short, medium, and long-term goals for the two regions.

Before progressing to the ambiguity between the decision-making and the discourse, the authors will briefly reflect on the differentiation between the ‘strategic’ and ‘geopolitical’ narratives. While the terms ‘geopolitical’ and ‘strategic’ are sometimes used interchangeably, the authors aim to identify both differences and overlaps between them, to consider whether the EU’s discourse and actions can be perceived as more geopolitical (geopoliticized) and/or strategic. The authors do not consider these terms to be completely separate. Specifically, ‘geopolitical’ can also be perceived as a subtype of ‘strategic’ whereas ‘strategic’ implies a longer-term perspective. What is common for both is that geopolitical and strategic actions intend to influence and shape the decisions and status of neighbouring geographical regions.

Strategic narratives are described by some (Miskimmon, O’Loughlin, and Roselle 2012, 8) as a means for political actors to establish a shared understanding of international politics, influencing the actions of other parties through analysing the connections between a state’s initial narrative stances, shifts in others’ perspectives, and their subsequent actions. The process also considers factual processes, the institutionalisation of preferred narratives, and the discursive efforts by recipient states. To foster transformative processes in the candidate countries, the EU promotes their alignment with its standards, laws, and policies, and creates societal expectations. Miskimmon et al. (2012, 9) also highlight Schimmelfennig’s observations on how CEE candidates have influenced the EU through ‘rhetorical entrapment,’ using the EU’s rhetorical commitments to support their path towards EU accession. Strategic narratives can not only influence the recipients but also shape the decisions of the strategists themselves, although ‘the ability to influence’ does not necessarily translate by default into geostrategic decision-making. The EU has been “entrapped” by its geopolitical discourse towards its eastern partners since 2022, to the extent that it has spilled over into the decision-making process (acknowledging their membership aspirations). Nevertheless, just as the WB holds on to the hope of EU accession, changes in geostrategic circumstances may diminish the eastern partners’ aspirations once conflicts subside.

Regarding geopolitical narratives or geopoliticized narratives, Cadier (2021) investigates the disparity between the portrayal of the EaP policy

program and its true intentions, substance, and effects. The analysis delves into the long-standing process of geopoliticizing the EaP, wherein it is depicted as a geopolitical issue, driven not only by Russia's actions but also by a discourse coalition within the EU aiming to increase influence in the Eastern neighborhood and counter Russia's influence. Cadier (2021) points out to Richard Young's 2017 study which found that EU support for certain political values and reforms is increasingly "pursued as a geopolitical comparative advantage over Russia" and "superimposed with a layer of geostrategic diplomacy". While the geopoliticization of narratives has been increasing since the Ukrainian crisis began, the practical effects on the ground have been unremarkable for nearly a decade. However, the 2022 invasion of Ukraine has spurred the EU to reinforce both its geopolitical discourse and decision-making.

TOWARDS THE EU SUPERPOWER STATUS: NARRATIVES AND ACTIONS

After a decade of the Yugoslav wars throughout the 1990s and the realisation of the EU's deficiencies as a power able to resolve crises in its immediate neighbourhood, many voices could be heard calling for the upgrading of its capabilities and transformation into a superpower or a world power (Majone 2009, 15). The calls were followed by a series of institutional and procedural innovations to build the EU's capacities to speak with one voice in the international arena and act in crises. The first attempts were made already with the Amsterdam Treaty in 1999 with the introduction of new instruments and bodies in the Common Foreign and Security Policy – hereinafter CFSP (e.g., common strategies, the possibility of QMV, High representative for CFSP (HR)) and finalised with the Lisbon treaty by bringing all of the EU's external action under the same Title V (European Union 2016), reforming the post of the HR to encompass the Council and the Commission's external services, and introducing single External Action Service as a form of a ministry of foreign affairs. Apart from the treaty revisions, there have been many movements since the end of the 1990s to make the EU a global actor capable of pursuing its goals as a block.

The CFSP objectives were defined already in the Maastricht Treaty, and the Lisbon Treaty complemented these to accommodate all the EU's external action goals. Nevertheless, the original CFSP objectives have remained mainly unchanged; the EU remained determined to "safeguard its values, fundamental interests, security, independence and integrity, ... consolidate and support democracy, the rule of law, human rights and the principles of international law, ... preserve peace, prevent conflicts and strengthen international security" (Article 21), etc. The European Council

got the task of identifying the strategic interests of the Union based on the mentioned objectives (Article 22).

To overcome one of its main foreign and security policy flaws, the lack of strategic thinking and a habit of reacting to events, in 2003, the EU adopted its first European Security Strategy (hereinafter: ESS) (Consilium 2009) in which the Member States attempted to identify the common threats and define their security interests. In 2016, in an even more challenging global and regional situation, but with the Lisbon Treaty in force, the EU came up with the new Global Strategy (“A Global Strategy for the European Union’s Foreign and Security Policy” (EUGS) (EEAS 2016). In sharp contrast to the 2003 ESS, which starts with the claim that “Europe has never been so prosperous, so secure nor so free” (European Union 2009, 27), the first line of the Foreword to the EUGS by the HR, Federica Mogherini, assess the situation in a dramatic manner: “The purpose, even existence, of our Union is being questioned” (EEAS 2016, 3). The rhetoric continues throughout the document by mentioning, for example, the “existential crisis” and claiming that the “Union is under threat” (EEAS 2016, 7, 13). Both EU enlargement and neighbourhood policies found their way into these strategies as tools for maintaining stability and peace at the EU borders.

Finally, in 2022, after the Ukraine war had started, the Council adopted “A Strategic Compass for Security and Defence” (Council of the European Union 2022).³ It aimed to provide a “shared assessment of security environment”, more coherence and direction for the EU in security and defence by 2030. With the “war returning to Europe” and “major geopolitical shifts”, its assessment of the politico-security situation is even more dramatic than in the previous EUGS. The EU found itself “in an era of growing strategic competition, complex security threats and the direct attack on the European security order” with the “return of power politics”; the interdependence has become conflictual and soft power “weaponised” (Council of the European Union 2022, 5). For the EU to be able to “defend the European security order”, the reinforcement of the strategic partnership with NATO, UN and others, and developing a “tailored partnership” with the WB and eastern and southern neighbours are some of the steps seen as necessary for the overall security of the EU. Although the Strategic Compass identifies others as engaging in conflict, power politics and strategic competition, the EU implicitly accepts the game by its determination to get involved and respond to the events, and sometimes even more explicitly with statements such as “Where the EU is not active and effective in promoting its interests, others fill the space” (Council of the European Union 2022, 8). The

3 Full title: “A Strategic Compass for Security and Defence – For a European Union that protects its citizens, values and interests and contributes to international peace and security”.

EU also plays this game in its neighbouring regions, namely the Balkans and the EaP countries, where it identifies the potential for security deterioration, foreign interference and even direct threats.

In such changed geopolitical circumstances, also reflected in the wording and the content of the EU's Strategic Compass, a realist logic would require the EU to employ all its instruments to control events in the adjacent regions that have always been considered potentially unstable and fragile. As we shall see, the EU has responded by encompassing the EaP countries with its enlargement policy (and other measures falling outside this policy). However, the full potential of this once most effective foreign policy instrument has not been used in the Balkans despite the expressed concerns. In the next section, we turn to the EU's dealings with the WBs and the EaP regions, now both covered by the EU enlargement policy, by analysing narratives and actions towards them.

GROUPISM, EGOISM AND POWER-CENTRISM IN THE EU'S APPROACH TO THE WESTERN BALKANS

It has often been argued that the EU decided to enlarge its community of liberal values in 2004 because its Member States were bound by a promise, a normative commitment or "rhetorical entrapment" towards the CEECs (Aggestam 2016, 447; Schimmelfennig 2001, 72-77). Although a similar commitment towards the Balkan countries was made at the Thessaloniki summit in 2003 (Petrović, Kovačević, and Radić Milosavljević 2023, 15) and on many other occasions afterwards, this factor played a small part in the EU's decision-making on enlargement. The promise has been used more to incentivise reforms in the (potential) candidates than to create a sense of obligation among the EU Member States. Contrary to that, geopolitical reasoning has been used to motivate the EU Member States to engage in the WBs region (also in EaP, as described later in the text).

In other words, their political and security interests have always framed the position of the EU and its Member States towards the Balkans, while their economic gains and normative or moral considerations played a smaller part. Balkan countries currently in the enlargement process account for a market of only around 18 million consumers, which is approximately the size of Romania, one of the most recent EU Member States. At the same time, the accession of Balkan countries would bring in 5-6 relatively poor economies and consumers of budgetary payments, which might still be of lesser concern than their position of new veto players in the Council. Thus, the EU and its Member States should have been more interested in influencing the Balkans and pursuing their interests through association, trade and cooperation agreements than through their EU membership with full rights and obligations. The promise of enlarge-

ment has served to incentivise reforms in these countries (at least to a point) and as an instrument of post-conflict regional stabilisation. Since the 1990s, the EU's action in the bordering regions, especially the Balkans, has been directed at mediating disputes, engaging in state-building, and interfering in internal political affairs, often contrary to its self-proclaimed normative mission (Petrović, Kovačević, and Radić Milosavljević 2023, 102). The EU's liberal, norm-spreading role has been criticised as largely inefficient giving way to the priority of stabilisation, especially during the long period of the EU's internal crises resulting in taking off the enlargement from the EU's agenda.

However, a mere promise of a distant European perspective has not been effective in ousting the influence of other, competing powers from the region. As Russia became more assertive in pursuing its geopolitical interests, especially with the 2008 Georgian war and the 2014 Crimea crisis, the EU's geo-politicisation of narratives surrounding decision-making became evident in the enlargement policy domain. But, new geopolitical moment did not enhance substantially the group cohesion among the EU member states and instead of substantial progress in the enlargement process, parallel initiatives have been started to bind these countries with the EU's energy and transport market and secure the transit of EU supplies.

It was mainly the Commission framing the enlargement policy decisions and documents in a way that increasingly reflected the EU's power competition with the emerging powers in the region (Russia, China, Turkey and UAE) and its (at least declarative) intention to defend its interests. Thus, the EU's enlargement policy towards the Balkans has become a blend of the classic conditionality policy to bring about the desired reforms and stability, on the one hand, and an openly geopolitical, securitised, i.e. realist rhetoric aiding the aggregation and pursuit of EU interests in the bordering regions, on the other.

While analysing the EU's documents and statements on enlargement, we found many examples of such realist rhetoric. As we do not have the space to present them all, we will mention only a few instances. First, we found the elements of groupism in the Commission's attempt to unite the Member States around an idea of a common external threat (Russia), portraying the "other's" influence in the Balkans as "malign" or detrimental. Aware of the Member States' differences in potential enlargement desirability and dynamics, the Commission has been trying to close ranks by securitisation and geo-politicisation of the enlargement policy. The enlargement has been portrayed as essential for enhancing "collective security and prosperity" (European Commission 2020b, 1, emphasis added). Second, egoism is found in the EU/Commission's putting forward the common *interests* and instrumentalising the enlargement policy to

that end by defining it as a “geostrategic investment in long-term peace, stability, and security of the whole of our continent” (European Commission 2022a, 1) and “in stable, strong and united Europe” (European Commission 2018, 1, 2020b, 1). The Western Balkans are depicted as a “geostrategic priority” (European Commission 2020a, 1) for the EU. Finally, power-centrism in the enlargement strategies and narratives is evident in the repeated intention to compete for power and influence in the region with other emerging powers (enlargement policy is “critical ... to tackle malign third country influence” (European Commission 2020b, 1–2)).

However, for the past decade, the enlargement policy results in the Western Balkans have starkly contrasted the proclaimed EU’s strategic interests and geo-politicised narratives. The indecisiveness of the EU Member States about even the modest steps in the association/accession process is striking. The enlargement was almost completely off the EU leaders’ agenda for around four years (2014–2018), as announced by the then-President of the European Commission Jean-Claude Juncker (Poznatov 2014). After that period, a shared comprehension of the unsustainability of such a situation in a changed geopolitical circumstance did not lead to a common understanding of how to effectively use the enlargement instrument once again. Instead, diverging visions on reforming the obviously ineffective policy resulted in modest changes in accession negotiation procedures (“new methodology”) but not in a comprehensive change of the enlargement strategy. These and previous changes (e.g. the 2012 “New approach” and the “fundamentals first” logic) coupled with the loss of conditionality credibility have led to the further raising of the bar for the candidates, thus additionally threatening the effectiveness of the enlargement policy’s transformative and stabilising role (Radic-Milosavljevic and Domaradzki 2022). In other words, the enlargement policy has lost the potential to serve the EU’s interests.

The flourishing of initiatives parallel to the enlargement process (e.g., Berlin process, European geopolitical community, Energy Community, Transport community, etc.) shows that the EU has been developing alternative ways to secure its interests in the Balkans without including them in the membership club. Moreover, the Energy and Transport communities aim to integrate the WBs (and other neighbouring countries) into the EU’s market by way of adoption by these countries of relevant EU laws without the necessity to fulfil political criteria (democratic institutions, the rule of law, fundamental rights and freedoms). It is a sort of *integration without membership* (Lazowski 2008; Vahl and Grolimund 2006) that should allow for securing the EU’s interests (defined, for example, in the new EU’s external energy strategy, e.g., EU energy independence supply chains diversification, etc.) (European Commission 2022b). The finan-

cial assistance offered to the WB through the Economic and Investment Plan and the Green Agenda is directed dominantly to these areas of EU's interest with "the key flagships ... aimed at transitioning from coal, diversifying gas supply routes, investing in renewable energy sources, and intensifying energy savings through the renovation wave" (European Commission 2022a, 4). Even though harmonisation through Energy and Transport communities seems compatible with the accession process as its subject matter belongs to the negotiating cluster IV (Green agenda and sustainable connectivity) and aids legal alignment in these policy areas, it diverges from the overall logic of enlargement conditionality, especially from the so-called "fundamentals first" dictum. In this regard, there seems to be ambiguity between the strategic nature of accession negotiations (focused on improving the country's preparedness to meet membership criteria) and the EU's immediate (shorter-term) preferences, particularly regarding energy security and other domains.

By pushing the WB countries to integrate without membership, the EU diverges away from the enlargement policy or at least transforms it to resemble more the ENP's logic ("everything but institutions"), valid also until recently for the EaP countries. In that respect, the EaP and the WB might seem to have switched their positions on the EU agenda. This is also due to the fact that the credibility of accession has been compromised to such a degree that the enlargement policy produces results that are more adequate for the EaP/ENP (Kovacevic and Petrovic 2023, 63). Conversely, as we shall see in the next section, the EaP countries have been formally welcomed to the (geopoliticized) enlargement policy after granting the (potential) candidate status for Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia. Although their path will seem to resemble the formal enlargement WBs' path by deploying the same or similar enlargement instruments, the geopolitical urgency allowed for a fast track for these countries that contrasts the merit-based approach formally underpinning the enlargement policy. However, such urgency (i.e., the immediate security threat) has been missing from the Western Balkan region affecting the lack of group cohesion among EU member states regarding the enlargement agenda, despite the Commission's attempts at enhancing it through geopolitical/strategic discourses. EU member states remained at their diverging positions regarding both necessity and schedule of enlargement to the Western Balkans. Some groupism in this regard could be identified only in few very modest and long overdue steps taken by supporting the Sarajevo's and Priština's EU integration paths.

The lower visibility of the WB is evident in the wording of the annual 2022 EU-Western Balkans summit in Tirana, which only had two articles: the first one highlighted the war in Ukraine and its broad ramifications,

while the second article confirmed the commitment to the region's accession (Consilium 2022). In that regard, even in documents that are supposed to be tailored for that region, the WB candidates appear to be treated marginally. While even such wording represented progress compared to the previous Brdo summit declaration in 2021, which failed to mention the term "membership" for the WB directly, the fact that the Tirana declaration had only two articles compared to the 29 present in its Brdo counterpart is indicative of the reduced relevance of that region (Consilium 2021). It leads to dilemmas about whether the EU accession of the Western Balkans is considered so self-explanatory that it doesn't require actual content in EU acts, or perhaps it is perceived as so irrelevant that it is not given adequate attention.

EASTERN NEIGHBOURHOOD'S GROWING STRATEGIC RELEVANCE

In the case of the eastern partners, as in the Western Balkans, we find some elements of *groupism* in the securitization and geopoliticization of the EU accession agenda, including through the lens of relations with Russia. The European Council June 2022 Conclusions largely begin by referring to Russian aggression before proceeding to point 10, recognizing the European perspective of Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia (European Council, 2022). Additionally, *power centrism* is evident in political statements, such as the one from the President of the European Commission in December 2023, stating, "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" (EC, 2023). Regarding *egoism*, for instance, there is a 2024 statement by Maroš Šefčovič, Executive Vice-President for European Green Deal, Interinstitutional Relations, and Foresight, asserting that "enlargement is in the Union's own strategic interest," and that "while there are challenges, the benefits of a well-managed enlargement process span across various areas: geopolitical, economic, environmental, social, and democratic" (EC, 2024). However, in order to properly reflect on the specificities of the eastern neighborhood compared to the Western Balkan candidates and how they correlate with realist logic, the authors will further present an evolution of the strategic and geopoliticized approach towards the EaP since its formal foundation.

The Eastern Partnership initiative has been burdened by unclear long-term political goals since its inception. Its foundation can be traced back to the altered geopolitical circumstances and boundaries following the two eastern EU enlargements, NATO enlargements, and the Georgian war (2008). Despite the appearance of a geostrategic motivation

behind its establishment and the presence of geopolitical elements in the EaP declarations and bilateral documents, it did not indicate the existence of a well-defined long-term strategy, nor did it imply clear-oriented results. The lack of long-term political goals, in contrast to the economic objectives aimed at integration, led to confusion. While the EU for years remained silent on the potential recognition of membership perspectives for the eastern partners, the partners' expectations also varied, considering that the membership was neither explicitly promised nor firmly denied (Petrović 2019, 17–18). None of the EaP (Prague 2009, Warsaw 2011, Vilnius 2013, Riga 2015, Brussels 2017, further Council decisions – 2019, 2020) explicitly mentioned EU membership, nor did any other binding EU document (EEAS 2023). Likewise, none of the association agreements with the most ambitious eastern partners – Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia, mentioned that aspect. While Serbia's SAA clearly pointed out the prospect of full political integration as a desired outcome of intensified political dialogue, for instance, in the Article 10 (EUR-Lex 2013), the Moldovan AA (EUR-Lex 2014) only highlighted the economic aspect of integration, coupled with political *association* (italic added for emphasis). Nonetheless, there has been a very subtle change of wording since the Prague Declaration (2009), which aimed at 'political association' (Council of the European Union 2009) and the most recent EaP declaration (Brussels, 2021), which reaffirmed a "strong commitment to our strategic, ambitious, and forward-looking Eastern Partnership" (...) while noting that, as a specific dimension of neighbourhood policy, it "allows bringing the EU and its Eastern European partners closer together" (Council of the European Union 2021). However, this evolution should not be overestimated, as it did not envisage any changes in terms of recognising the long-term outcomes for eastern partners.

On the contrary, the documents referring to the eastern partners between 2009 and 2021 were more indicative of long-standing views that the EaP and the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP) are substitutes for the Union's enlargement, which had previously been the main domain for the display of the EU's cross-border transformative power. The long-standing terminological constructs like 'clear European perspective', 'European choice' and 'ever closer relationship' with eastern partners (Petrović and Kovačević 2023, 73) have been 'upgraded' only several months following the Brussels Eastern Partnership summit (late 2021) when the invasion of Ukraine prompted the EU to reconstitute the strategic partnership.⁴ This also included adjusting the wording to conform to the enlarge-

4 The EU-Ukrainian strategic partnership is currently based on several broad aspects: the association agreement (and its evolution in the context of membership application), the trade agreement, participation in the EaP, EU's support in international forums to Ukraine's

ment terminology. This section specifically focuses on the eastern partners integrated into the enlargement domain. For the remaining partners – Azerbaijan, Armenia (and theoretically also Belarus)⁵ – the advancement of their relations is not solely influenced by the ongoing war dynamics but is further complicated by the dissolution of the EaP before establishing clear long-term strategic objectives.

Until recently, ties between EU and Ukraine were extremely asymmetrical; conditionality increased in parallel with the deepening of relations, Brussels maintained that territorial integrity issues needed to be resolved (while its own role in the escalation of the Ukrainian crisis has been marginalised), that “European choice” needed to be maintained, while the EU continued to demonstrate the lack of long-term political commitment towards that country and its neighbours (Petrović 2019, 104). The European Union’s ‘ring of friends’ logic⁶ has been maintained until the comprehensive assault on Ukraine began in 2022. In other words, the absence of a long-term strategy (such as establishing the full membership perspective or a roadmap towards external form of integration, such as the EFTA) was disguised under the “integration without membership” approach (Van der Loo 2015) – a technocratic process aimed at securing a comprehensive external alignment in political and economic matters while excluding the membership prospects for the eastern partners. Popescu also examined this phenomenon, referring to it as “enlargement-lite (Popescu and Wilson 2009). Interestingly, a similar technocratized approach also occurred in the enlargement domain in the context of accession fatigue and a multitude of challenges. Using tools and mechanisms resembling those of the enlargement policy, the EU attempted to foster an impression of increased deepening of collaboration with the eastern partners while formally restraining them from entering the enlargement domain. The association treaties with Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia, apart from complete economic integration, aimed at political association rather than integration – a *differentia specifica* compared to the Western Balkans.

In the case of the three eastern partners – Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia – such an approach proved to be tactical or temporary rather than strategic, given that the EU dramatically altered its approach, at least in formal terms. As the invasion started in 2022, the three eastern partners were allowed to submit EU membership applications (in February and

sovereignty and territorial integrity and cooperation in the context of the damaging Russian activities in Ukraine.

5 Belarus has self-suspended its participation in the initiative since 2021 onwards.

6 ‘The ring of friends’ is a reference to the EU neighborhood policy elaborated by the former President of the European Commission Jose Manuel Barroso in his speech titled: “The European Union and the Emerging World Order – Perceptions and Strategies” in 2004.

March). This signalled a geopoliticization of EU enlargement activities, aligning them with the geopoliticization of discourse, and the two became increasingly intertwined.

The questionnaires were filled out with perhaps record speed.⁷ The Opinion on Ukraine's membership application (European Commission 2022, 2) states that the country has responded to the questions in political and economic criteria domains in 9 days and to the *acquis* part in 26 days. Recognising that that country is a "European State which has given ample proof of its adherence to the values on which the European Union is founded", the European Commission (2022, 20) recommended the formal recognition of membership perspective to that country while in addition it also recommended a formal candidate status "on the understanding that... (seven designated priority areas, author's remarks)...are taken". However, within days, regardless of some reservations contained in the European Commission's Opinion regarding the fulfilment of the seven priority areas, in a landmark geopolitical move, the European Council endorsed both membership perspective and candidate status for Ukraine and Moldova. At the same time, Georgia's candidacy was postponed until conditions are met. However, despite the distaste for Georgia's cooperation with Russia, criticism for Ukraine and the troubling state of democracy in the country, the European Council (2023, 5) did ultimately recognize its candidate status. The reasons for that are of geopolitical and/or strategic nature – cooperation with the most pro-European Caucasus nation is not to be dismissed in favour of Russia during these difficult times (Light, Baczyńska 2023). In the case of the leading WB candidates – Montenegro and Serbia – formal membership recognition (Thessaloniki summit, 2003) was years apart from the candidate status. Truth be told, the advanced political and trade association agreements that have been in place for Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia since the previous decade have paved the way for their membership applications, enabling alignment and approximation even ahead of the membership recognition.

In 2022, the European Commission issued a list of recommendations concerning the further progress of the eastern partners along their EU paths. The list included seven (7) recommendations for Ukraine, nine (9) for Moldova, and twelve (12) for Georgia. By June 2023, Ukraine has made good progress in domains of Constitutional Court reform and completed the tasks in the domain of judicial governance and media legislation, while some progress has been detected in anti-corruption, anti-money laundering, curtailing of oligarchy and national minorities. That means that most of the mentioned priorities have been addressed only to a limited

7 One of the recent examples in that regard is Iceland, which replied to the questionnaire in only 6 weeks in 2010. In the case of WB countries, the process took much longer.

degree. In February 2023, the European Commission published its analytical reports assessing the capacity of the three eastern candidates to assume the obligations of EU membership, providing an overview of their alignment with the EU *acquis*, and complementing the favourable Opinions on the three countries' applications for EU membership adopted by the European Commission in June 2022 (European Commission 2023). An EU diplomat who is engaged in the process stated in June 2023 that "the focus is on the positives" (Brzozowski 2023). In December 2023, the European Council (2023, 5) decided to open accession negotiations with Ukraine and Moldova and grant candidate status to Georgia. However, this manifestation of groupism between Member States was secured in a somewhat unusual manner. Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán had objected to a €50 billion euro package of financial aid for Kyiv and threatened to also halt the enlargement agenda decisions. However, Chancellor of Germany Olaf Scholz convinced Orbán to leave the room to clear the way for a unanimous decision on the opening of accession negotiations, whereas the decision on financial aid was postponed (Gray et al. 2023)..

CONCLUSION

After the previous analysis of fast-tracking the EaP countries and sidelining the WBs on their EU membership path several aspects need to be addressed here.

Firstly, the fact that the EU has suddenly changed its perception regarding the membership prospects of some eastern partners does not imply that it has formulated a clear strategy in that regard. The swift progress of the eastern candidates may be a tactical response aimed at convincing the security rival of the firm strategic partnership with the Eastern European countries. Once the security threat is reduced (necessary to consider admitting Ukraine as a country at war), the EU's motivation for fast-tracking the eastern candidates may also decrease.

Secondly, it is questionable whether one could speak of a strategic approach towards enlargement in circumstances when the enlargement strategy has been deficient for many years or perhaps even nonexistent. Serbia and Montenegro have been negotiating EU membership for a decade, Albania and North Macedonia have been attempting to open negotiation clusters for years, while Bosnia-Herzegovina and Priština are still far from that stage. While in technocratic terms certain steps are taking place, strategically speaking, the countries are not nearing EU membership, both due to difficulties surrounding their democratization or bilateral disputes and the EU's unwillingness to define a timeline of accession, as in earlier enlargement rounds. The stalemate in EU enlargement policy contains far-reaching consequences for the EU's strategic role and

interests, affecting the EU's credibility, security, economic opportunities, normative power, and influence in its neighbourhood. Resolving this stalemate and reinvigorating the enlargement process is essential for the EU to maintain its strategic relevance and achieve its long-term goals in its neighborhood.

Thirdly, although eastern partners have only recently been given a membership perspective, the geopolitical urgency might stimulate their more dynamic EU accession compared to the Western Balkans, even though (some) WB candidates are more advanced in the process. Such a scenario would imply a need for a strategic approach towards the EaP but not towards the WB, which would be unfair to the long-standing candidates whose membership prospects were recognised 20 years ago in Thessaloniki. An additional paradox lies in the fact that, whereas security concerns drive the EU's interest in integrating the WB, it is also concerned that the unresolved political and ethnic issues in the Western Balkans could exacerbate tensions and create security challenges within the EU. For this reason, it cautiously approaches the region. Contrastingly, the eastern partners, all of which have unresolved territorial disputes, with one experiencing ongoing conflict, are being expedited towards membership, even though the Western Balkans are significantly more stable and less vulnerable to great-power competition, including Russia. The geopolitical and other vulnerabilities of the eastern partners constitute a major motive behind their rapid EU integration path. In contrast, the Western Balkans have a lower priority, despite undergoing Europeanization processes for over 20 years, some more advanced indicators or established mechanisms for regional cooperation.

The previous analysis finally brings us to the following question: are we heading towards an enlarged enlargement policy or an enlarged Eastern Partnership logic, that would encompass the Western Balkan candidates? We aimed to tackle a very broad research problem: whether the geopolitization of the discourse might serve as a smoke-screen to obscure the lack of actual strategic decision-making (exemplified by the absence of a clear strategy, instruments, and a range of short, medium, and long-term goals for the two regions). For instance, while consistently highlighting appreciation for Ukraine's struggle in the context of recognition of its membership prospects, other critical issues, such as how a country facing invasion can progress in fulfilling Copenhagen and other criteria, and how these aspects spill over to other candidates' bids (including the WB), as well as more practical aspects such as how EU institutions are preparing to assist Ukraine, one of the largest agricultural producers, in using funds, are often sidelined.

While there is a clear trend toward the geopolitization and securitisation of EU narratives, there also appears to be an absence of a strong group

cohesion and a shared or common interest. Additionally, the ambition for power centrism is largely declarative, as concrete strategies and instruments are notably absent. Overall, from a realist perspective, this argumentation illustrates the tension between the EU's desire to engage in geopolitics and security matters, its challenges in forging a shared interest among Member States, and the potential gap between its declarative ambition for power centrism and its actual capacity to achieve it. Realism underscores the importance of power, self-interest, and concrete actions in shaping the behaviour of states and international actors, and these dynamics are only to an extent evident in the EU's approach to its immediate neighbourhood.

In the WBs, its enlargement policy is close to a standstill despite being perceived as “a geostrategic investment in long term peace, stability, and security” in Europe and an instrument for tackling the “malign influence” of other global powers. While the WBs are slowly sinking towards authoritarianism, ever-growing corruption and organised crime, the EU's instruments have been modest, slow, and unsuitable for establishing a stable and secure regional order and thus for fulfilling the EU's (or its Member States's) own interests. The EU's groupism operating at the level of a minimum common denominator developed several alternative initiatives directed at satisfying immediate EU's needs/priorities in the Balkan region (e.g., energy and transport integration and accompanying funds) and leaving the enlargement policy aside. This situation presents a paradox because, while the European perspective of eastern candidates is gaining strength, the membership prospects of the older candidates might be shifting towards alternative integration models. In this aspect, it appears that the two regions have, to some extent, exchanged their roles within the EU's neighbourhood plans. The eastern partners' accession goals are now taking centre stage, while the WB's long-promised membership is moving towards integration without accession. The fact remains that the war has not prompted significant (or any) changes in decision-making processes or led to long-term strategies (which does not mean they won't emerge in the future).

However, the war has encouraged some common agreements concerning sanctions against Russia, the acceleration of energy policy reforms, aid to Ukraine, both in military and financial terms, and ultimately, the prospect of membership. These developments represent a step toward groupism, as there was a sense of belonging to the same community/side, which led to a somewhat unified European response, despite the unanimity requirement. There's also an element of power-centrism, even though no new capacities are being developed. It's about power competition and influence in the region (power as a relational concept rather than the existence of capabilities). Likewise, regarding egoism, both individual

and collective, the decisions made by the EU align with common or individually perceived security interests, while the insistence on upholding EU values seems to have been put on hold for better times. However, while these developments are observed as a consequence of altered geopolitical and other circumstances in the eastern neighborhood, primarily affecting that region, the Western Balkans has not been given the same treatment, despite its decades-old status in the enlargement policy. This is due to its minor geopolitical and other significance for the EU.

The geopoliticization of both narratives and decision-making seems to primarily affect the eastern partners and only to a lesser degree the 'old candidates'. While geopolitical circumstances did encourage the progress of some 'laggard candidates' towards EU membership (e.g., Bosnia-Herzegovina), it can hardly be compared to the fast-track inclusion of countries like Moldova in the enlargement agenda, as a full-fledged membership candidate, during only several months. While geopoliticization certainly affected both regions, resulting in significant and swift changes primarily for the eastern partners, that aspect should not be equated with strategic actions and discourses that are broader and more long-term oriented. Geopolitical discourses and actions might also be tactical – primarily meant for this current period marked by great security concerns and instability. The fact that 20 months following the aggression of one of the largest European countries, strategic acts enabling at least mid-term EU enlargements have still not been adopted is indicative of the possibility that the geopoliticization of EU discourses and activities might be tactical and temporary, and it might perhaps subside once the geopolitical concerns (primarily surrounding the war) diminish. Even mentioning provisional dates of possible enlargement proved unwelcome among the EU actors, as observed following the 2030 initiative by Charles Michel in August 2023. As a result, both regions might find themselves in a situation where they have been included in an enlarged enlargement policy that has no real perspective of membership.

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EU ENLARGEMENT POLICY BETWEEN THE CHRONOLOGICAL PRECEDENCE
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