

# EXPLORING BEYOND THE FORMAL CHARACTERISTICS OF THE EU ENLARGEMENT POLICY

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## **Abstract:**

*The shifting security environment in Europe necessitates an urgent reform of the EU's enlargement policy. Its meaningful redefinition requires a systematic understanding of the underlying principles, operational mechanisms, and their concrete effects. This paper examines its real-world application by studying the European Commission's annual reports for four candidate and potential candidate countries. Using a mixed-method qualitative-quantitative approach, we identify key structural characteristics beyond official discourse. These findings lay the groundwork for significant reforms in the EU's approach to future enlargements.*

**Keywords:** EU enlargement policy; Transformation in the Western Balkans and former Soviet states

## **Introduction**

The shifting security environment in Europe, accelerated by Russia's war against Ukraine, has heightened the political relevance of the EU's enlargement policy. Until 2022, the process had largely stagnated in the face of persistent challenges in candidate countries – including limited economic competitiveness, inconsistent adherence to democratic norms and the rule of law, and deep-rooted differences in historical experience, political culture, and socio – economic development (Börzel 2023; Schimmelfennig 2023b; Sydow and Kreiling 2023). The current geopolitical context has revitalised enlargement, expanding both its scale and strategic scope. At the same time, however, it has placed substantial pressure on the EU to reassess the principles and mechanisms guiding accession (Schimmelfennig 2025; Börzel 2023; Domaradzki 2023; Schimmelfennig 2023a; Sydow and Kreiling 2023; Nizhnikau and Moshes 2024).

The upcoming enlargement is being conducted under a renewed methodology which was adopted in 2020 and initially designed for the Western Balkan

countries. This reform was rooted in a critical reflection on past experiences – particularly the challenges associated with the post-accession trajectories of Bulgaria and Romania. The framework was designed before the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, and its application has since been complicated further by shifting geopolitical priorities and evolving strategic imperatives.

## **Analytical Approach**

This paper investigates the underlying logic of the EU's current enlargement methodology, which is most clearly embedded in the European Commission's annual enlargement reports. Therefore, the contents of the latest reports for four candidate countries – Albania, Serbia, Ukraine, and Moldova – will be used as an empirical source to explore the political mechanisms shaping enlargement practice.

Specifically, the analysis examines:

- 1) the portrayal of key actors in the process;
- 2) the portrayal of the progress in the core reform areas.

Through this dual focus, the paper reconstructs the EU's operative priorities in the enlargement policy, moving beyond declarative rhetoric to uncover its underlying logic.

## **Socio-historical background**

The EU enlargement policy, necessitated by the Eastern enlargement, was fundamentally a non-military solution to complex geopolitical challenges post-Cold War, such as German reunification and regional instability (O'Brennan 2007; Veleva 2021; Dimitrov 2023). Despite the incompatibility of CEE countries' political, economic, and societal models with Western European principles, which called for deep structural reforms, the process was managed with a „logic of historical continuity“ (Dimitrov 2023).

To sidestep political disputes, enlargement management was depoliticized and delegated to the European Commission, framing it as a technocratic procedure primarily focused on rule transfer (acceptance of the *acquis communautaire*) rather than deep, irreversible reforms. This approach exposed major flaws in conditionality, revealing that assumptions about the EU's „power of attraction“ and „power asymmetry“ were debatable, particularly in the face of local resistance to reforms (Popova 2022). Paradoxically, academic literature often mirrored this policy logic, solidifying its presumed validity instead of prompting a fundamental redefinition of the cognitive perspective (Dimitrov 2026).

The limited and uneven outcomes of the Eastern enlargement, still evident almost two decades after Bulgaria and Romania's accession, underscore these persistent shortcomings. While the European Commission formally updated its approach after Croatia's accession, emphasizing tangible results and fundamental

chapters, these changes do not affect the foundational assumptions that continue to rely primarily on the transfer of legislation. This raises the critical question of whether the proclaimed new approach is genuinely transformative or merely a continuation of the old one, and if it can effectively prepare countries for meaningful and sustainable EU membership.

### **Case selection**

The four cases – Albania, Serbia, Ukraine, and Moldova – were selected to capture variation across key dimensions relevant to EU enlargement: regional context, formal accession status, and political trajectory. Albania and Serbia represent the Western Balkans and are at different stages of the negotiation process, offering insights into how procedural progress intersects with political challenges. Ukraine and Moldova reflect the EU's evolving engagement with the Eastern Partnership region, where geopolitical urgency has redefined traditional accession logic.

This selection enables a comparative analysis of how the EU's revised enlargement methodology operates across distinct settings. More importantly, it reveals how formal criteria interact with informal drivers – such as regional security concerns, strategic alignment, and perceived loyalty – highlighting the underlying rationale shaping enlargement decisions.

### **Methodology:**

The paper builds on the social constructivist paradigm as a productive perspective to studying the subject of EU enlargement. This methodological perspective views the process as a complex interaction between multi-level actors who take part in this interaction through their perceptions, values, beliefs, attitudes, goals. The EU with its complex structure of interests between member states, institutions, businesses, citizens, is represented in this interaction by the European Commission. The clearest expression of the Commission's priorities and goals sought in the different countries, as well as the methods to achieve, are the annual reports in the enlargement packages. Thus, we will use as an empirical source the latest reports published in October 2024 by the European Commission on the four studied countries.

While acknowledging that these reports reflect the official and formalized vision of the EU, and not the entirety of the complex political interplays behind enlargement, the analysis aims to go beyond declarative content. To this end, a tailored qualitative-quantitative analytical instrument has been developed to reconstruct the structure of implicit priorities and logics within the reports – what we refer to as the Commission's practical enlargement logic.

This method consists of a number of concrete steps. Firstly, the documents will be broken down into individual semantic accents, representing the different variants of meaning. At the next step, these semantic accents will be structured

back together following the logic of the research subject itself. Then each individual semantic accent will be placed under the specific actor it is related to. In this logic, we will reach a complete structure, allowing us to grasp the general picture of the actual priorities in the process. This structure will differ greatly from the structure of the declarative priorities, presented in the report, and will be instructive for evaluating the selection of the concrete elements which will then be subjected to in-depth quantitative analysis.

### **Empirical results:**

The following will present the results of the empirical analysis on the four candidate states:

#### **Albania:**

Starting with Albania, we have identified a very diverse picture of actors - most of them concentrated internally within Albania (the most represented actors being Parliament, Government, Albanian authorities, media, judicial system but we also see reference to civil society, police, customs and others, some represented with just a single semantic accent), or the EU, including the EC, leaders, MSs. There are a few semantic accents that refer to actors from the Western Balkan region, Russia, Ukraine, and a number of Western actors.

As a next step, we will take a close look at how the structure of actors on the Albanian side look, and in what terms and connotations the most significant ones are used.

First of all, there are 210 references to ‘Albania’ as a collective actor. It is interesting to note that when ‘Albania’ is used in general terms, it is used exclusively as the subject in the sentence. There are only three examples in which ‘Albania’ takes on the passive role of an object, and they refer to „Türkiye’s pressure on Albania to deliver on dismantling the ‘Gülen’ movement in the country“, and with Albania being „a beneficiary of EU programs“ (e.g. the international dimension of the Erasmus+ programme.) In 68% of the cases ‘Albania’ is used with a positive connotation. In the majority of the cases „Albania actively engages“ in initiatives, „Albania’s stance sends a strong signal“, „Albania maintained its record of full alignment with the EU’s common foreign and security policy“, while there are fewer case talking about „limited progress“, e.g. „Albania is not aligned with the acquis on victims’ rights“, „has not yet set up a national drugs observatory“.

Among the semantic accents referring to a general ‘Albania’ we can distinguish between several categories:

- the most used category has to do with **adoption/non-adoption of legislation** and strategies and alignment/ non-alignment with the EU-acquis in a certain area („On the legal cultivation of cannabis for medical and industrial purposes, Albania adopted three pieces of the required implementing legislation“).

- the next category reflects **participation in various initiatives and programs** (either EU-ones or regional - Creative Europe, Horizon Europe, etc.).
- the next one registers **‘commitment’** (continued to show its commitment to EU integration).
- **alignment with positions or sanctions** (Albania maintained its record of full alignment with the EU’s common foreign and security policy).
- and finally, the minority of semantic accents address **a concrete action**: (Albania assumed the Chairmanship-in-Office of the Western Balkans Fund and the Berlin Process in 2023).

### Serbia:

In the Serbian case, while the majority of actors again fit under Serbia and the EU, we have identified a substantial share of semantic accents related to different countries in the Western Balkan region. Among them, the biggest focus is placed on Kosovo<sup>1</sup> which is a sign of the special status of the relationship between the two countries for the integration process. However, there is an extensive list of semantic accents referring to many other countries from the region (Bosnia and Herzegovina, Albania, Croatia, Montenegro), as well as various regional initiatives in which Serbia takes active part, mostly of economic character, which in fact perfectly depicts the leading position of the country exemplified through the chapters opened and provisionally closed.

This advancement in terms of integration in different Single market initiatives is in fact evident also through the structure of accents showing the different aspects of the interaction process - for example, among 25 accents, 9 (more than 1/3rd) concern Serbia’s involvement in the new Growth plan for the Western Balkans, concerning different gradual integration initiatives. The semantic accents which have to deal with the negotiations process in terms of status, pace and all other aspects (outside the gradual integration to the Single market) have again 9 semantic accents, which only confirm the relative priority of this particular aspect of the process. The third large group of semantic accents which fall under the interaction process are related to Serbia’s alignment with EU’s common foreign and security policy. This is particularly interesting, because the section dedicated to this matter is the last in the report, presents the last in order negotiating chapter, and its total length is less than 2 pages. However, we see throughout the entire document there has been sufficient evidence showing that this is in fact a main element of the negotiations process. Here, not surprisingly, the semantic accents involved have to do with the unalignment of Serbia to the EU’s common foreign positions.

The majority of semantic accents refer to the agents within the generic actor „Serbia“ (180 cases) refer to Serbia in general terms. 100% of the cases it is

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<sup>1</sup> This designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with UNSCR 1244/1999 and the ECJ Opinion on the Kosovo Declaration of Independence.

used as the subject in the sentence, however, we see a difference in the positive/negative connotation which is almost even - there is a very slight prevalence in the positive connotations (only 54%). We observe the same categories of usages, identified in the Albanian case, however, with different weight. Here a strong focus is placed on:

- **alignment with positions or sanctions** („Serbia aligned with some EU positions in international forums“; „Serbia is expected to progressively align its policies towards third countries with the policies and positions adopted by the EU“; „Serbia still does not align with any restrictive measures against the Russian Federation“)

Here, we can also observe a group of semantic accents related:

- to **foreign relations** („Serbia has maintained high-level relations with the Russian Federation“. „has intensified its relations with China“)

Going forward, we have identified:

- **adoption/non-adoption of legislation** and strategies and alignment/ non-alignment with the EU-acquis in a certain area („Serbia is not aligned with the EU postal acquis“, „not aligned with the banking regulations“);
- **participation in various initiatives and programs** is a particularly strong category in the Serbian case („Serbia has actively engaged in the implementation of the new Growth Plan for the Western Balkans“, „has taken part in several regional initiatives“);
- the next one registers ‘**commitment**’ („Serbia continues to declare EU membership as its strategic goal“, „Committed to implement obligations with Kosovo“);
- and finally, the minority of semantic units address a **concrete action**.

This shows a unique trajectory of Serbia’s accession path.

### **Moldova:**

The next section will look at how the main actors and the main reform processes are depicted in Moldova’s case.

Here again we see that the most semantic units refer to „Moldova“ and internal actors within, followed by the EU in general, EC, EU leaders and MSs. It is interesting to note however that both ‘Ukraine’ and ‘Russia’ (including Russia’s proxies) appear as well-recognised separate actors in the report. The security context plays a key role in the overall structure. This clearly shows the EU’s relationship with Moldova is framed through the war in Ukraine.

As we can see, the most frequently used actor is ‘Moldova’ in general terms, however we have a substantial share of semantic accents where ‘Moldova’ is not the subject in the sentence - „Russia’s war against Ukraine creates challenges for Moldova“, „hybrid actions against Moldova from Russia and its proxies“,

„ongoing threats to its energy supplies“, „The EU remains fully committed to Moldova’s territorial integrity“. As we can see in the examples in most of these cases Moldova is portrayed as the victim, while Russia is the subject; in a few instances EU is the subject, where the stress is placed on its commitment. This initial finding shows the priority in the relations with Moldova and the EU’s perception about its own role in this interaction - as a supporter to the security, rather than a supporter to achieving Europeanising reforms which would prepare the country for eventual membership. The semantic accents with positive and negative connotations are more or less equal (78 to 75). The positive ones predominantly concern the country’s response to the geopolitical challenge - „continuing to cope with the unprecedented challenges resulting from Russia’s war of aggression against Ukraine“; „has shown resilience“, „has responded to ongoing threats to its energy supplies“, „to its security“. On the contrary, the negative ones are directed towards actual challenges in the reform processes - „Moldova should further strive to align its electoral processes with the highest democratic standards“, „should continue to engage with the Venice Commission and the OSCE/ODIHR on any potential changes to the Electoral Code“, „should design an overall policy on reforming the central public institutions“. It is obvious however, that these aspects are quite vague, in contrast to what we observed in the case of the two Western Balkan countries, and often related to recommendations from 3rd parties.

### **Ukraine:**

The Ukrainian case presents a vastly different structure of actors and distribution of semantic accents altogether. A serious share of the semantic accents concern the geopolitical landscape and Russia appears as a major actor with 39 references in the report, although represented in a small number of variations in meaning - war, aggression, cyberattacks, disinformation campaigns, hacking campaigns<sup>2</sup>. This presence of Russia restates the geopolitical dimension of the enlargement process, and shows that in the Ukrainian case the focus has been shifted away from the preparatory efforts. This observation is reinstated by the fact that when it comes to the dimensions of the interaction process, only 5 semantic accents deal with the elements of the negotiations process which is about 19%. In contrast, 12 semantic accents deal with Ukraine facility, 8 with the Security and defence partnership, and 6 with the Association agreement. Ironically, all three can be seen as alternatives to membership. This finding clearly shows where EU’s priorities stand when the relationship with Ukraine is concerned.

The first very interesting finding is related to the use of ‘Ukraine’ as a generic actor - there are 212 uses to Ukraine altogether, where in about 60% of the

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<sup>2</sup> This is an example showing the important distinction between number of references and variants of semantic units, which is central in the methodology used in this study. The analysis works with semantic accents, not references in order to be more precise in capturing the actual dimensions in the perceptions of actors and processes.



semantic accents Ukraine is used as an object, and in most of these cases 'EU' is the subject - „EU supports the independence of Ukraine“, „EU supports the sovereignty of Ukraine“, „EU supports the territorial integrity of Ukraine“, „EU supports Ukraine's internationally recognised borders“, provides „flexible support to Ukraine“, „predictable support to Ukraine“, „supports its recovery“, its „modernisation“, its „immediate financial needs“. This portrays a very peculiar relationship of perceived power asymmetry multiple times stronger than in any other case in the accession process, where among the goals in the interaction, neither the Europeanisation reform process, nor the EU membership per se seem to be recognised.

### **Discussion of empirical findings:**

The empirical findings reaffirm the central role of the geopolitical environment as the primary driving force in the process. The data showed how different priorities are formed with the different countries in the interaction process (not necessarily heading towards membership), and these priorities are in fact the sum of geopolitical considerations.

The most striking differences between the four studied cases come when the countries are presented in the reports without a reference to any specific domestic actors. We see that the two Balkan countries are presented predominantly as acting subjects, while the two Eastern countries are often objects in the Commission's statements. This is showing the EC's perception of their position in the negotiations - they are victims of the circumstances, and especially in the Ukrainian case, recipients of the EU's support and sympathy, rather than real partners in the process. Obviously, in these cases, the actual preparation for EU membership is very distant from the real goals and priorities in the interaction. The sympathy towards Ukraine is also presented in the overwhelmingly positive image of the country which is not mirrored when referring to specific actors and specific processes. In these sections the continuous resilience and continuous operation within the conditions of war remain among the key evaluated characteristics, although they have nothing to do with the enlargement methodology.

Looking at the content and substance behind the full spectrum of semantic accents we see that neither of the 4 countries are anywhere close to complete reforms. For geopolitical reasons, however, progress needs to be proved and registered in the reports, making the membership perspective real. Therefore, the EC needs to demonstrate fast progress in some of the countries.

The empirical results lead to several interesting conclusions about the interaction process itself. They prove that the EU integration process continues to be an elite-driven process. Despite the brave declarations about the key role of the civil society in the process in all official communications, the analysis clearly shows that the EU continues to recognise national governments and political elites as the key partners in the process.



## Conclusion

Despite strong declarations that the revised enlargement methodology would address the shortcomings of the Eastern enlargement, this study demonstrates that the EU's approach remains rooted in the same foundational assumptions: a perceived power asymmetry, the prioritisation of political elites as primary partners, and a conditionality framework centred on *acquis* compliance. These dynamics are evident in both the portrayal of domestic actors and the superficial treatment of reform progress in Commission reports. Drawing on a semantic-structural analysis of Commission discourse, the findings point to a persistent gap between the EU's rhetorical commitment to transformative reform and its practical engagement on the ground. Given the heightened geopolitical stakes and the broader scope of the forthcoming enlargement, a comprehensive rethinking of the EU's enlargement logic – one that addresses both the structural and discursive limitations of the current approach – is essential to safeguard the Union's long-term credibility, cohesion, and strategic effectiveness.

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