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Sweeping It Under the Rug? EU Issue
Reprioritisation and Frozen Conflicts in a
Geopolitical World

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Introduction & Significance

For historical institutionalists, Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine represents a critical juncture for European Union (EU) geopolitics, specifically enlargement (Dimitrova, 2023). Intuitively, one might assume that enlargement's return to the forefront would equal increased attention paid to candidates' democratic reform, long-lasting stability and resolving frozen conflicts - common in post-Soviet candidates like Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia - to facilitate their accession. Nonetheless, some scholars argue that faced with geopolitics' return, the EU treats such issues as secondary vis-a-vis strategically significant ones, like fast-tracked enlargement to expand the EU's reach eastwards, counterbalancing Russian hegemony. Yet, amid Russia's instrumentalisation of frozen conflicts to destabilise post-Soviet states and maintain its grip over them, the Union's potential neglect of such issues could hinder its ability to promote regional stability. Therefore, this paper adopts a historical institutionalist framework to conduct a frame analysis comparing Cyprus with Georgia and Moldova during their EU candidacies, to contrast the EU's approach to frozen conflicts pre- and post-Russia's invasion respectively, yielding the research question: *How has EU actors' approach to frozen conflicts in candidate states changed since Russia invaded Ukraine?* Upon discussing relevant literature and drafting a theoretical framework hinting at explanations for a distinct post-invasion approach, this paper explains its research design before analysing the frame analysis' results, followed by an interpretation in dialogue with the research question.

This study's academic significance lies in the lack of similar existing work. Although some scholars have theorised on post-critical juncture EU priority reorientation, this has never been applied in the context of frozen conflict resolution (Hernández & Closa, 2024). In that regard, this paper innovates by linking such theories to frozen conflicts, potentially revealing the EU's novel approach to conflict resolution in its eastern neighbourhood. Additionally, even pre-invasion, frozen conflicts are rarely studied in conjunction with EU enlargement.

Regarding the study's societal and policy relevance, if findings suggest that the EU is sweeping frozen conflicts "under the rug" to facilitate quick accession and the subsequent geopolitical benefits that follow, then the Union is undermining conflict resolution, jeopardising the territorial integrity of prospective members stuck in a state of limbo and potentially allowing states that do not meet the Copenhagen Criteria to join. This is because states with persisting frozen conflicts, often involving separatist/breakaway entities supported by third parties like Russia, do not exercise full control over their entire territory, hence hindering membership requirements about robust market institutions, democratic standards and the ability to apply the EU *acquis* throughout their territory (European Council, 1993). It may

also allow third parties to influence the Union from within indirectly. Enlargement reports explicitly claim that adherence to the Copenhagen Criteria is the sole accession criterion, rejecting geostrategic pressures' influence on the Union's judgement of a state's progress (European Commission, 2023a, p. 2). Thus, if findings suggest otherwise, this would signal a contradiction between EU rhetoric and practice, further indicating that EU institutions attempt to "conceal" their post-juncture, de facto-shifted approach.

Literature Review & Theoretical Framework

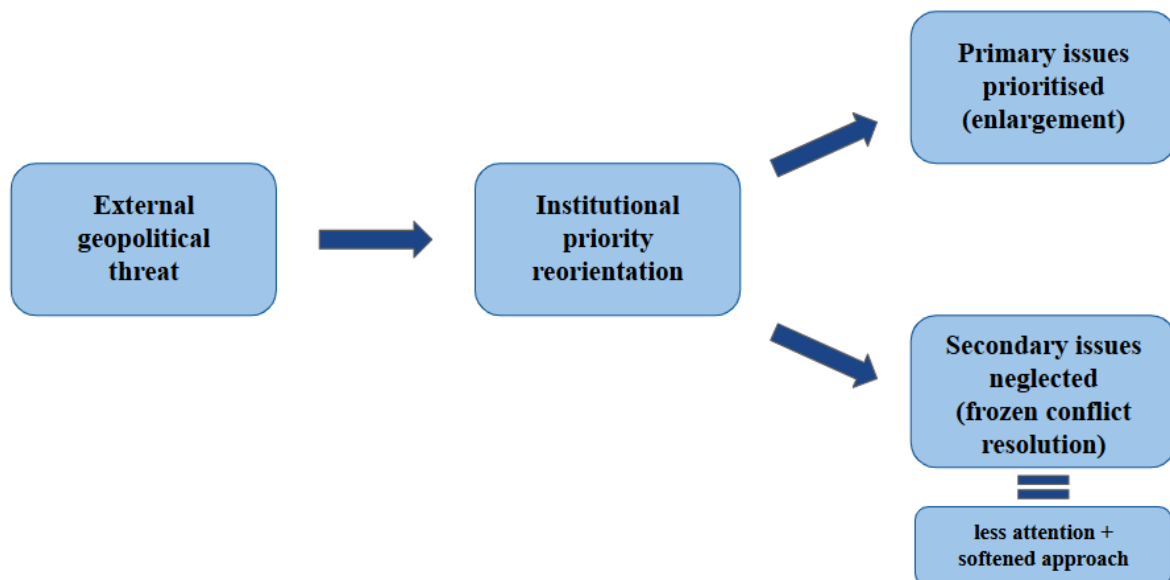
A handful of scholars theorise on EU enlargement's impact on conflict resolution, alas these cases remain limited and primarily focus on Cyprus, as it is the most clear-cut example of a state with an unresolved frozen conflict entering the Union. Kyris (2013) argues that accession brought incentives for conflict resolution via conditionality, despite the eventual rejection of the Annan plan, aiming to create a federal republic on the island (p. 6). Although reunification failed, some evidence indicates that accession conditionality could at least increase parties' willingness to negotiate, as conflict resolution was at the time presented as an accession prerequisite (pp. 7-8). Others argue that conditionality is insufficient for conflict resolution and label the EU response in Cyprus "unclear" (Kamov, 2006). Hence, the Union could not reunify Cyprus, so it internalised the conflict and allowed Cyprus to raise it as a European issue (pp. 33-38). Additionally, no studies explicitly examine conflict resolution progress evaluation in enlargement reports, instead investigating how enlargement impacted conflicts, but never vice versa. Nonetheless, it is evident that until the Eastern enlargement, EU accession and conflict resolution were extensively intertwined.

There is a noticeable literature gap on frozen conflicts in the context of enlargement in the post-Soviet space, specifically Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia, which were granted candidate status post-Russia's invasion (European Commission, 2024d). While various studies investigate their conflicts, and EU involvement in resolution efforts (e.g. Berg & Vits, 2024; Mnatsakanyan, 2018), this is rarely done through the prism of enlargement. Crucially, Karjalainen (2023) uses EU personnel interviews to posit that behind closed doors, enlargement is perceived as still linked to conflict resolution, perhaps now more than ever, considering Russian expansionism. However, staff's individual perceptions potentially vary from institutional practice, rhetoric and signalling directed towards the public and candidate administrations - which remain understudied. It is thus clear that there is a lack of research on how the recent geopolitical revival impacted enlargement policies on frozen conflicts in post-Soviet states at the institutional level.

To theorise on how the invasion affected EU issue reprioritisation regarding frozen conflicts, this paper heavily borrows from historical institutionalist theorists, insofar as critical junctures are conceptualised as altering actors' behaviour/preferences (Capoccia & Kelemen, 2007, p. 343). Hernández and Closa (2024) focus on the Union's internal democratic crisis to show how the war reoriented the EU's approach, using funding to "reward" Poland but "punish" Hungary because of the latter's milder stance against Russia, rendering democracy protection a *secondary* issue vis-a-vis geopolitics, which is now a *primary* concern (p. 968). As a result, the Union follows a softened and assertive stance on Poland and Hungary respectively, depending on their performance in primary issues. Albeit diverging in their conclusion regarding softened frames, Bárd and Kochenov (2022) similarly argue that the internal democratic crisis is subordinate to geopolitics, and sidelined in the face of Russian imperialism. Although both papers examine internal issues being subordinated vis-a-vis geopolitics, such a framework can also be applied to external action. Saatçioğlu (2009) presents evidence of political and economic considerations sidelining the Copenhagen Criteria during Türkiye's accession negotiations, even before the Erdoğan regime's democratic backsliding was identified as a matter of concern by EU institutions. She argues that the accession negotiations' progress was not proportional to Türkiye's adherence to EU treaty-derived conditions, but rather high-politics matters like bilateral conflicts with members and perceptions of how Türkiye's economy would shift EU dynamics. Empirical data corroborates the premise of *external* issue reprioritisation, linking it to Russia's invasion, showing that post-2022 the EU adopts a softened framing of democratic insufficiencies in candidate states, with accession criteria potentially becoming sidelined by geopolitical concerns (Ioannou, 2024).

Concerning the present research question, allowing states like Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova into the Union would expand European influence eastwards, counterbalancing Russia's expanding reach. Thus, the framework above can be extended to hypothesise that other issues involving adherence to accession criteria, like frozen conflict resolution and effective control over a government's whole territory, have been subordinated vis-a-vis geopolitics. However, if ensuring accession is the EU's primary concern, post-invasion, it may be prompted to leave such conflicts in a "state of limbo" to fast-track accession. Hence, *less attention* and a *softened stance* towards conflict resolution can be expected in EU evaluations of post-invasion candidates, compared to pre-invasion, regardless of separate conflict resolution programmes, or the eventual outcome of such efforts, per Graph 1. This yields the hypotheses *H1: EU evaluations of candidate states after Russia's invasion of Ukraine involve*

fewer mentions of frozen conflicts than before; and H2: EU evaluations of candidate states after Russia's invasion of Ukraine employ a softer framing of frozen conflicts than before.



Graph 1. Theoretical framework.

Research Design

Case Selection

The study employs a Most Similar Systems Design across three cases; Cyprus, Moldova and Georgia, to compare one pre-invasion and two post-invasion cases, investigating if there are distinct differences concerning H1 and H2. Although frozen conflicts emerged as a term in post-Soviet literature, this paper employs a broader conceptualisation, not limited geographically to the post-Soviet space, defining them as a “protracted, post-war conflict process, characterised by the absence of stable peace” remaining unresolved but with a “threat of the renewed violence” (Smetana & Ludvik, 2019, p. 4).

This allows Cyprus’ inclusion as a “control” case, as it was admitted to the Union long before the identified critical juncture. Cypriots are split between ethnic Greeks and Turks, prompting Greek-aligned forces to orchestrate a coup in 1974, attempting to merge the country with Greece (Moulakis, 2011, pp. 198-201). Nonetheless, following a Turkish invasion and subsequent war, the island remains split between the majority-Greek, internationally recognised Republic of Cyprus in the south, and the Türkiye-backed, unrecognised “Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC)” in the north. Although there has been a gradual easing of tensions, the island remains split and thousands of Cypriots remain displaced, whereas inter-ethnic contacts are kept minimal. “TRNC” maintains its quest for independence but remains

diplomatically and economically isolated from the world, and reliant on Türkiye. Nonetheless, Cyprus was admitted into the EU in 2004, despite the persisting conflict (pp. 195-197).

Perhaps Cyprus' admission despite no resolution indicates that a study of enlargement-related evaluations merely indicates EU rhetoric, rather than enlargement's conflict resolution potential. Nonetheless, a potential shift in rhetoric remains instructive to determine the extent to which the EU's signalling on conflict resolution is muted/softened post-invasion. Arguably, there is a distinction between the EU issuing demands concerning conflict resolution as an accession criterion but subsequently *failing to enforce* that demand, and the EU *ceasing to articulate* it altogether, per the above framework.

Conversely, Moldova and Georgia are cases where a shift in EU framing is expected, as they were both granted candidacy post-invasion. Reduced mentions of frozen conflicts in their accession reports, and a softer framing, would support H1 and H2 respectively. Regarding Moldova, the frozen conflict in Transnistria endures since the 1992 Transnistrian War, when Russia-backed militias attempted to break away from newly independent Moldova. Transnistria remains a separatist, unrecognised state, primarily inhabited by Russian-speaking populations, and largely relies on Russian aid and the presence of Russian troops (Beyer, 2010). Similarly, two distinct frozen conflicts persist in Georgia. Following Georgia's independence, subsequent civil war, the 1991-1992 South Ossetia War and 1992-1993 Abkhazia War, the formerly autonomous regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia established themselves as "independent", becoming breakaway, unrecognised states. Both entities enjoy extensive Russian aid and military presence - which Georgia regards as occupation - best showcased through the 2008 Russo-Georgian War. Both regions remain de facto separated from Georgia (Sotiriou, 2017).

Methods

The study employs a frame analysis, a qualitative content analysis type allowing for an interpretive investigation of changes in framing of frozen conflicts in EU candidate states, pre- and post-Russia's invasion. Frame analysis links ideas and statements to determine how "packages of meaning" can be correlated to create a frame (Crespy, 2015, pp. 106-108). Hence, comparing pre- and post-invasion *framing* of candidates' frozen conflicts can reveal shifts in EU prioritisation of such issues, per the theoretical framework and H2. Similarly, comparing the *frequency* of mentions pre- and post-invasion is instructive for answering H1.

To investigate H2, the theoretical framework yields two frames. First, an assertive frame is expected in the pre-invasion period, in Cyprus' case, as the renewed geopolitical

pressures that followed Russian aggression had not yet triggered EU institutions' issue reprioritisation. Subsequently, one would expect that EU frozen conflict framing follows a comparatively assertive line, evaluating conflict resolution progress proportionately to real-world developments, criticising failures and avoiding excessive praise of trivial progress. This yields four subcategories that quotations can be sorted into during coding. "Assertive language" (A1) refers to imperative statements, including value-laden words of condemnation for aggression or its consequences. "Accession prerequisite" (A2) refers to the presentation of conflict resolution and long-lasting peace as a necessary accession precondition. "Domestic criticism" (A3) refers to EU institutions criticising domestic actors for minimal conflict resolution progress, at least on an equal level as external actors. This is qualitatively distinct from shifting blame exclusively to external actors like Russia or Türkiye, instead holding domestic actors at least equally accountable. Lastly, "short-term temporal framing" (A4) refers to statements framing conflict resolution as a strategic issue to be resolved immediately, rather than a long-term desire of the Union.

On the other hand, a softened frame is expected post-invasion, where the triggering of EU institutions' issue reprioritisation renders frozen conflict resolution a secondary concern vis-a-vis quick enlargement, tempting them to minimise criticism that could delay integration. Four subcategories are also expected here to mirror the assertive frame. First, "softened language" (S1) refers to instances of praise for positive developments, disproportionate to real-world progress, or value-laden words of praise. "Neutral mentions" (S2) refers to matter-of-fact acknowledgements of a conflict, devoid of evaluative language, falling short of framing them as an issue to be resolved, an EU priority, or condemning separatism, indicating neglect. "External blame" (S3) refers to blame placement exclusively on external actors, not holding domestic actors accountable for lack of progress or escalation. Lastly, "long-term temporal framing" (S4) refers to conflict resolution being framed as a long-term goal, irrespective of EU accession, and a desirable development in the future. *Table 1* presents an overview of the coding framework.

<i>Framing</i>	<i>Subcategory</i>	<i>Explanation/Indicators</i>	<i>Example</i>
Assertive	Assertive language (A1)	Imperative statements, including value-laden words of condemnation for aggression/occupation.	<i>The status quo, which is at odds with international law, threatens the stability of the island, the region and has implications for security</i> (European Commission, 1998, p. 188).

	Accession prerequisite (A2)	Presentation of conflict resolution as a necessary accession precondition.	<i>On 9 November 1998, four Member States again expressed reservations about the accession of Cyprus while it was divided (European Parliament, 2000, p.17).</i>
	Domestic criticism (A3)	Criticism of domestic actors on at least an equal basis as external actors.	<i>At the time the Commission indicated that this approach does not contribute to the establishment of confidence between the two Cypriot communities necessary to ensure progress in the negotiations under UN auspices (European Commission, 1999, p. 144).</i>
	Short-term temporal framing (A4)	Presentation of conflict resolution as an immediate strategic goal.	<i>Agreement on a political settlement would permit a faster conclusion to the negotiations (European Parliament, 2000, p. 14).</i>
Softened	Softened language (S1)	Praise for positive developments disproportionate to real-world progress, or value-laden words of praise.	<i>This type of measure should be encouraged given its effect in creating a climate of confidence between the two communities necessary to reach a political agreement (European Commission, 1999, p. 141).</i>
	Neutral mentions (S2)	Neutral mentions of the conflict devoid of evaluative language condemning aggression/occupation or urging for resolution.	<i>The Georgian government does not exercise effective control over the breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia (European Commission, 2023b, p. 113).</i>
	External blame (S3)	Exclusive blame on external actors.	<i>Despite numerous UN resolutions, all based on Resolution 3212, calling for the withdrawal of foreign troops from the Republic of Cyprus, Turkey has maintained its forces on the island (European Commission, 1998, p. 197).</i>
	Long-term temporal framing (S4)	Presentation of conflict resolution as a long-term desirable goal, but not an urgent concern.	<i>Progress towards accession and towards a just and viable solution to the Cyprus problem will naturally reinforce each other (p. 199).</i>

Table 1. Frame subcategories.

The documents to be coded consist of four EU enlargement reports per case, published by European institutions like the Commission or Parliament, hence allowing the study of EU actors' framing at the institutional level, departing from previous studies. Evaluating

candidates' adherence to accession criteria, such reports situate findings specifically in the context of enlargement, unlike aforementioned studies that focus on unrelated EU engagement with frozen conflicts, allowing for inferring how frozen conflict resolution interacts with the renewed enlargement momentum. Sentences were manually coded into the two frames using Atlas.ti software, which allows for the optimal categorisation and visualisation of quotations. In line with H1 and H2, the theoretical expectation is that there will be more statements per case for enlargement reports evaluating Cyprus (pre-invasion) compared to Georgia and Moldova (post-invasion), whereas a significant majority of quotations on Cyprus will reflect the assertive frame, whilst Moldovan and Georgian quotations will fit the softened frame.

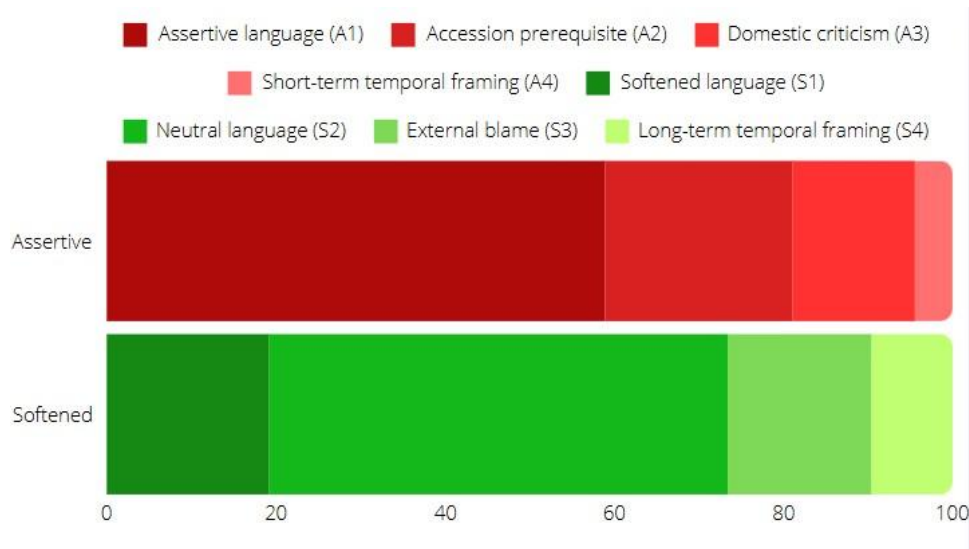
Findings

Cyprus

184 unique quotations were identified in Cyprus' enlargement reports, evaluating the frozen conflict and distributed across the above subcategories. Contrary to the theoretical expectation, the codes' spread across the two main frames is roughly equal, with 90 assertive and 94 softened quotations. *Table 2* provides an overview of quotations per code, whereas *Graph 2* illustrates their percentage spread.

<i>Code</i>	<i>Occurrence</i>
A1	53
A2	20
A3	13
A4	4
S1	18
S2	51
S3	16
S4	9
Total	184 (A:90; S:94)

Table 2. Codes per subcategory (Cyprus).



Graph 2. Bar chart showing the % distribution of codes per frame (Cyprus).

The data do not corroborate the theoretical expectation of H2, as the two frames appear at a similar level, however, they remain instructive. The larger-than-expected occurrence of the softened frame can be attributed to the high amount (51) of “neutral language” (S2) quotations, at 54.26% of all softened quotations, as EU institutions often referred to the Cyprus conflict without necessarily evaluating it. The assertive frame remains dominated by a large occurrence of “assertive language” (A1; 58.89%), like calling the “TRNC” an “illegal regime” (European Parliament, 2000, p. 5), expressing “regret” over adverse developments (p. 16) and condemning international law violations (European Commission, 1998, p. 188). Early reports present conflict resolution as a necessary precondition for accession (A2), with quotations such as:

In the case of Cyprus, it is obvious that - at least for the time being - the still unsolved Cypriot question does exclude accession of this country to the Community (European Commission, 1993, p. 4).

Nonetheless, post-1998, the European Council made an explicit, *ad hoc* decision to decouple the conflict from Cyprus’ accession negotiations, treating the issues as separate, because of Cyprus’ fast-paced advancement and adoption of the *acquis*. The decision was intended to reward Cyprus and further motivate reforms (European Parliament, 2000, p. 17). Throughout Cyprus’ candidacy, there is a high occurrence of external blame on Türkiye (S3), with 16 quotations, however, this is paired with a near-equal amount of quotations criticising domestic actors (A3), with 13. For example, while Türkiye is blamed as an “illegal occupier”

(p. 11), Cypriot administrations are also condemned for minimal political will to negotiate on ending the conflict (p. 5).

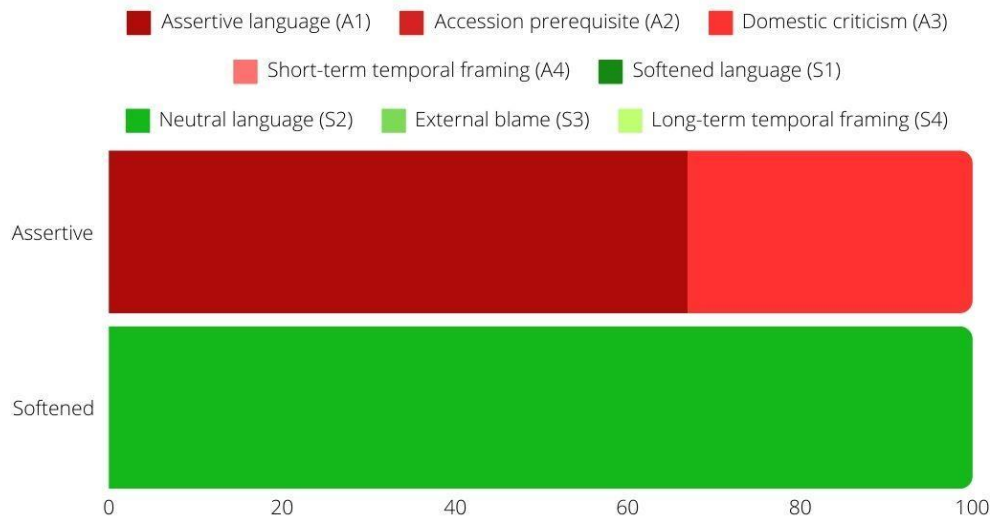
Instances of “softened language” (S1) are minimal (18) but typically include praising incremental developments falling short of real-world change but indicate political will, for example reduced weapons procurement in the south (European Commission, 1999, p. 137). “Short-term temporal framing” (A4) occurs 4 times and consists of calls for quick resolution, often urging for both sides to engage “unconditionally” (p. 144). “Long-term temporal framing” (S4) occurs 9 times and primarily paints accession as a process that will eventually lead to long-term stability and conflict resolution, “naturally reinforcing each other” (p. 145).

Moldova

Moldova’s enlargement reports present a starkly different image. With only 14 relevant quotations overall, there is a significantly reduced occurrence of mentions of the Transnistria conflict, compared to Cyprus. *Table 3* presents an overview of quotations per code and *Graph 3* illustrates their percentage spread.

<i>Code</i>	<i>Occurrence</i>
A1	4
A2	0
A3	2
A4	0
S1	0
S2	8
S3	0
S4	0
Total	14 (A:6; S:8)

Table 3. Codes per subcategory (Moldova).



Graph 3. Bar chart showing the % distribution of codes per frame (Moldova).

Although the number of quotations is too minute to make meaningful interpretations, their spread mirrors Cyprus’ roughly equal spread across frames. However, the lack of quotations is a finding in itself, pertaining to H1 and the tendency of EU institutions to neglect frozen conflicts vis-a-vis geopolitics.

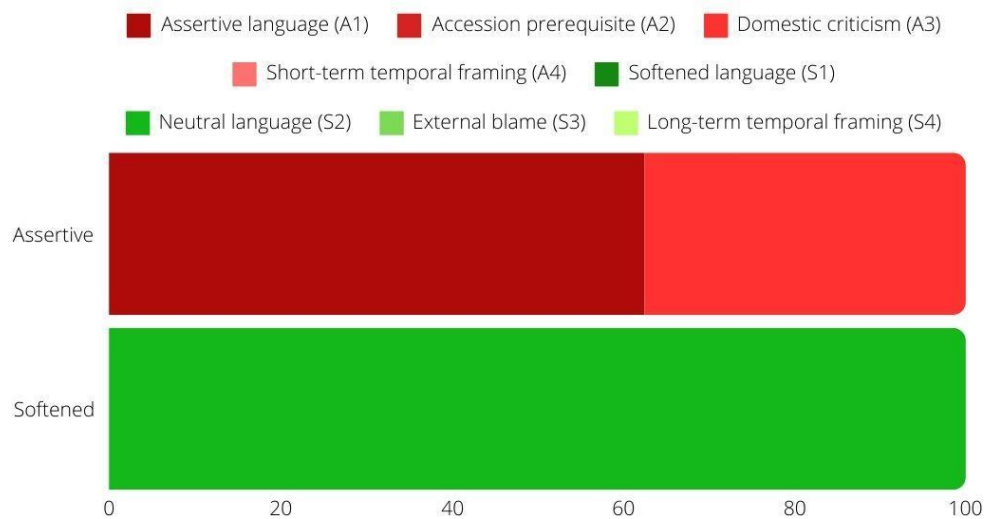
Softened quotations are exclusively “neutral mentions” (S2), where institutions acknowledge Transnistrian separatism but fall short of evaluating it as a hurdle for accession, mentioning its consequences or correlating it to Russian aggression. Assertive frame quotations are primarily imperative declarations of unconditional commitment (A1; 66.67%) to Moldova’s territorial integrity (European Commission, 2023c, p. 4), with minimal instances of domestic criticism (A3; 33.33%), exclusively on the criminalisation of separatism by the Moldovan government as a hindrance to dialogue with Transnistrian forces and eventual conflict resolution (p. 39).

Georgia

Findings on Georgia are similar to Moldova, insofar as there is a limited number of quotations - namely 14. Again, the reduced number of quotations is a finding in itself concerning H1, but hinders conclusions on H2, as assertive and softened quotations are almost equal (8 vis-a-vis 6). *Table 4* presents an overview of quotations per code and *Graph 4* illustrates their percentage spread.

<i>Code</i>	<i>Occurrence</i>
A1	5
A2	0
A3	3
A4	0
S1	0
S2	6
S3	0
S4	0
Total	14 (A:8; S:6)

Table 4. Codes per subcategory (Georgia).



Graph 4. Bar chart showing the % distribution of codes per frame (Georgia).

Softened quotations are again exclusively neutral (S2), mentioning the Abkhaz and Ossetian conflicts but lacking evaluation or urging for resolution. Similar to Moldova, most assertive frame quotations come from A1 (62.5%), and specifically imperative commitments to Georgian territorial integrity and sovereignty (European Commission, 2023b, p. 114). The remaining quotations (37.5%) relate to domestic criticism (A3), exclusively to the Georgian government’s unwillingness to implement legislation related to internally displaced populations as a result of the conflict (p. 42).

Analysis & Interpretation

The findings appear insufficient to corroborate H2, regarding the expected softer framing post-invasion. Cyprus' enlargement reports have no decisive leaning to one frame, indicating that the EU employed an assertive frame, but also included a lot of softened quotations treating the conflict less as an endogenous issue and more as an instance of Turkish aggression. In that regard, perhaps the mixed approach by European institutions can be best conceptualised as a distinct, "balanced framing". On Moldova and Georgia, there is insufficient data to make a meaningful interpretation, however the framing appears to be balanced in those instances as well. Hence, the frame analysis' findings *do not support H2*, at least insofar as the expected framing subcategories are concerned.

Conversely, there is a much clearer picture concerning H1, on the expectation of an overall reduction in mentions of frozen conflicts post-invasion. A comparison of the three cases reveals that the EU devoted significant attention to the conflict in Cyprus compared to the ones in Moldova and Georgia, with 184 quotations vis-a-vis only 14 and 16 respectively. Subsequently, the invasion of Ukraine can be seen as a critical juncture that altered the EU's issue prioritisation, making conflict resolution subordinate to quick accession, at least in the context of enlargement.

Hence, the EU no longer links accession to conflict resolution, despite the considerable hurdles frozen conflicts impose on adopting the *acquis* - unlike in Cyprus which was only decoupled after nearly a decade of negotiations, on an *ad hoc* basis. Additionally, even after decoupling the conflict from accession, it continued to be extensively discussed in enlargement reports, as illustrated in the 1999 Commission report (55 quotations) and the 2000 European Parliament report (68 quotations). This is far from the case post-invasion, where even without an official *ad hoc* decoupling decision, EU institutions *de facto* neglect frozen conflicts in the context of enlargement. Consequently, *H1 cannot be rejected*. The aforementioned yield an answer to the research question: EU institutions increasingly neglect frozen conflicts in candidates' enlargement evaluations post-Russia's invasion, but without a distinct shift in the type of framing employed.

One can also argue that the low occurrence of mentions post-invasion represents an instance of softer framing in itself - implicating that the Union's *de facto* de-coupling of conflict resolution and accession criteria represents a milder stance towards frozen conflicts. Nonetheless, this nuance is not sufficiently captured by the present study's conceptualisation of a softened frame and can be amended/investigated in further studies.

Discussion & Conclusion

These findings have several implications for EU enlargement. First, as aforementioned, allowing states with ongoing frozen conflicts into the Union could jeopardise European integration because they cannot comprehensively adopt the *acquis*, and as separatist states facilitate foreign influence in EU affairs. Subsequently, neglecting conflict resolution and decoupling it (albeit *de facto*) from accession poses risks to the Union itself. Similarly, neglecting conflicts in enlargement, even if separate concurrent EU missions remain active, hinders resolution efforts, vitiating the potency of accession conditionality as a driver of change. Moreover, this neglect indicates a contradiction between EU rhetoric and action, as EU institutions explicitly commit themselves to a fair and proportional evaluation of candidates' progress, but proceed to sweep frozen conflicts "under the rug" for geopolitical purposes. It also indicates a mismatch between the priorities of EU institutions and personnel, per Karjalainen (2023).

Although the findings on H2 do not match the theoretical expectation of an assertive framing pre-invasion and a softened framing post-invasion, they remain instructive. The empirical detection of a distinct "balanced frame" in Cyprus remains an academic innovation revealing much about EU institutional approaches to the conflict in the context of enlargement, which has not been studied in previous literature. Perhaps further research should consider alternative theoretical explanations for this, or examine EU framing pre- and post-1998's decoupling decision.

This study suffers from certain limitations that further research can amend. First, enlargement reports are a "curated" version of EU rhetoric and action, and might not represent the rawest form of EU preferences. Hence studying alternative sources like EU officials' statements or Parliament speeches might provide further insights. Second, due to their geographic and temporal distance and external forces involved, the cases of Cyprus, Georgia and Moldova vary undesirably. Although they are the only candidates with frozen conflicts - hence the only available cases - this introduces potentially confounding variables offering deferring causal explanations. In that regard, further studies can use an explicitly causal design - which this paper falls short of doing - and consider alternative explanations like disillusionment with conditionality's transformative potential or Cyprus' accession being a critical juncture in itself, long before Russia's war. Lastly, as aforementioned, Cyprus eventually joined the Union, hence revealing that a potential distinction in framing/mention occurrence is merely a shift in EU rhetoric rather than practice, perhaps implicating that the

Copenhagen Criteria were *never* an obstacle to accession when political will was present - a prism that further studies must investigate.

Concludingly, this paper engaged historical institutionalist literature to posit that Russia's invasion of Ukraine constitutes a critical juncture for EU enlargement, prompting the Union to neglect frozen conflicts vis-a-vis geopolitics to ensure quick enlargement. Upon conducting a frame analysis, it concluded that there is a distinct difference in the attention devoted by EU institutions to frozen conflicts in Moldova and Georgia, post-invasion, compared to Cyprus, pre-invasion, indicating a subordination of frozen conflicts as a secondary priority. This raises questions on EU institutions' adherence to the Copenhagen Criteria and the dangers an "inconsiderate" enlargement could have for both the EU and the stability of post-Soviet states ravaged by Russian occupation.

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Please consult the separate Excel file for the complete appendix of coded statements.