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**"The EU as a Global Actor: Peace,  
Security and Conflict"**

Communicating Enlargement:  
The EU's Strategic Narratives for the  
Western Balkans in a Shifting  
Geopolitical Context

Chloé  
**Föster**



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## Introduction

The Thessaloniki Summit in 2003 granted the Western Balkans (WB) a “European perspective” (Vukasovic, 2024, p. 2). Despite this promise, the WB remained outside the European Union (EU) twenty years later, with limited progress in reforms (Vukasovic, 2024, p. 6). After Croatia joined the EU in 2013, the enlargement process stalled. The EU closed its doors to new members for nearly a decade and even lost the United Kingdom in 2020. Although several countries, including Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), and others, were granted a “European perspective”, EU enlargement policy from 2013 to 2022 focused on internal strengthening, with little push for expansion (Karjanlainen, 2023, p. 637-638).

Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in 2022 marked a turning point in the EU’s approach to enlargement. The rapid processing of membership applications from Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia, and the resumption of accession talks with Albania, North Macedonia, and BiH reflected a renewed focus on the enlargement agenda. This shift has sparked again discussions on EU enlargement and provided a renewed sense of urgency. Enlargement is not merely a geopolitical tool, it also involves state-building reforms for democratic governance and market economy (Karjanlainen, 2023, p. 637-638). These developments raise questions about how the EU communicates its enlargement priorities and balances geopolitical considerations with the expectations of candidate countries.

Strategic narratives play a critical role in how the EU frames its enlargement policies and communicates its intentions. Strategic narratives are powerful tools for political actors to construct shared meaning. By shaping these meanings, narratives influence the behaviour of both domestic and international actors. This perspective underscores how narratives serve as a significant political instrument, with the EU leveraging them to exert influence on the global stage (Miskimmon et al, 2014, p. 2). Building on this, this essay examines how the EU’s strategic narratives on enlargement towards the WB have evolved before and after Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, and what this reveals about shifts in the EU’s enlargements approach. This analysis contributes to understanding the EU’s evolving enlargement strategy and the role of narratives in international relations, offering insights into the EU’s adaptability in a changing global context.

## Theoretical Framework

Strategic narratives are vital tools in political communication. They enable political actors to create shared understandings and influence domestic and international behaviour by framing priorities and legitimising actions (Miskimmon et al., 2014, p.2). In the context of the EU, narratives serve not only as communication tools but also as mechanisms to project legitimacy and align policies with broader geopolitical goals (Schumacher, 2015, p. 383-384).

Strategic narratives fulfil three key functions: identity-building, public acceptance and continuity and adaptability (Schumacher, 2015, p. 383-384). This essay will focus on the function of continuity and adaptability, which means narrative linkage. This concept connects the past, present and future, while narrative options allow for policy shifts (Schumacher, 2015, p. 383-384). This is especially relevant in analysing the shift in EU enlargement communication before and after Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, where geopolitical changes necessitated narrative adjustments.

This essay focuses on four of Schumacher's (2015) narratives, as they are most relevant to analysing the EU's evolving enlargement strategy and communication. These narratives provide a clear lens to analyse the balance between geopolitical urgency, democratic reforms, and the EU's role in fostering stability in the Western Balkans.

#### *Threat/Risk Narrative*

This narrative suggests that the post-Cold War environment exposes the EU to broad, multidimensional, and border-transcending threats and risks. These go beyond traditional military concerns, requiring the EU to develop comprehensive strategies and policies to secure both its internal and external stability (Schumacher, 2015, p. 385). It frames the EU as a "space of stability" in contrast to a chaotic external world. It reinforces the perception that maintaining stability requires decisive action and policies to address risks emanating from outside its borders. This justification supports the EU's integration efforts and external interventions (Schumacher, 2015, p. 384-385).

#### *The EU as a Promoter of Peace Narrative*

This narrative highlights the EU's role in fostering intra-European peace and its broader ambition for global peace. The Treaty of Lisbon reaffirms the EU's commitment to promoting peace and values. By linking internal stability *with* external actions, this narrative legitimises further integration and external measures to counter global threats. Over time, this narrative has expanded to include the EU's global peace-building efforts, further consolidating its role as a global actor (Schumacher, 2015, p. 385-386). This narrative positions enlargement as a tool to prevent conflict, not only in the WB but also within the wider EU.

#### *The EU as a Democratising Force Narrative*

This narrative draws inspiration from the Copenhagen Criteria and the Treaty of Lisbon's values. The EU's external actions should be guided by the principles underpinning its foundation. Despite strong rhetoric, the EU faces internal and external challenges to its legitimacy and effectiveness (Pace, 2009). Its transformative power is limited without a credible prospect of EU membership, undermining its democratising impact in some regions. Nonetheless, it remains a central part of the EU's external relations discourse, guiding its interactions with neighbouring countries and those aspiring for membership (Schumacher, 2015, p. 386). The narrative emphasises the transformative power of the EU and uses enlargement as a means to embed stability and democratic norms.

#### *The EU and Well-Being of People Narrative*

This narrative emphasises the importance of human security, development, and protection in EU policies. It is rooted in the belief that improving socio-economic conditions fosters peace, stability, and democratisation. While the EU lacks an explicit human security strategy, this concept underpins much of its discourse and external actions, such as development aid and responses to global threats. The narrative justifies EU interventions by focusing on protecting individual rights and addressing issues like poverty, inequality and climate challenges (Schumacher, 2015, p. 387).

# Methods

This essay will employ a comparative narrative analysis to examine the communication surrounding EU enlargement for the WB, especially comparing the periods before (1980-2021) and after (2022-2025) Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. This method allows for a nuanced understanding of how shifts in geopolitical context shape the EU’s communication strategies and narrative framing (McLeod, 2024, p. 12). The analysis assumes that the narratives and motives behind EU enlargement are shaped by geopolitical, economic, and ideological factors, which evolve over time.

The first part of the analysis will focus on the period before Russia invaded Ukraine. Existing literature and speeches will be utilised to analyse the EU’s communication and motivation in this period. Scholars have extensively studied the motivation, rhetoric, and challenges surrounding EU enlargement in this context. This period will be linked to the four narratives (Schumacher, 2015). These narratives will serve as a lens to understand how the EU framed its enlargement policy and communication towards the Western Balkans.

The second section of the analysis will concentrate on the period after Russia’s invasion. This invasion marked a significant shift in the geopolitical landscape of Europe, leading to a change of EU priorities, including its enlargement strategy. In this part, both speeches and academic literature will be examined. Speeches and comments by EU leaders, key policymakers, and officials will be analysed for their framing of EU enlargement and the Western Balkans. These speeches and comments are collected from news articles and official EU-websites. These will be complemented by an examination of academic literature, which provides theoretical context and critical perspectives to access how the invasion has shifted EU narratives, priorities, and strategies.

In both periods, a comparative approach will allow for a deeper understanding of how EU enlargement communication has evolved over time, with particular attention to the role of narratives (McLeod, 2024, p. 12). By comparing the pre- and post-invasion periods, the essay will offer insights into how the EU’s goals have been reframed in response to the shifting geopolitical environment in Europe.

## Operationalisation

It is important to operationalise the four narratives to translate the narratives into measurable and observable elements.

### *Threat/Risk Narrative*

This narrative frames the EU as a “space of stability” amidst external instability, justifying enlargement to secure the region and address geopolitical challenges (Schumacher, 2015, p. 384-385). To analyse this narrative, themes have been identified to determine its presence or absence in EU communication, as shown in the table below.

<b>Dimension</b>	<b>Present</b>	<b>Absent</b>
<b>Security and stability</b>	The EU is presented as a stable region compared to an unstable outside region.	The EU does not present itself as more stable compared to the rest of the world.

<b>Geopolitical threats</b>	There are mentions of external risks by foreign actors.	There are no mentions of external risks by foreign actors.
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Table 1: Operationalisation Threat/Risk Narrative

### *The EU as Promoter of Peace Narrative*

This narrative highlights the EU’s role in fostering peace both internally and externally. The EU aims to bring stability to conflict-affected countries and work towards global peace.

<b>Dimension</b>	<b>Present</b>	<b>Absent</b>
<b>EU as Global Peace Actor</b>	The EU presents itself as an actor that promotes peace.	The EU does not present itself as an actor that promotes peace.

Table 2: Operationalisation EU as Promoter of Peace Narrative

### *The EU as Democratising Force Narrative*

This narrative is grounded in the EU’s commitment to the Copenhagen Criteria, which emphasise democracy, the rule of law, and human rights. It underscores the EU’s role in promoting democratic governance.

<b>Dimension</b>	<b>Present</b>	<b>Absent</b>
<b>Copenhagen Criteria</b>	The EU references the Copenhagen Criteria as a foundation for democratic reforms.	The EU does not mention the Copenhagen Criteria in the context of democratic reforms.
<b>Transactional power</b>	The EU references the conditional membership.	The EU does not reference the conditionality of membership.

Table 3: Operationalisation EU as Democratising Force Narrative

### *The EU and Well-Being of People Narrative*

This narrative is centred around the EU’s focus on human security, development, and protection. It highlights the importance of improving socio-economic conditions and addressing global challenges like poverty, inequality, and climate change.

<b>Dimension</b>	<b>Present</b>	<b>Absent</b>
<b>Human security and development</b>	The EU references to improving human security and socio-economic conditions.	The EU does not mention improving human security and socio-economic conditions.
<b>Protection of individual rights.</b>	The EU mentions protecting human rights and addressing inequality.	The EU does not mention protecting human rights and addressing inequality.

Table 4: EU and Well-Being of People Narrative

### **Pre-Russia’s Invasion Context**

Historically, EU enlargement has been driven by principles of democratisation, economic integration and social progress. Cecchini et al. (2001, p. 115) highlight these idealistic motivations behind admitting Greece, Spain, and Portugal in the 1980s. These ideals align with the EU’s commitment to human rights and democracy, as outlined in Article 2 of the Treaty on

the European Union. The enlargement strategy can be understood as an expression of the ‘EU as Democratising Force’.

After the collapse of the Eastern Bloc, the EU also aimed to promote democracy, economic integration, and social progress in Central and Eastern Europe. The EU's enlargement has typically been viewed as a process of stabilising the region, ensuring the integration of former communist states into the European community (Anghel and Džankić, 2023). Enlargement was seen as a transformative and transactional tool for supporting the transition to liberal democracy, free markets, and the rule of law. The 2004 enlargement aimed to unite East and West and promote peace and stability across Europe by consolidating democracy in post-communist states (Keil, 2023, p. 118). In this context, the EU's communication reflected the ‘EU as Democratising Force’ and the ‘EU as Promoter of Peace’ narrative. The EU positioned itself as a driver of change and peace by promoting democracy and strengthening the rule of law. This is reflected in then-European Commissioner for Enlargement and the European Neighbourhood Policy Nielson's statement:

*“European Council [...] fully supported the European perspective of the WB States becoming an integral part of the European Union once they meet the conditions for accession: the so-called political and economic criteria, and their ability to demonstrate that they are ready to assume the obligations of membership” (Nielson, 2004).*

However, enlargement was also used as a process to stabilise the region, which fits with the narrative of ‘Threat/Risk’. This combination was dominant. Varsori (2023, p. 29) highlights that geopolitical considerations were increasingly important, with EU enlargement viewed as a mechanism to ensure stability, particularly in the wake of the Yugoslav wars and the instability of post-communist economies. This security-driven rationale became particularly relevant in the 1990s and 2000s, as the EU sought to stabilise its immediate neighbourhood, preventing conflict and fostering peace. Barrinha (2007, p. 11) states that the EU framed enlargement as a “cordon sanitaire” that could help prevent the recurrence of conflict by integrating countries into a peaceful, democratic, and secure European domain. This context shows that the communication of the EU fits with the ‘Threat/Risk’ narrative. The EU sought to prevent conflicts and stabilise the neighbourhood. Nevertheless, the narrative of the ‘EU as Promoter of Peace’ played a role as well. The EU uses enlargement as a tool for conflict prevention, reflecting its objective to maintain peace in historically unstable areas.

Alongside these security and normative goals, economic integration has also been a central motivator. Through initiatives such as the Stabilisation and Association Agreements, the EU aimed to integrate the economies of the Western Balkans by promoting trade, investment, and infrastructure development, establishing itself as the region's primary economic partner (Panagiotou, 2020, p. 255-227). This economic dimension is evident in statements by key EU officials:

*“It is in both the EU's and Western Balkans' mutual interest to build a region of stability, reciprocal trust, and prosperous economies, which will boost investments and trade” (Hann, 2016).*

Despite geopolitical and economic motives, democratic reforms and the rule of law remain essential conditions for enlargement, which shows the narrative of ‘EU as Democratising Force’. This is highlighted by president of the European Commission Barroso:

*“The Commission is accompanying and supporting the countries of the WB on their European track. Strengthening the rule of law, facilitating regional co-operation, improving economic governance and public administration are essential in this regard [...] the responsibility for key reforms lies in their own hands, in the countries themselves - "Fundamentals first!", as we have said over the years”*  
(Barroso, 2014)

However, as the enlargement process moved into the 2010s, the discourse surrounding EU enlargement became increasingly contested. National parliaments within the EU, particularly France and Germany, began to politicise the accession process, reflecting a shift in the EU’s internal dynamics. The enlargement discourse became more restrictive, with an increasing number of member states growing reluctant to extend membership to new candidates (Butnaru-Troncato, 2024, p. 182- 184). France and Germany, as two of the EU’s largest member states, played a significant role in shaping this shift. This can be seen in France decision to block the opening of accession negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia in 2019, despite the European Commission’s positive assessment of these countries’ readiness for membership. Similarly, Bulgaria followed suit in 2020, vetoing the progress of North Macedonia due to a dispute over language issues. These vetoes politicised the technical assessments made by the European Commission, turning them into contentious political matters tied to the national interests of member states (Butnaru-Troncota, 2024, p. 182- 184). This ‘enlargement fatigue’ is also seen in this statement of Juncker:

*“The Western Balkans countries are not yet ready to join the EU at this point in time”*  
(Juncker, 2018)

The rise of nationalism and populism within the EU, combined with crises such as the migration crisis and the 2008 financial crisis, further exacerbated divisions over enlargement. The EU’s “absorption capacity” was increasingly questioned, with many fearing further enlargement could lead to a dilution of the EU’s cohesion and undermine its internal stability (Butnaru-Troncota, 2024, p. 182-184). This concern led to a shift from an expansionary, transformative approach to a more transactional one, where political interests and short-term stability took precedence over long-term goals of democratisation and economic integration.

In the period before Russia’s invasion, the EU enlargement strategy and communication for the WB was shaped by several intertwined narratives. Throughout time, the ‘EU as Democratising Force’ narrative has been a key player and remained important. It emphasised the promotion of democracy and the rule of law for enlargement. The ‘EU as Promoter of Peace’ positioned the EU as a stabilising force, aiming to prevent conflict and foster stability, particularly after the Yugoslav wars. From the 2010s onward, the EU’s communication and strategy evolved, reflecting a growing hesitation towards further enlargement. The ‘Threat/Risk’ narrative began to take on new dimensions, where the perceived risks were no longer solely about the instability of post-communist countries but also about the internal risks of expanding the EU. The potential for new member states to bring instability to the EU itself became a significant concern. This shift marked the rise of a transactional approach, where enlargement was framed more pragmatically, focusing on short-term political stability in potential new member states and the



protection of EU cohesion over long-term transformative goals. Consequently, the ‘EU as Democratising Force’ continued to play a role, showing the transactional approach, but it was increasingly entwined with the pragmatic concerns captured by the ‘Threat/Risk’ narrative.

### Post-Russia’s Invasion Context

The geopolitical shock of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in 2022, revitalised discussion on EU enlargement, particularly regarding the WB, Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia. The invasion underscored the strategic importance of EU enlargement for regional security, prompting the EU to reconsider its previous hesitancy in making membership commitments to countries in its neighbourhood. As Kribbe and Middelaar (2023) argue, the war in Ukraine has shifted the focus of EU enlargement from a purely normative and economic strategy to a more urgent security policy. This shift is reflected in a statement made by the European Council President Charles Michel at the Bled Strategic Forum in August 2023:

*“So now enlargement is no longer a dream. It is time to move forward [...] As we prepare the EU’s next strategic agenda, we must set ourselves a clear goal. I believe we must be ready - on both sides - by 2030 to enlarge” (Michel, 2023)*

This marks the first time that an EU official publicly proposed a timeline for accession, signalling a shift in EU enlargement policy compared to the period before Russia’s invasion (Butnaru-Troncota, 2024, p. 177-179). António Costa, President of the European Council, also illustrates this critical reorientation of the EU’s enlargement discourse by emphasising the strategic imperative of countering external influences.

*“The geopolitical context we are facing today makes it imperative to accelerate the integration of the Western Balkans into the European Union. This is not only a matter of regional stability but also a strategic necessity for the EU” (Costa, 2024)*

Building on these sentiments, Josep Borrell, the EU’s High Representative, also emphasises the need for a renewed focus on enlargement in light of the evolving geopolitical landscape:

*“These past five years have been marked by unprecedented challenges, demonstrating the importance of a new momentum for EU enlargement [...] EU membership is a strategic choice. Alignment with EU values, starting with the rule of law” (European Commission, 2024)*

These statements reflect the commitment of the EU to expanding its influence while reinforcing its core principles, highlighting the growing geopolitical significance of enlargement in maintaining regional stability and promoting shared European values. This shows that the ‘EU as Democratising Force’ narrative is still relevant within the enlargement discourse. Moreover, the invasion has amplified the EU’s perception of enlargement as a strategic necessity for security. The framing of enlargement as essential to counter threats, particularly Russian influence, aligns with the ‘Threat/Risk’ narrative. This can also be seen in the EU’s enlargement policy, which has been reshaped and is acting as a ‘political opportunity structure’ for countries seeking EU membership. This unprecedented situation triggered a rapid succession of strategic decisions. Just days after the Russian invasion began, Ukraine applied for EU membership, followed closely by Moldova and in March 2022, Georgia (Butnaru-Troncota, 2024, p. 177-179).

These applications marked a turning point for countries within the Eastern Partnership framework, which previously had no formal membership perspective. In June 2022, the European Council granted candidacy status to Ukraine and Moldova. Similarly, BiH received candidacy status in December 2022, despite longstanding political challenges and unfulfilled EU conditions. These underscored the EU's focus on geopolitical priorities in response to Russia's aggression (Butnaru-Troncota, 2024, p. 184-186). This further highlights the dominance of the 'Threat/Risk' narrative over the 'EU as Democratising Force' narrative. This is also illustrated by a quote from Charles Michel:

*“Enlargement will protect Western Balkans from malign influences” (Reuters, 2023)*

This sentiment highlights the EU's intent to shield the region from hybrid threats and external actors by accelerating integration efforts. Kosovo, despite its unresolved sovereignty issues, followed BiH in applying for membership. However, five EU member states still withhold recognition of Kosovo's independence, complicating its accession prospects. By late 2023, the EC recommends opening accession talks with Ukraine, Moldova, and BiH, while also granting Georgia candidate status (Butnaru-Troncota, 2024, p. 184-186). As High Representative Josep Borrel states about the Enlargement Package 2023 and highlights the motivation for enlargement:

*“Completing our Union is the best investment in peace, security and prosperity for our continent and this year's package sets out major steps forward” (European External Action Service, 2023)*

However, the rapid expansions of EU enlargement commitments exposed internal and external challenges. Internally, member states remain divided over balancing urgency with adherence to accession criteria. France's proposal for a European Political Community and the Franco-German report highlight debates over institutional readiness for a larger union. Externally, instability in the WB, such as Serbia's stance on Russia sanctions, tensions in Kosovo, and BiH's secession threats, underscore regional fragility (Butnaru-Troncota, 2024, p. 186-190). European Commission President, Ursula von der Leyen reinforced this dilemma in a speech regarding the Enlargement Package 2024. This shows that enlargement is important due to the geopolitical situation but must be carried out under the principles of democracy and the rule of law.

*“The tense geopolitical context makes it more compelling than ever that we complete the reunification of our continent, under the same values of democracy and the rule of law. [...] Enlargement will remain a top priority of the new Commission” (European Commission, 2024)*

This shows that the 'EU as Democratising Force' remains an integral part of the EU enlargement strategy and even acknowledges the geopolitical urgency highlighted by the 'Threat/Risk' narrative. Von der Leyen's emphasis on democratic principles underscores the EU's commitment to its core values. Despite the accelerated pace due to security concerns, democratic reforms and adherence to the Copenhagen Criteria remain central, reinforcing the EU's role in fostering regional stability through democratic transformation.

In conclusion, Russia's invasion of Ukraine has fundamentally reshaped the EU's enlargement communication and strategies, accelerating debates on reform while also exposing persistent

tensions within the process. The push for staged accession reflects an attempt to balance geopolitical urgency with conditionality, yet enlargement fatigue and political divisions continue to shape the process (Butnaru-Troncota, 2024, p. 192-194).

The shift in enlargement narratives reflects this tension. While the EU traditionally framed enlargement as a tool for democratisation and peace, the war has reinforced the ‘Threat/Risk’ narrative, repositioning enlargement as a geopolitical necessity. This shift highlights the EU’s increasing focus on strategic stability but also raises critical questions about whether geopolitical imperatives will undermine the merit-based approach that has long characterised the enlargement process. The shift from a normative-driven enlargement strategy towards one increasingly shaped by geopolitical imperatives has sparked debates about the future of EU expansion. The EU’s enlargement strategy is at a crossroad, where strategic stability and democratic reform must coexist.

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