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Journal of European Public Policy

ISSN: 1350-1763 (Print) 1466-4429 (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/rjpp20

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To cite this article: Marius Ghincea & Laurențiu Plesca (2025) From transformation to demarcation: explaining the EU's shifting motivations of the enlargement policy, Journal of European Public Policy, 32:12, 2999-3033, DOI: 10.1080/13501763.2025.2498033

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2025.2498033

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Published online: 29 Apr 2025.

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JOURNAL OF EUROPEAN PUBLIC POLICY
2025, VOL. 32, NO. 12, 2999–3033
https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2025.2498033

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From transformation to demarcation: explaining the EU's shifting motivations of the enlargement policy

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the evolving motivations underlying the European Union's (EU) enlargement policy, particularly following the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine and the accelerated candidacies of Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia. While existing scholarship is built on competing assumptions regarding the EU's motivation—stressing stability, transformative aims, or the containment of rival great-power influence—these accounts assume unchanging EU motivations. Contrary to such assumptions, we argue that the EU's enlargement policy has been driven by distinct and shifting 'policy logics': transformation, stabilization, demarcation, and cohabitation. Drawing on content analysis of European Council conclusions from 1990 to 2024 and comparative case studies, we show that the hierarchy among these logics has changed over time in response to varying internal challenges within candidate states and external risks. We trace three major phases: the transformative logic dominated the 1990s to early 2010s, stabilization gained prominence from the early 2010s to early 2020s, and a demarcation logic surged from the early 2020s onward, particularly after the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These findings demonstrate that EU enlargement policy motivations are not static but dynamically reconfigured, offering new insights into how the EU navigates its neighborhood amidst shifting geopolitical conditions.

ARTICLE HISTORY Received 5 August 2024; Accepted 18 April 2025

KEYWORDS EU enlargement; Geopolitics; Policy logics; Motivations; western balkans; Eastern Europe

The 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine has spurred the European Union (EU) to revive its enlargement process and expand the pool of candidate countries aspiring for membership. In just a few months after the war started, Ukraine, Moldova, and ultimately Georgia, countries that previously had

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little prospects of ever joining the EU, were granted EU candidate status. Simultaneously, the EU recommitted to admitting into the Union the Western Balkan countries and offered candidate status to the remaining countries from the region, Albania, North Macedonia, and Bosnia–Herzegovina. After a decade of 'enlargement fatigue,' during which the enlargement policy became a mere afterthought (O'Brennan, 2014), the enlargement process experienced a revival. This significant shift in the enlargement policy has attracted renewed debate about the central drivers of the numerous shifts and turns in the EU's enlargement policy over the past three decades.

In explaining this significant shift in the EU's enlargement policy, scholars have pointed to the changing 'geopolitical' conditions affecting the EU's neighborhood and claimed that the EU uses the enlargement policy as primarily a stabilization and security-building mechanism to manage its neighborhood (Anghel & Džankić, 2023; Anghel & Jones, 2022; Smith, 2023; Vachudova, 2014). The security-oriented elements of these arguments resonate with older arguments that emphasized security considerations for the 2004 'Big Bang' enlargement (Skålnes, 2005), while the emphasis on stabilization is grounded in a broader literature emphasizing the linkages between the EU enlargement policy and the emergence of 'stabilitocracies' in the Western Balkan candidate countries (Bieber, 2018b; Richter & Wunsch, 2020). In focusing on security-driven preoccupations, this argument goes against a rival but empirically well-supported strand of argument pointing to the transformative aims of the European Union in its neighborhood and less so on security considerations (Börzel & Risse, 2009; Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2004, p. 2020). In contrast to this security-driven account, the transformative argument emphasizes the reformist preoccupations of the European Union in its Eastern neighborhood. Both these accounts also go against the claims made by a growing number of area studies specialists that point to the EU's central preoccupations with limiting the unwanted influence of great powers in the EU's neighborhood, particularly but increasingly China and others—what we call the 'strategic' perspective (Bechev, 2015; 2017; Freudlsperger & Schimmelfennig, 2023; Makarychev, 2015; Pavlićević, 2019; Popescu & Wilson, 2009). It is important to note that while all perspectives acknowledge the importance of geopolitics—sometimes only implicitly—they start from very different assumptions regarding the driving motivations informing the EU's behavior and its enlargement policy, which are not assumed to change in response to shifting geopolitical conditions, remaining rather static as an anchor for their analytical frameworks across time. We use 'geopolitics' as a metaphor for referring to the economic, political, and socio-cultural transactions and developments in a given region or area—in line with current use in the European studies literature (see Nickel, 2024 for an extensive discussion of the uses and misuses of the concept in recent scholarship). Security-oriented perspectives focus on stabilization,

reform-oriented accounts emphasize transformative aims, while strategic-oriented perspectives assert that the EU primarily seeks to limit rival influence. Each set of assumptions about the EU's primary motivation is well-supported empirically and, importantly, not necessarily mutually exclusive. However, we claim that these strands of scholarship should not simply assume the primary motivations of the EU and instead should empirically probe them by analyzing the key positions expressed by the Council.

This article addresses two central questions: First, assuming that the European Union can pursue multiple priorities simultaneously, how have priorities guiding its enlargement policy evolved in prominence since the end of the Cold War? Second, what can explain the potential shifts in prominence observed over time?

Building on the existing literature, we make several theoretical and empirical contributions. We begin with the proposition that the EU's enlargement policy is informed by distinct 'policy logics'—that is, underlying rationales that guide decision-making toward candidate and associate countries during specific periods. These logics involve distinct sets of assumptions, priorities, and expected outcomes that shape the structure, strategies, and actions of the EU's enlargement policy. They provide compelling and generally accepted answers to the 'why' and 'how' behind policy behavior, explaining why certain actions should be taken and how specific goals should be prioritized over others. Drawing upon existing scholarship, we deductively identify four distinct policy logics: transformation, stabilization, demarcation, and cohabitation. As we will demonstrate in our empirical analysis, each of these four logics has co-operated at different times since the end of the Cold War, and each has distinctive prescriptive characteristics for the EU's enlargement policy.

In contrast with the existing literature, which assumes unchanging motivations informing the EU's enlargement policy, we argue that the history of the EU's enlargement policy has been structured by distinct phases during which the prevalence and hierarchy of different motivations has shifted, driving a change in the thinking of EU officials and member states toward candidate and associate countries. To this end, we find empirical traces for all the four logics we consider in this paper, while simultaneously finding that the prevalence and hierarchy of these logics has shifted across time. In line with reform-focused accounts, we find that the transformative logic was the prevailing logic during the early years of EU enlargement, from the early 1990s to the mid-2000s. Subsequently, consistent with recent literature on the emergence of 'stabilitocracies' in the Western Balkans, we find that from the late 2000s to the late 2010s, the stabilization logic was prevailing in the texts we analyzed. Finally, we observe significant evidence that since the late 2010s, and especially starting in 2022, the demarcation logic has surged in importance (see also Schimmelfennig and Kakhishvili (2024) for a similar periodization). What these empirical findings show, contrary to the

assumptions informing much of the literature, is that the motivations informing the EU's enlargement policy are far from unchanging and, instead, evolve in response to the external environment.

Finally, we argue that the shifts in prevalence and hierarchy among policy logics can be explained by looking at two necessary and sufficient conditions: the perceived level of internal challenges emanating from within the candidate and associate countries and the level of external risk resulting from either inter-state tensions or unwanted influence from rival powers from outside the neighborhood. By perceived internal challenges we refer to difficulties or obstacles from within the candidate or associate countries that may hinder their governance, and alignment with the EU standards or values. These challenges can encompass issues such as political instability, weak institutions, corruption, economic underdevelopment, democratic deficits, or the absence of the rule of law. In contrast, by perceived external risk we refer to unwanted influence or disruptions emanating from outside the candidate or associate countries that can impact the neighborhood or the EU's interests. These can include interstate tensions, regional conflicts, and the influence or intervention of rival powers—such as geopolitical competitors seeking to expand their influence in the EU's neighboring countries. We posit that the interaction of these two types of conditions (internal and external) determines the reconfiguration in the hierarchy and prevalence of policy logics guiding the EU's policy candidate and associate countries.

We employ a two-step empirical strategy that combines content analysis with a comparative case study design to test our claims. The content analysis aims to identify and trace empirical evidence of the four policy logics from 1990 to 2024. To achieve this, we coded all European Council conclusions' enlargement and neighborhood policy content during the studied period. The comparative case study design enables us to compare the contrasting internal and external conditions present across the past thirty-five years. By examining variation in the intensity of perceived internal and external conditions, we illustrate our claims about the necessary and sufficient conditions determining the shifts in the hierarchy of policy logics.

Our contributions have significant policy implications and offer meaningful insights into the shifting motivations of the European Union (EU) toward candidate and associate countries. While the EU strives to achieve multiple objectives simultaneously, there is often a clear hierarchy among these motivations over extended periods, providing EU officials with a blueprint for engaging with candidate and associate countries. Moreover, our work clarifies—aligning with a growing body of research—that the enlargement policy is externally driven and shaped by different configurations of internal and external conditions originating from within or outside candidate countries. Additionally, our contribution addresses the conceptual ambiguity surrounding the term 'geopolitics' as employed by scholars of EU

enlargement and integration. In this context, we demonstrate that the term 'geopolitical' alone offers limited insight without understanding how different types of threats interact to produce distinct policy outcomes. Different geopolitical contexts can lead to vastly different policy logics becoming dominant depending on the levels and interaction of internal and external challenges affecting the EU neighborhood.

In what follows, we discuss existing accounts of the shifts and turns in the European Union's policy toward candidate and associate countries. We then present our central theoretical contribution, introducing our conceptualization of the four distinct policy logics informing the EU's enlargement policy and outlining the theoretical framework to explain the conditions under which one logic becomes dominant. We then discuss the research design and methods employed to test our contribution, explaining our use of frequentist content analysis and how we coded the different logics in the European Council conclusions. We also justify our comparative case study design and case selection. In the remainder of the article, we present our findings, illustrating the temporal evolution of the four policy logics and we examine the plausibility of our theoretical argument regarding the necessary and sufficient conditions that determine which policy logic becomes dominant.

The underlying rationale(s) of enlargement policy

The existing scholarship offers three contrasting perspectives on the primary priorities and underlying rationales of the European Union's enlargement strategy. Since the early 1990s, when the EU's enlargement process gained momentum, scholars have debated whether its priorities stem primarily from the EU's liberal or normative commitment to reshaping its neighborhood in line with European values and principles, or whether they are driven by a 'security imperative' focused on fostering stability. A third perspective highlights strategic considerations, emphasizing the EU's efforts to counterbalance the influence of rival powers in its geographical proximity. While these perspectives are often framed as competing or mutually exclusive, we argue that this dichotomy is unnecessary. Instead, we seek to integrate these into an overarching framework that shows how distinct priorities interact and vary in prominence over time, shaping the EU's enlargement policy in different contexts.

The first and probably most established perspective about the key motivations behind the EU's enlargement policy emphasizes the transformative preoccupations of the EU in its neighborhood. Scholars such as Börzel and Risse (2009), Lavenex and Schimmelfennig (2013), or Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier (2004) argue that the EU's primary preoccupation has been to transform candidate countries by promoting democratic governance, rule of law, and alignment with European norms and institutions. This reformist perspective is rooted in the idea that the EU's influence can fundamentally reshape the

political and institutional landscape of candidate and associate countries, as long as the necessary scope conditions are present. According to this perspective, the enlargement policy serves as a powerful mechanism for exporting values and institutions to other countries, this being the driving motivation informing the EU's policy toward candidate and associate countries.

This reformist perspective regarding the driving motivation of enlargement can be said to be grounded in the EU's identity as a 'normative power'—an idea first proposed by Manners (2002), referring to the EU as 'an "ideational" actor characterized by common principles and acting to diffuse norms within international relations' (Whitman, 2011). Applied to the enlargement policy, this perspective emphasizes the desire of the EU to promote its community norms and values to other European countries, which are seen as belonging to the same socio-cultural and political space and which have a destiny to join a united Europe. The significant political, economic, and societal reforms undertaken in the Central and Eastern European countries that joined the EU in 2004 are seen as an expression of these transformative preoccupations of the enlargement process. For this process to be effective, Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier (2004) emphasize the role of conditionality, whereby the EU sets clear reform-related conditions for membership that candidate countries must fulfill. As such, the transformative impact of the EU is most successful in countries that demonstrate a strong attachment to European values and express willingness for structural reforms, together with the continued presence of credible promises that compensate for the costs associated with the required transformations.

However, the reformist perspective has faced challenges in recent years because of the EU's perceived inability and unwillingness to push for reforms in the remaining candidate countries, particularly from the Western Balkans. This leads us to the second perspective present in the literature, which focuses on stability-oriented preoccupations as the main drivers of EU enlargement policy. Scholars such as Anghel and Džankić (2023), Anghel and Jones (2024), and Smith (2023) argue that the EU uses the enlargement process as a tool for stabilization and security-building within its neighborhood. This perspective posits that the primary driver of the EU's enlargement efforts is to maintain stability and manage security risks in the neighborhood, particularly in response to conflicts and instability. This perspective is strongly connected to the growing theoretical and policy arguments emerging in the 2010s regarding the emergence of 'stabilitocracies' in the Western Balkans and the role of the European Union in legitimizing or enabling their existence (Pavlović, 2017; Richter & Wunsch, 2020). The rise of stabilitocracies reflects, according to this literature, the EU's pragmatic approach to enlargement, wherein short-term stability is often prioritized over long-term democratic transformation, especially in politically fragile regions like the Western Balkans (Bieber, 2018b).

The stability-oriented perspective draws attention to the role of inter-state tensions and conflicts or crises in shaping the EU's enlargement policy. The disintegration of Yugoslavia in the 1990s and the subsequent conflicts and latent tensions in the Western Balkans are said to have underscored the importance of using the enlargement policy to maintain regional stability (Anghel & Jones, 2024). By offering the prospects of EU membership, the EU has *primarily* sought to mitigate the risk of conflict and fostered cooperation among neighboring countries, creating, in the words of Jones (2024), a 'security imperative' for EU enlargement.

A third perspective, connected with the second one but grounded in strategic considerations, highlights the EU's efforts to limit the influence of rival powers, such as Russia or China, within its neighborhood. Scholars such as Bechev (2015, 2017) Bruszt and Jones (2024), Freudlsperger and Schimmelfennig (2023) or Makarychev (2015) argue that the EU's enlargement policy is increasingly oriented toward 'demarcation'—establishing boundaries that limit unwanted influence from geopolitical competitors. This demarcation-oriented perspective has become particularly prominent in the wake of the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine, as the EU has sought to counterbalance Russia and China's growing presence in Eastern Europe and the Western Balkans. Unlike the transformative or stabilization perspectives, which focus on democratic reforms or stability-oriented policies, this third perspective explicitly considers the exclusion or limitation of external influences, dependencies, or intrusions in the EU's neighborhood as the key driver of today's enlargement policy (Bechev, 2017).

Scholars looking at the EU's enlargement process from this perspective focus on the EU's response to the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine and Brussels's actions to limit the presence of Chinese investments or Russian 'malign' political and societal influence in candidate and associate countries. As such, the driver of EU enlargement policy is neither a normative desire to promote values and institutions nor simply to ensure stability by diminishing the risk of inter-state tensions and conflicts, but to limit or exclude unwanted dependencies, influences, and strategic intrusions of rival geopolitical powers, particularly Russia in the context of the war in Ukraine.

To these three perspectives, one may very well add a fourth perspective that focuses on co-existence, referring to a preoccupation with simply maintaining cordial, cooperative, and friendly relations based on mutual exchange (Schimmelfennig, 2024; Veuthey, 2023). This is arguably the type of dynamic that the EU has with countries such as Switzerland or EFTA countries that have preferred not to join the European Union. Yet, the literature we consider in this paper focuses on the Eastern neighborhood, and simple co-existence has never been the main preoccupation in this region, maybe except when it comes to Russia or, in recent years, Turkey.

While these perspectives provide valuable insights into the EU's enlargement process and dynamics, they have important limitations. First, they assume relatively unchanging motivations across time instead of testing them empirically. Second, these perspectives are often framed as rival explanations that are mutually exclusive, leading to a rather fragmented understanding of the EU's enlargement process and how it has evolved. While each perspective highlights different primary priorities for the EU's enlargement, we contend that they are not necessarily mutually exclusive and that we should not assume that these are static across time. The EU pursues multiple aims simultaneously, and this should be more widely and transparently acknowledged in the literature. Rather than positioning these distinctive yet not necessarily exclusive perspectives as rival explanations, we can develop overarching frameworks—as we aim to do in this paper—that consider a plurality of priorities operating simultaneously and explain under what conditions the hierarchy of these priorities shifts across time. By doing so, we clarify that the EU always has a hierarchy of priorities at any given time, with one being more prevalent than its alternatives and thus more significantly guiding its enlargement policy. Acknowledging this, it becomes particularly interesting to explain what determines changes in this hierarchy: under what conditions does one priority overtake others to dominate the thinking guiding the EU's enlargement process?

Theoretical framework

In this section, we outline our theoretical contribution, seeking to integrate the distinctive perspectives about the primary priorities guiding the EU's policy toward candidate and associate countries into an overarching framework. In doing so, we make two analytical moves. First, we reframe the distinct sets of priorities discussed in the literature by introducing the notion of 'policy logics,' as distinct ways of thinking that provide answers to the 'why' and 'how' of enlargement policy. Second, we go beyond the ideational level to specify how these logics manifest in policy tools, initiatives, and institutional practices, thus illustrating why the policy logics matter for the EU's actual relations with candidate and associate states. We consider two necessary and sufficient conditions to explain the variation in the prominence of different policy logics over time, explaining why the hierarchy of priorities changes over time; these are the level of perceived internal challenges emanating from within candidate and associate countries and the level of perceived external risk resulting either from inter-state tensions or unwanted influence from rival powers from outside the neighborhood. The interaction of these two conditions, we argue, determines specific changes in the hierarchy of policy logics guiding the political thinking of the European Union *vis-à-vis* candidate and associate countries.

Drawing on existing scholarship, we deductively consider four distinct policy logics—Transformation, Stabilization, Demarcation, and Cohabitation—each representing specific priorities and addressing the 'how' and 'why' of the EU's policies toward candidate and associate countries. While these logics are expected to coexist throughout the history of the EU's enlargement process, their prominence is likely to fluctuate over time. Consequently, we expect different hierarchies of motivations during specific periods, and these can be traced only through official statements embedded in the European Council conclusions but also through concrete policy actions and instruments that accompany such rhetoric.

The transformative logic prioritizes reshaping these countries to align with EU normative and regulatory standards, focusing on democratic governance, the rule of law, and institutional and economic reforms (Lavenex & Schimmelfennig, 2013). In practice, this manifests itself through a practical emphasis through resource allocation and political conditionality on institutional and societal reforms. In contrast, the stabilization logic emphasizes maintaining societal, political, and security-oriented stability over deep transformation, directing efforts toward reducing risks from inter-state tensions and conflicts (Anghel & Jones, 2024). In practical terms, this implies that democratic and institutional reforms are de-emphasized or overlooked in favor of instruments that reduce inter-state tensions, such as the Stability Pact for Southeastern Europe, and conflict-resolution mechanisms (EUFOR missions, EU-facilitated dialogue). The demarcation logic seeks to delineate political, economic, and strategic boundaries between the EU, its candidate and associate countries, and rival powers, aiming to diminish dependencies and limit unwanted influence from actors like Russia or China (Bechev, 2017). In policy terms, this becomes visible in diversification efforts (e.g., energy infrastructure programs such as the Southern Gas Corridor). Finally, the cohabitation logic involves maintaining cooperative, friendly, and mutually beneficial relationships without pursuing deeper integration, accounting for situations where the EU does not perceive a need for more profound engagement. The EU's conditionality is an element in all these four logics, but the formal or informal conditions associated with each vary depending on its primary preoccupation. In practice, this entails instances of 'light-touch' economic and diplomatic relations (e.g., Partnership and Cooperation Agreements).

These four policy logics encompass a spectrum of underlying rationales that guide the European Union's behavior toward candidate and associate countries. We contend—and aim to empirically demonstrate—that these logics coexist and interact over time, collectively influencing EU policymaking. While they may appear partly or substantially incoherent or incompatible when considered together, it is essential to recognize that policymaking in any polity, especially in complex, multi-level entities like the EU, inevitably

includes inconsistencies. Such incoherencies should not be dismissed but rather acknowledged and accounted for in our analysis.

Threat perception and enlargement policy

To understand the conditions under which a particular policy logic becomes dominant in guiding the EU's approach toward candidate and associate countries, we hold that two critical factors need to be considered: the perceived levels of internal challenges and external risks originating from within the EU's Eastern neighborhood. The prevalence of a specific policy logic—transformation, stabilization, demarcation, or cohabitation—and the resulting hierarchy of motivations is contingent upon the interaction of these elite threat perceptions. When we discuss levels of threat perception, we focus analytically on the member states, which are represented in the council, and technocratic elites from within the European Commission. In line with both intergovernmental and neo-functionalist theories, these two types of actors are particularly relevant when it comes to decisions about the policy orientations related to the EU's neighborhood and generally with external affairs (Hooghe & Marks, 2019; Moravcsik & Vachudova, 2003; Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2002).

By internal challenges, we refer to conditions or properties originating from within candidate and associate countries that may hinder the EU's existence, development, prosperity, or values. These conditions or properties encompass political instability, weak institutions, corruption, democratic deficits, economic underdevelopment, or the absence of the rule of law. The EU's perception of these challenges influences its policy-making process and overall policy orientation regarding candidate and associate countries, determining the prominence of one or another policy logic. Conversely, external risks are conditions that stem from outside the candidate and associate countries and may involve strategic considerations. These include inter- state tensions, regional conflicts, and unwanted influence from rival powers, such as Russia and China. High external risks may push the EU toward a policy behavior that emphasizes different sets of priorities when dealing with candidate and associate countries.

The interaction of the perceived levels of internal and external conditions determines, we argue, which policy logic becomes dominant in guiding the EU's policy toward candidate and associate countries. Juxtaposing the perceived levels of internal challenges emanating from within candidate countries with the risks resulting from outside them allows us to capture variation in the changing prevalence of each policy logic and the resulting hierarchy of motivations (see Table 1). A crucial point is that some policy initiatives—like support for reducing inter-state tensions—can appear across multiple periods. However, what differs is the *emphasis* placed on

Table 1. Interaction of perceived internal challenges and external risks and corresponding policy logics.

Conditions		External Risks	
		Low	*High*
Internal Challenges	*High*	Transformation	Stabilization
	Low	Cohabitation	Demarcation

such initiatives and how they are justified discursively and operationalized. For instance, the Stability Pact for Southeastern Europe in the late 1990s already included elements of conflict prevention, yet it was overshadowed by the broader emphasis on democratic and institutional reforms. In contrast, by the 2010s, when the enlargement process moved to the Western Balkans exclusively, the same kinds of initiatives played a much more central role and were coupled with an explicit focus on conflict risk reduction rather than the full transformative focus—leading to outcries from local experts that the EU is implicitly supporting local autocrats (Bieber, 2018b).

We expect that when internal challenges are perceived as high while external risk perceptions remain relatively low, the EU tends to prioritize a transformative approach. In such circumstances, the EU focuses on aligning candidate countries with its normative and regulatory standards, promoting democratic governance, the rule of law, and institutional reforms. Conversely, when both internal challenges and external risks are perceived as high, *stabilization* becomes the primary logic guiding EU policy. This reflects a need to manage internal challenges while simultaneously addressing external risks, particularly in conflict-prone or geopolitically contested regions. The emphasis is on reducing risks through stabilization, even if this means compromising on deeper democratic reforms (Smith, 2023). Differently, when internal challenges are perceived as low and external risks are also minimal, the EU's policy logic shifts toward *cohabitation*. This scenario focuses on maintaining cordial and cooperative relations without pursuing deeper integration, as there is no immediate impetus for transformative reforms or stabilization measures. However, when internal challenges are perceived as low but external risks are perceived as high, the EU adopts a *demarcation*-oriented logic. This logic seeks to limit dependencies and counter unwanted influence from rival powers, emphasizing the need to delineate boundaries—whether political, economic, or strategic—between the EU, its candidate and associate countries, and rival actors like Russia or China.

Turning words into deeds

The changing prevalence and hierarchy of policy logics informing the EU policy thinking toward candidate and associate countries may translate

into action through three complementary causal mechanisms. First, the European Council performs an agenda-setting and mandating function through its conclusions and declarations, which establish key political priorities and confer either formal or informal mandates upon the Commission, EEAS, and other EU bodies. Second, the articulation of a particular policy logic at the European Council level influences resource allocation. Once a prevalent logic is signaled—for instance, demarcation—the Commission and various EU agencies adjust budget lines, priority lists, and conditions attached to financial instruments, such as the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA). This results in targeted support for energy infrastructure projects or other initiatives to reduce reliance on rival powers, effectively operationalizing the Council's views. Third, statements at the highest political level filters through working groups both in the Council and the Commission, leading to bureaucratic adaptation. Over time, repeated signals from the Council can recalibrate how officials in different directorates-general perceive their roles and objectives, culminating in the institutionalization of revised policy practices. Commission directorates, for instance, may issue more rigorous guidelines for evaluating rule-of-law reforms if the Council consistently prioritizes transformative motivations. These mechanisms—agenda setting and mandating, resource allocation, and bureaucratic adaptation—can explain how the Council discourse not only reflects member-state consensus (or tension) but also reshapes the formal actions of EU institutions.

Overall, this framework comes with two significant advantages. First, it coherently integrates the existing observations about the plurality of the EU's priorities into a single overarching framework. Second, it demonstrates that the EU's primary set of priorities is not static, contrary to the implicit assumption of much of the existing scholarship. Instead, the preoccupations driving the EU's enlargement policy are dynamically adjusted based on shifting configurations of perceived internal and external conditions. The remainder of this article tests this theoretical framework by analyzing the historical evolution of the EU's stated policy priorities toward candidate and associate countries and examining the conditions under which the prevalence and hierarchy of policy logics changes and with what implications for the actual policy actions of the EU.

Data and methods

We adopt a two-step research approach to test our claims in this article. We combine content analysis to measure the dependent variable with comparative case studies to test the necessary and sufficient conditions for particular policy logics to become dominant. We rely on document analysis in each case study to gather data and perform a congruence analysis (Blatter & Blume, 2008). This approach allows us to integrate multiple research methods to

achieve robust and reliable qualitative insights into the EU's priorities and how they change in response to geopolitical dynamics.

First, we conducted a frequentist content analysis to trace the empirical evidence of the four policy logics we consider–transformation, stabilization, demarcation, and cohabitation–across time. This approach involved coding all enlargement and Eastern neighborhood policy content from all the European Council conclusions available from 1990 to 2024. In total, we analyzed 143 documents and identified 506 relevant statements, coded according to one of the four policy logics. All documents are available on the website of the European Council (European Council, 2024). The content analysis enabled us to systematically identify and document the presence, pro- portions, and shifts in the underlying rationale guiding the EU's enlargement policy as expressed in these key documents. The evolution of these priorities in the European Council conclusions highlights changes in the prominence of each policy logic over time.

We focus on the conclusions of the European Council because, as previous scholars have noted, this is the European Union's 'supreme decision-maker,' enjoying unparalleled political authority in the European institutional architecture and having the most important voice in deciding the pace and turns in the enlargement process (Schramm, 2025). The heads of state and government assembled in the Council are the 'centre of political gravity' of the EU and have final say on the direction and outcomes of the Union's enlargement policy (Middelaar & Puetter, 2021). Therefore, the conclusions of the Council are the most authoritative source for uncovering the motivations informing the enlargement policy, which are subsequently operationalized by the Commission, guiding its interaction and conditions vis-à-vis candidate and associate countries.

Our coding framework was developed based on deductively derived definitions of each policy logic, based on the existing literature, which were further refined based on existing literature and policy documents. This framework is summarized in Table 2.

Second, we employed a comparative case study design to analyze the conditions under which each of the four policy logics we consider becomes dominant in informing the EU's policy toward candidate and associate countries. This design enables us to empirically explore the specific configurations of perceived internal and external conditions and their implications for the EU's enlargement policy at various points in time. By selecting contrasting cases from different phases of the enlargement process, we can better illustrate the influence of causal conditions on the emergence of the dominant policy logic.

To select adequate case studies, we sought variation on the dependent variable (dominant policy logic) across the three decades of the post-Cold War enlargement process, identifying three distinct and contrasting case

Table 2. Coding framework for content analysis.

Code	Definition	Inclusion Criteria	Example
Transformation	Reforming state and societal institutions to adopt EU norms and principles.	Policy statements aimed at institutional reforms or adopting EU norms.	The EU calls for the adoption of anti-corruption laws and reforms in the judiciary to align with European standards.
Stabilization	Maintaining political and security stability.	Policy statements focused on stability or crisis management.	The EU will continue its efforts to reduce trans-border tensions between Serbia and Kosovo.
Demarcation	Setting boundaries to limit rival influence.	Policy statements focused on reducing dependencies on rival powers.	The EU must work to reduce the candidate country's dependency on energy imports from Russia.
Cohabitation	Maintaining the status quo without major reforms.	Policy statements calling for friendly relations without changes.	The EU should seek to maintain friendly relations with country X

periods based on our findings from the content analysis. The first case study focuses on the perceived threat levels during the 1990s and early 2000s when our descriptive analysis shows that the transformative logic was dominant. The second case study covers the late 2010s until the early 2020s, during which we observe a shift toward the dominance of the stabilization logic. Finally, we consider the period beginning with the Russo-Ukrainian War, characterized by the surge of demarcation as the prominent logic informing the EU's policy toward candidate and associate countries. To test our theoretical assertions, we probe the variation in perceived levels of internal and external conditions within each case period. In summary, our two-step empirical strategy allows us to trace the temporal evolution of the EU's enlargement policy logics and analyze the necessary and sufficient conditions under which one logic became dominant.

Tracing the policy logics

To explain the temporal shifts in the EU's policy priorities toward candidate and associate countries, we trace the evolution of the four policy logics–transformation, stabilization, demarcation, and cohabitation–over time. By employing a frequentist content analysis of policy statements from European Council conclusions from 1990 to 2024, we measure how the prominence of each policy logic has varied over time. Our findings reveal a dynamic shift over time between these distinct policy logics.

Figure 1 reveals three distinct phases in the evolution of the EU's enlargement policy priorities. From 1990 to the 2012, transformation was the prevailing policy logic identified in the entire body of EC conclusions, followed by stabilization, cohabitation and demarcation. During this period, the European Council preoccupations vis-à-vis candidate and associate countries were

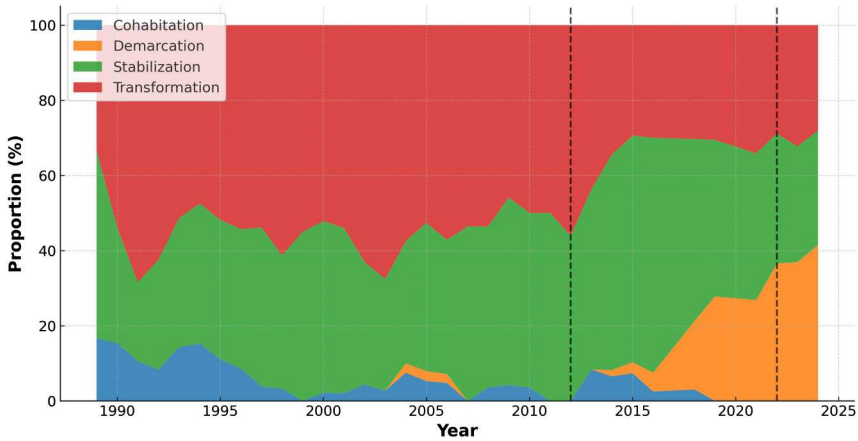

Figure 1. Chart with 3-year rolling average of coded policy logics.

focused on domestic institutional reform, fostering democratic governance, and ensuring regulatory alignment of the Central and Eastern European countries seeking to join the EU. These countries were transitioning from planned economies and communist dictatorial regimes to free markets and democracy. The prevalence of the transformative logic is evident in the language of the Council conclusions, which frequently highlighted the importance of institutional convergence and reform-driven conditions for membership. For instance, statements like the one below, from the 1993 Copenhagen Council conclusions reflect the primacy of the EU's transformative aims during this period:

> Membership requires that the candidate country has achieved stability of institutions guaranteeing democracy, the rule of law, human rights, and respect for and protection of minorities (Copenhagen EC, 1993).

Following the 'Big Bang' enlargement, our data reveals a shift in the hierarchy of policy logics, with stabilization becoming prevalent starting in the early 2010s and until the latter part of the 2010s. This logic was followed by the transformative logic, which occupied the second spot, cohabitation, and demarcation. This shift occurred as the enlargement process moved from Central and Eastern Europe to the Western Balkans, with Serbia, for instance, receiving candidate status in 2012, composed mostly of post-conflict states with lingering inter- and intra-state tensions from the 1990s Yugoslav wars. This likely reflects a pragmatic approach to maintaining stability in the face of political instability and inter-state tensions. For instance, statements like 'it considered that a stable and prosperous Serbia fully integrated into the family of European nations is important for the stability of the region' demonstrates the prioritization of stability over reform-oriented transformative objectives during this period.

Finally, since the late 2010s and especially following the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, we observe a significant surge in the frequency of language associated with the demarcation logic. If in the previous period we observed around 1% of statements associated with a demarcation logic, during this third period the demarcation language in the conclusions raises to 32 percent. However, no policy logic significantly prevails over the others, with the transformation, stabilization, and cohabitation logic being around 30% of the coded statements. This period is characterized by a dual focus on the Western Balkans, where stabilization concerns continue to exist, and the former countries of the Eastern Partnership, Ukraine, Moldova, and, until recently, Georgia, who were offered candidacy status in the wake of the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine and where the demarcation-related concerns are prevalent.

For instance, whereas the foreign policy alignment of candidate and associate countries was not a particular concern in previous years, starting from late 2010 and especially after 2022, the EU has increasingly emphasized foreign policy alignment, especially related to sanctions, concerning its enlargement conditions and expectations even before these countries become members. The language of the Council conclusions shifted one that underscores strategic autonomy and external boundary-setting. This reflects the EU's growing concern over the influence of rival powers in its immediate Eastern neighborhood, which has been exacerbated by geopolitical crises such as the war in Ukraine. This has led to initiatives aimed at enhancing energy security, building critical infrastructure, and fostering alliances that can counterbalance the influence of Russia and China. The EU's approach during this phase also emphasizes solidarity with candidate countries that are willing to align with the Union's strategic interests, highlighting the strategic dimension of enlargement policy.

Table 3 illustrates the proportions of each policy logic across different periods in our dataset. These proportions empirically support the assertion of a historical shift from the dominance of one logic to another. During the 1990s, Transformation was the prevailing logic, accounting for 58.6% of policy decisions, while Stabilization followed with 33.8%, and other logics played a marginal role. This trend continued into the 2000s, where Transformation remained prevalent at 53.8%, though Stabilization grew to 42.3%, indicating a more balanced distribution between these two logics. However, a

Table 3. Distribution of each logic per period (Percentage).

Decade	Transformation (%)	Stabilization (%)	Cohabitation (%)	Demarcation (%)
1990s	58.6	33.77	7.62	0
2000s	53.75	42.28	3.44	0.52
2010s	42.05	47.49	2.12	8.32
2020s	37.22	22.35	0	34.41

notable shift occurred in the 2010s, when Stabilization surpassed Transformation as the most prevalent logic, reaching 47.5%, while Demarcation also gained traction at 8.3%, signaling an increasing emphasis on geopolitical boundaries. The most striking transformation took place in the 2020s, where Demarcation surged to 34.4%, reflecting a growing priority on differentiating political and economic spheres, while Transformation declined to 37.2% and Stabilization dropped significantly to 22.35%. These findings highlight a clear evolution in policy priorities, demonstrating how the European Council's stated motivations gradually transitioned from fostering structural transformation to prioritizing demarcation and boundary-setting in response to changing global dynamics.

To summarize, our content analysis's findings support our claims about the temporal shifts in the EU's policy priorities toward candidate and associate countries. We traced the evolution of the four policy logics we considered and identified three distinct phases defined by different hierarchies of these policy logics in the analyzed documents. In the next sections, we probe the different internal and external conditions that may have led to these shifts to emerge.

The first phase: Central and Eastern Europe

The first phase in the European Union's enlargement policy, spanning from the early 1990s to the late-2000s, where our data indicates that the transformative logic was prevalent. Our theoretical framework would expect that during this period, the perceived levels of internal challenges emanating from within the candidate and associate countries of Central and Eastern Europe were relatively high. On the other hand, we expect that the perceived levels of external risks resulting from inter-state tensions or concerns about the influence of rival powers or geopolitical competition were relatively low. Our analytical framework suggests that the configuration of these perceived internal and external conditions enables a hierarchy of priorities that prioritizes transformation. This is because internal challenges can be effectively addressed through a process of deep reform, involving comprehensive institutional and economic changes, reducing these issues by the diffusion and adoption of EU institutions, its economic model, and regulations in candidate and associate countries.

Internal challenges

The first phase in the enlargement process, which lasted from the early 1990s to the late 2000s, according to our longitudinal data, was defined by the end of the Cold War, the transformation of the European Communities into today's European Union, and the CEE countries of the former members of

the Communist block to free market democracies. With the collapse of the communist regimes, countries such as Poland, the Czech Republic, Hungary, and others emerged from decades of authoritarian rule with weak institutions and economies in need of deep restructuring. Simultaneously, these countries aimed to 'return to Europe' by joining NATO and the nascent European Union, which offered the EU significant influence in shaping the future development of these neighboring countries (Tulmets, 2014).

During this phase, the internal challenges faced by the candidate and associate countries were significant. These threats primarily included political instability, weak institutions, and economic underdevelopment (Rose, 2009). The entire Communist political, institutional, cultural, and economic architecture on which these countries relied for decades collapsed almost overnight in 1989 and the early 1990s. The collapse of centralized control mechanisms led to political instability as new political actors vied for power, often resulting in fragmented and unstable governments. The institutional void created by the disintegration of communist structures was filled by fledgling democratic institutions that lacked the capacity, legitimacy, and experience to govern effectively.

Moreover, the legacy of authoritarianism persisted in the form of entrenched elites who were reluctant to relinquish power and often resisted reforms, further undermining political stability. This created real risks related to democratic backsliding, as was the case with Slovakia and Romania, where political elites sought to consolidate power by undermining democratic institutions and practices (Malova & Dolny, 2016; Roper, 2004).

In addition to political instability, the institutional weaknesses of these countries posed significant challenges. The communist regimes had established centralized, hierarchical institutions that were ill-suited to the demands of a democratic governance system. As these institutions collapsed, the countries faced the daunting task of building new institutions from scratch, including parliaments, judicial systems, and local governments that were independent, accountable, and capable of supporting democratic governance (Slay, 2019). Due to decades of centralized control, these countries lacked the administrative capacity to implement complex reforms, and the absence of a well-functioning bureaucracy hindered the ability to make meaningful progress toward EU integration.

Economically, the societies and states in the region had no direct experience with market economies and lacked the understanding required to operate in a free market economy, leading to economic collapse, systematic fraud, and an abrupt reduction in per capita incomes. The transition from centrally planned economies to market-driven systems was particularly challenging, as state-owned enterprises were privatized, and the countries sought to establish the legal and regulatory frameworks necessary for a functioning

market economy (Blanchard, 1997). The sudden shift to a market economy led to significant economic disruption, including high unemployment, inflation, and social inequality. The lack of experience with market mechanisms also made these countries vulnerable to corruption and economic mismanagement, as former communist elites sought to exploit the privatization process for personal gain (Pridham, 2005).

To summarize, the internal challenges emanating from within the CEE countries were systemic following the collapse of the institutional, political, cultural, and economic pillars of the Communist regimes during the 1980s and early 1990s. Considering the proportion of the challenges these countries faced, we can adequately argue that the perceived levels of internal challenges emanating from these countries were very high and risked not only affecting the countries from the region but could also produce spillover effects affecting the single market.

External risks

During the first phase, the levels of external risks–as we defined them in this article, namely inter-state tensions and geopolitical influence–were relatively limited, though not entirely absent. The collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War significantly reduced the immediate geopolitical pressure on Central and Eastern Europe, as the region was no longer directly threatened by a superpower rival. The geopolitical vacuum left by the disintegration of the Soviet Union allowed the EU to position itself as the primary actor shaping the future of these countries, using the prospect of membership to drive reforms and align candidate countries with European standards.

The 1990s and early 2000s were defined by the American 'unipolar moment', during which the United States and Western Europe enjoyed a monopoly of influence over military, political, and economic matters at global levels. This produced relative stability and security in Central Europe, although local elites remained anxious about the possibility of a resurgent Russia. This concern prompted them to seek membership in NATO and the European Union, aiming to prevent their isolation and exposure to a resurgent Russian power. Nonetheless, until the late 2000s, Russia was not seen as particularly threatening by most European actors or by the European Union, which sought to develop a stronger political partnership and intensify mutual economic interdependence (Haukkala, 2015; Khudoley & Ras, 2021). This included extensive assistance for the revival of the Russian energy sector, on which the European economy became increasingly dependent during the 1990s (Siddi, 2022; Van der Meulen, 2009).

The wars in the Balkans during the 1990s were a significant external threat, but these wars primarily affected the nascent countries of the Western Balkans rather than the Central European countries that were the focus of

the EU's enlargement efforts during the transformative phase. The conflict in the former Yugoslavia underscored the potential for violence and instability in the region. However, these conflicts did not involve the countries that received the status of candidate or associate countries. The fears of spillovers during those years were related to neighboring countries of the Western Balkans that shared a common history, not to countries such as Hungary or Poland, which were at the forefront of the enlargement process. The EU's response to the Balkan conflicts was to pursue a policy of stabilization and reconstruction through the 'Stability Pacts', while simultaneously pushing forward with the transformative agenda in Central and Eastern Europe (Becker & Jurkeit, 2001). Contrary to what some scholars have argued, no substantive evidence shows that the EU was concerned that the Balkan wars could spread to countries such as Poland, Hungary, or the Czech Republic (Liotta, 2003). As our analysis of the European Council conclusions shows, the EU clearly distinguished the political and security situation in the Balkans from that in the rest of the post-Communist region, particularly in Central Europe, a space unaffected by the inter-state tensions characteristic of the Balkans. For instance, in the conclusions of the 1998 Vienna European Council and the 1999 Cologne European Council, developments in Central Europe were clearly differentiated and discussed in separate paragraphs or sections. Whereas the conclusions of the European Council regarding Central European countries were driven by a transformative logic focused on reforms, statements referring to the Western Balkans focused on stability and measures to reduce conflict (European Council, 1998, 1999).

In summary, the perceived levels of external challenges were relatively low during the first phase. The geopolitical landscape was defined by the end of the Cold War, the emergence of the undisputed US hegemony during its short-lived 'unipolar moment'. A weak and internally chaotic Russia was no longer able to project influence and power in its former sphere of influence, with some exceptions in the post-Soviet space. Inter-state tensions were present but only in the Western Balkans, which was outside the scope of the enlargement process at the time and were not directly concerning most Central European nations.

High internal challenges, low external risks: transformation

As our analysis of the period when our descriptive data shows that the transformative logic was prevailing, the enlargement process took place amid a unique configuration of high perceived internal challenges and relatively low external risks. The internal challenges were characterized by political instability, weak institutions, and economic underdevelopment, which required a strong focus on reforming these countries. The end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union reduced immediate external risks,

while interstate tensions were limited to the Western Balkans, a region with no prospects of integration at the time.

This configuration of external and internal conditions resulted in a hierarchy of policy logics where the transformative aims were prevalent. This was visible both in the type of conditionality and external employed by the EU vis-à-vis candidate and associate countries. For instance, transformative aims prevailed in the PHARE program's stated priorities, the EU's key pre-accession financial instrument to assist CEE countries until 2006, with stabilization concerns being rather limited. Its founding document (EEC 3906/89) focuses on two priorities: 'helping the administrations of the candidate countries to acquire the capacity to implement the Community acquis […]' and 'helping the candidate countries to bring their industries and basic infrastructure to Community standards by mobilizing the investment required'—hallmark aims linked to a transformative policy logic.

The second phase: Western Balkans

The second phase in the European Union's enlargement policy, spanning from the late 2000s to the late 2010s, was marked by a shift in the hierarchy of policy logics in our dataset. During this period, we observe a shift from the hierarchy where the transformative logic was the most prevalent logic to one where stabilization was the prevailing logic. Based on the analytical framework, we expect that the shift in the observed hierarchy and the prevalence of the stabilization logic during this phase reflects a high level of perceived internal challenges coupled with equally significant external risks. Internally, we would expect that the Western Balkan countries faced persistent challenges such as political instability, corruption, and societal divisions, which required intervention to prevent further deterioration. Externally, we would expect heightened levels of competition from geopolitical rivals and interstate tensions. The interaction of these perceived conditions necessitated a policy approach prioritizing stability over transformative reforms, aiming to mitigate risks while laying a foundation for later reforms and future integration.

Internal challenges

The internal challenges facing the Western Balkans during this phase were significant. Following the disintegration of Yugoslavia in the 1990s, the region was left with fragile states, unresolved inter-ethnic tensions, and weak institutions (Bieber, 2018a; Börzel, 2013). Political instability was pervasive, with frequent government collapses and an inability to implement necessary reforms. Corruption and state capture further undermined governance, as political elites exploited weak institutions to consolidate power and

enrich themselves (Perry & Keil, 2018; Vachudova, 2019). The lack of effective rule of law, coupled with widespread economic underdevelopment, exacerbated societal discontent and hindered progress toward European integration (Bartlett, 2021; Keil, 2013).

Economic underdevelopment further compounded these issues. The Western Balkans faced low levels of foreign direct investment, high unemployment rates, and significant brain drain as young, educated citizens sought opportunities abroad (Sotiropoulos, 2014; Strohm, 2023). These economic challenges undermined societal cohesion and fueled dissatisfaction with governing elites, creating fertile ground for populist and nationalist rhetoric (Lavric & Bieber, 2021). The absence of robust economic structures capable of supporting sustainable growth left the region vulnerable to both internal discontent and external manipulation (Bonomi & Uvalic, 2019).

Social factors also played a critical role. Post-conflict trauma, ethnic divisions, and a lack of effective reconciliation efforts perpetuated distrust among communities (Subotic, 2015). Education systems often reinforced ethnic divides rather than fostering unity, while media outlets were frequently co-opted by political elites to promote divisive narratives (Zamfir, 2020). These societal challenges required immediate attention, as they threatened to destabilize the region further and derail any prospects for deeper integration with the EU.

External risks

The move of the enlargement process to the Western Balkans also coincided with rising external risks that compounded the region's vulnerabilities. The late 2000s and 2010s saw increasing geopolitical competition in the Western Balkans, as external actors such as Russia, Turkey, and China sought to expand their influence (Bieber & Tzifakis, 2019). Russia leveraged historical ties and cultural affinities with Orthodox Christian communities to undermine the EU's role in the region, often supporting nationalist movements and political actors opposed to European integration (Bechev, 2015, 2017). Turkey and China also increased their economic footprint through infrastructure investments and trade agreements, creating dependencies that challenged the EU's influence.

The legacy of the 1990s conflicts continued to loom large, as unresolved issues such as the status of Kosovo, border disputes, and the lack of reconciliation between ethnic communities created a volatile regional political environment (Dyrstad, 2012; Hayden, 2012). For instance, relations between Serbia and Kosovo remained fraught, with sporadic flare-ups of tensions that threatened regional stability (Economides & Ker-Lindsay, 2015; Hajrullahu, 2019). Similarly, Bosnia and Herzegovina struggled with a fragmented political system established by the Dayton Agreement, which, while ending

the war, entrenched ethnic divisions and institutional paralysis (Petrovic & Wilson, 2021).

In addition to these geopolitical dynamics, the migration crisis of 2015–2016 further highlighted the region's strategic importance to the EU. The Western Balkans became a critical transit route for migrants and refugees seeking to enter the EU, prompting concerns about border security and the capacity of these states to manage such flows (Cocco, 2017). This external pressure underscored the necessity of ensuring political and societal stability in the region to prevent further crises from spilling over into the EU (Pastore, 2020).

Geopolitical rivalries exacerbated existing tensions. Russia's support for anti-Western political forces and its influence through energy dependencies created friction in countries like Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina (Bechev, 2017). China's Belt and Road Initiative extended its economic reach, with significant investments in infrastructure projects that often came with opaque terms and long-term strategic implications (Pavlićević, 2019). Meanwhile, Turkey's cultural and religious diplomacy sought to strengthen ties with Muslim communities in the region, adding another layer of complexity to the EU's stabilization efforts (Koppa, 2021; Solberg, 2007).

The EU also faced challenges from within its own borders. The 2008 financial crisis and the subsequent Eurozone debt crisis diverted attention and resources away from enlargement policy (Bechev, 2012). This in-ward focus weakened the EU's ability to project influence and respond effectively to external risks in the Western Balkans. Furthermore, the rise of Euroscepticism and populism within member states undermined the credibility of the EU's enlargement promises, reducing its leverage over candidate countries.

High internal challenges and high external risks: stabilization

The confluence of high internal and external conditions during this phase led to the prevalence of the stabilization logic in the EU's enlargement policy. Unlike the transformative phase, where deep reforms were prioritized over stabilization concerns, the stabilization phase focused on managing immediate risks and fostering a semblance of political and societal stability, even at the expense of democratic and institutional progress (Minić, 2018). This pragmatic approach reflected the EU's recognition that without stability, deeper reform and integration would remain unattainable.

The EU's emphasis on stabilization was evident in its support for regional cooperation initiatives and conflict resolution mechanisms (Gordon, 2013). For instance, the EU actively mediated dialogue between Serbia and Kosovo, resulting in agreements aimed at normalizing relations. Similarly, the Stabilization and Association Process (SAP) provided a framework for fostering regional cooperation and aligning policies with EU standards, albeit with a focus on crisis management rather than comprehensive reforms. It is

notable that in contrast to the Central European countries from the earlier phase, which signed 'Association Agreements' with the EU, the Western Balkan countries had to sign '*Stabilization and Association Agreements*,' emphasizing the EU's focus on stabilization.

The EU also invested in capacity-building programs to strengthen governance and public administration in the Western Balkans (Bieber, 2018a). These programs aimed to address corruption, improve judicial independence, and enhance the efficiency of state institutions. While these efforts yielded some progress, they often fell short of achieving substantial transformation, as political elites in the region resisted reforms that threatened their entrenched interests (Börzel, 2013).

This approach also had unintended consequences. By prioritizing stability over transformation, the EU inadvertently enabled the emergence of 'stabilitocracies,' where authoritarian-leaning leaders used the promise of stability to secure EU support while resisting meaningful reforms (Bieber, 2018b). This dynamic was particularly evident in countries like Serbia, where political elites maintained a facade of commitment to European integration while consolidating power domestically (Vachudova, 2014). These leaders often exploited the EU's focus on stability to entrench their authority, suppress dissent, and limit media freedom, undermining democratic progress.

Moreover, the stabilization logic sometimes conflicted with the EU's normative values. While the EU's rhetoric continued to emphasize the promotion of democracy and the rule of law, its de facto focus on stability often required compromises that diluted these principles. This tension raised questions about the coherence and credibility of the EU's enlargement policy, particularly in the eyes of civil society actors and reform-oriented groups within the Western Balkans (Richter & Wunsch, 2020).

In conclusion, our empirical expectation is mostly met during this phase in the EU enlargement policy. We observe an interplay of high internal challenges–characterized by weak institutions, political instability, and societal divisions–and high external risks, including geopolitical competition, interstate tensions, and migration pressures. The resulting policy logic produced by the interplay of these two types of threats prioritized stability as a prerequisite for long-term transformation, even as it raised questions about the trade-offs between stability and democratic progress.

The third phase: Western Balkans and Eastern Europe

The third phase of the European Union's enlargement policy, spanning from the late 2010s to the present, has been characterized by the rapid surge of statements associated with the demarcation logic. However, this phase showcases a relatively balanced frequency of all three major logics: transformation, stabilization, and demarcation, each with around 30% of the coded

statements. As such, no policy logic enjoys overall prevalence over others in the hierarchy of policy logics, as we theorize in this article.

Based on the analytical framework, we expect that different configurations of internal challenges and external risks in the two distinct regions, the Western Balkans and Eastern Europe, to lead to different hierarchy of policy logics for the two set of countries. In Eastern Europe, we would expect relatively lower levels of perceived challenges, such as governance issues, corruption, limited state capacity, economic disfunction. Externally, we would expect to observe intensifying inter-state tension, geopolitical competition that requires a robust EU response to safeguard its strategic interests. These internal and external conditions lead to the prevalence of a demarcation logic toward the candidate countries from the region. In turn, in Western Balkans we would expect to observe a continuation of the internal and external conditions present during the previous phase, with high levels of internal challenges and external risks, leading to a continued prevalence of stabilization logic. These distinct external and internal conditions in the two regions can explain why no policy logic enjoys *overall* prevalence in our dataset of the European Council statements, as different policy logics are prevalent vis-à-vis countries from the two regions.

Internal challenges

During this third phase, internal challenges across the Western Balkans and Eastern Europe remain a critical concern for the EU, though they manifest in different ways. In the Western Balkans, the persistent legacy of the 1990s conflicts and the complex, post-war institutional arrangements continue to hamper democratic consolidation and socio-economic development. Corruption and clientelism remain deeply entrenched, allowing political elites to engage in state capture and block substantive reforms that would improve transparency and accountability (Vachudova, 2019). In many cases, justice systems are only partially independent, enabling politicians to leverage prosecutions against opponents or, conversely, to shield allies from investigation. Such practices erode public trust in government and fuel a cyclical pattern in which cynicism about politics and weak rule of law reinforce each other (Prelec, 2020).

A further complicating factor lies in the unresolved internal disputes. Bosnia and Herzegovina's highly decentralized constitutional setup, established by the Dayton Peace Agreement, has helped to maintain a fragile peace yet often hinders effective governance. Multiple tiers of governance, based on ethnic quotas and power-sharing, slows legislative processes to a crawl and sometimes paralyze decision-making at the state level. This fragmentation feeds political stalemate, leaving space for leaders to invoke ethno-nationalist rhetoric rather than pursue compromise-driven policy solutions (Koval & Vachudova, 2024). Although the EU continues to push dialogue and

reconciliation initiatives, genuine social healing remains incomplete, further complicating the region's path toward durable democratization.

Meanwhile, in Eastern Europe—primarily in Ukraine and Moldova but also Georgia—internal dynamics reflect a different though still significant set of challenges. While corruption remains pervasive, both societies have displayed pockets of strong reformist energy in the past decade, spurred by grassroots movements, anti-corruption campaigns, and investigative journalists (Samokhvalov & Strelkov, 2021). Nonetheless, oligarchic networks still wield considerable influence, using private media ownership or informal connections to guide public discourse and policy decisions in their favor. Judicial independence, though officially enshrined in legislation, can be undermined by opaque appointments and selective prosecution practices (Richter, 2024). As a result, even forward-looking governments struggle to implement structural reforms when powerful business or political interests resist change.

In short, while the Western Balkans and Eastern Europe both grapple with internal challenges, the forms they take are distinct. Where the Western Balkans remain mired in post-conflict complexities and stagnant political structures, Ukraine and Moldova at times marshal notable civil-society momentum and reformist ambitions, only to be hindered by entrenched corruption and, in Ukraine's case, active warfare.

External risks

Alongside these internal challenges, the key distinction rests in the intensity of external risks in the Western Balkans compared to the post-Soviet space, which have intensified in divergent ways. In Eastern Europe, Russia's aggressive behavior has come to the forefront, culminating in the 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine. While has long leveraged energy ties, strategic investments, and socio-political networks to project power and exert influence, its war against Ukraine has profoundly altered the EU's threat perception. Ukraine and Moldova now face existential dangers related not only to direct military invasion but also hybrid warfare and destabilization campaigns, as has been seen recently in Moldova (Anghel & Džankić, 2023). The war in Ukraine has accelerated the EU's efforts to anchor these countries into its political and security orbit, seeking to limit malign external interference even if the governance structures of these countries are still in need of reforms (Freudlsperger & Schimmelfennig, 2023).

In the Western Balkans, no military conflict has erupted, even if multiple external actors—including Russia, China, and Turkey—continue to compete for influence with the EU. Russia's cultural, religious, and political ties with Slavic and Orthodox populations in Serbia, Montenegro, and Bosnia and Herzegovina allow it to tap into lingering nationalist sentiments and mistrust of Euro-Atlantic institutions, but the perceived external risks as not as stark as in

Eastern Europe (Bechev, 2017). China deploys infrastructure investments, especially under the Belt and Road Initiative, to cultivate economic dependencies that may translate into political leverage later on, but right now the EU sees enough scope to manage the geopolitical dynamic. Turkey, for its part, leverages historical and cultural connections, particularly in Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia, and Kosovo, using economic ties and diplomatic support to fortify its presence. Such engagements by rival powers can undermine EU conditionality if candidate countries see alternative partnerships as more attainable or less demanding.

Nonetheless, energy security considerations also contribute to heightened external risks. Dependence on Russian gas and oil was and continues to be significant for many countries in the Western Balkans, creating vulnerability to abrupt supply cuts and price volatility (Bieber & Tzifakis, 2019). The EU has responded with efforts to diversify energy sources and bolster cross-border interconnections, but alternative routes and suppliers can take years to establish (Frey, 2024). In the Western Balkans, Chinese financing of coal plants and large-scale infrastructure risks locking local economies into carbon-intensive models just as the EU is pushing a new Green Agenda (Pavlićević, 2019; Vangeli & Pavlićević, 2019). Critical infrastructure—from rail lines to digital communications—thus becomes a battleground for geopolitical competition, with the EU aiming to ensure that outside investments do not compromise alignment with its standards and strategic interests (Bennon & Fukuyama, 2023).

Finally, the EU's growing emphasis on strategic autonomy and global relevance is reframing the role of enlargement in its foreign policy, particularly in Eastern Europe—in line with what we would expect from actions informed by a demarcation logic. Having adopted a more 'geopolitical' vision, the Union now views membership prospects for its neighbors as an instrument to counter challenges posed by authoritarian competitors (Oxford Analytica, 2023). The grant of formal candidate status to Ukraine and Moldova despite them not meeting the meritocratic conditions set in the Copenhagen criteria exemplifies this recalibration: the EU accepts that these states require comprehensive reforms but sees a broader strategic imperative to stand firm against Russian aggression first (Schimmelfennig, 2023). In the Western Balkans, pressing countries to harmonize their foreign policies and align with the Union's sanctions against Russia reveals a similar calculation, but the priority is not as urgent as it is in the post-Soviet space. These demands underscore how deeply external risks now permeate discussions about accession.

Different internal and external conditions: disjointed distribution

Because the Western Balkans and Eastern Europe each present divergent configurations of internal challenges and external risks, the EU's hierarchy

of policy logics is increasingly 'disjointed' across these two neighboring arenas. In the Western Balkans—where internal challenges remain high and the external risk environment is also non-trivial—stabilization retains considerable importance, and local leaders often leverage EU fears of renewed conflict to secure leniency on reform (Bieber, 2018b). Meanwhile, the transformative impetus has not disappeared. The Commission, backed by reform-oriented member states, continues to emphasize rule-of-law improvements and democratic criteria. However, actual momentum toward meaningful transformation frequently stalls, overshadowed by concerns over regional stability and the perceived necessity of limiting outside influences.

In Eastern Europe, by contrast, the logic of demarcation has come to the forefront. Although Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia still struggle with corruption and governance deficits, the existential military threat posed by Russia shifted Brussels's strategic priorities. This places external boundary-setting and foreign-policy alignment at the center of the enlargement process: the EU is keen to expedite measures to incorporate these countries—at least politically and economically—into Europe's institutional architecture, signaling to Moscow that the region's long-term orientation is non-negotiable. While transformation and institution-building have not disappeared, they now proceed amid an urgent strategic imperative that was largely absent two decades ago, with an emphasis on demarcation.

The outcome is therefore far from uniform: the EU is guided by different hierarchies of policy logics in the Western Balkans versus Eastern Europe. This fragmented approach can dilute the consistency of the enlargement process, generating frustration among aspirants that see different standards or timelines applied elsewhere. At the same time, these discrepancies are the product of differences in perceptions about the internal and external conditions: a would-be member state whose territory is literally under attack spurs a different EU reaction than a Western Balkan candidate wrestling with 'frozen' disputes and chronic governance shortcomings (Jovic & Uvalic, 2023).

In sum, this third phase of enlargement illustrates how evolving external risks —most dramatically shaped by Russia's invasion of Ukraine—has propelled a demarcation-oriented logic vis-à-vis Eastern Europe while, in the Western Balkans, the EU remains torn between promoting deeper reforms and accepting 'stabilitocracy' politics to pre-empt renewed internal unrest. The combined effect is a disjointed distribution of policy logics across the Union's near-abroad, reflecting profound differences in both the nature of candidate states' internal challenges and the geopolitical risks that hover over them.

Conclusion

The European Union's policy toward candidate and associate countries has undergone significant shifts since the end of the Cold War, driven by

changing geopolitical conditions and the interplay of internal and external conditions. In this article, we set out to address two key questions: how the EU's enlargement policy priorities have evolved and what conditions explain these shifts over time? By tracing the evolution of these priorities, we highlight the dynamic nature of the EU's approach to candidate and associate countries, shaped by the interaction of internal challenges and external risks. To this end, we challenge the underlying assumptions informing most of the EU enlargement literature, which broadly assumes unchanging motivations across time and only disagrees over what are the prevailing motivations informing the EU's behavior. In doing so, we seek to emphasize the need for a more nuanced understanding of the EU's motivations by showing that these change across time—forcing us to empirically test our underlying assumptions in this regard.

We also introduced the concept of 'policy logics' as part of an analytical framework to understand the underlying rationale behind the EU's shifting priorities. We discussed empirical evidence of how these logics have dominated different phases of the EU's enlargement policy. These findings push against the underlying assumptions guiding much of the literature on enlargement that the EU's motivations are rather static over time—showing instead that these evolve in response to the conditions present in the neighborhood.

In the first phase (1990s to late 2000s), the EU's focus was on fundamentally reshaping the institutions and societies of candidate countries to align them with European norms and values. This period, characterized by low external risks and high internal challenges, demonstrated the EU's capacity as a normative power to drive reforms and promote democratization in Central and Eastern Europe. The transformative logic dominated as the EU prioritized institutional convergence and rule-of-law reforms.

The second phase (early 2010s and into the early 2020s) marked a shift in priorities as the focus moved to the Western Balkans, a region still recovering from conflict. Higher levels of both internal and external conditions required a pragmatic approach centered on maintaining stability. While this strategy mitigated immediate risks, it also allowed the emergence of 'stabilitocracies'—regimes that traded democratic progress for political and societal stability. The stabilization logic thus reflected the EU's prioritization of short-term stability over long-term transformative goals.

The third phase (early 2020s to present) reflects the EU's response to heightened external risks, particularly from Russia. As geopolitical tensions intensified, the EU's focus shifted toward reducing external dependencies and limiting rival influences in its neighborhood. With internal challenges perceived as moderate, the demarcation logic has prioritized safeguarding the EU's strategic autonomy and reinforcing alignment with its geopolitical interests, particularly in Eastern Europe.

Future research could explore the domestic political dynamics within EU member states that influence these shifts and investigate the broader consequences for candidate countries' democratic and geopolitical trajectories. Comparative studies with other regional organizations may also yield insights into how multilateral institutions respond to changing threat landscapes.

Acknowledgments

We are grateful for the insightful comments and feedback from the participants of the Workshop for EU Enlargement to Ukraine and Beyond, held at the CEU Democracy Institute in Budapest in June 2024 and the ETH European Politics Research Group 2024–5 Winter Retreat held in Liechtenstein in January 2025. We are particularly grateful to Frank Schimmelfennig for his valuable comments and to Veronica Anghel for steering and guiding the process that led to this Special Issue.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

Laurențiu Plești acknowledges financial support through the Fund for Bilateral Relations/Norway Grants 2014-2021, under the Project 'New Security Challenges in the Black Sea Region Due to the Russian Aggression in Ukraine,' contract no. G2024-7380/2024.

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