

The Safe Guardian of Europe

A Critical Discourse Analysis of the European Commission's
Geopolitical Actorness and Enlargement Agenda

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Abstract

This research analyses how the European Commission uses 13 press releases and political guidelines as institutional instruments to advocate its own agenda, presenting itself as a rational actor that uses different powers to achieve its political goals and enhance its own actorness. The transition from technocratic rhetoric demonstrates that enlargement is no longer seen merely as a technical process, but as a ‘geopolitical imperative’ that requires urgent action. The Commission clearly demands that the candidate states follow strict ‘merit-based criteria’, which illustrates its strong actorness. Furthermore, existential discourses such as ‘History is calling once again’ create an image of urgency, suggesting that the EU must make radical changes to enlarge the Union and strengthen its actorness. This research introduces the author’s own conceptualization that the Commission acts as a ‘safe guardian’ of Europe, which advocates the enlargement agenda as a necessity to maintain the EU’s position in global politics. By applying a realist-constructivist framework and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)—where the Commission is not merely seen as a normative and altruistic humanitarian actor, nor solely focused on candidate countries—this research reveals how the European Commission is actively evolving its own actorness in times of crisis.

Key words: European Commission, European Actorness, EU Enlargement, Critical Discourse Analysis, Realist Constructivism

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1 Introduction

1.1 Introduction

This research analyzes the European Commission as a rational actor that seeks to strengthen its own actorness and position through the EU's enlargement agenda. The material shows that the EU has moved from a slow and technocratic communication process towards a process characterized by a sense of urgency, framed as a "geopolitical imperative" where "History is calling once again". In this context, the EU's enlargement is not seen as an administrative choice, but as a geopolitical and moral necessity. There has been extensive research regarding macro-level politics; however, press release research has not gained enough attention within academia. This is despite the fact that press releases are the Commission's main way to reach the media and citizens, and to further integration in times when member states might have differentiating views.

This study employs Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) combined with a realist-constructivist framework. Ultimately, the study does not seek to examine the Commission's communication simply as an attempt to distribute information, but rather as an institutional mechanism that actively builds geopolitical actorness. Based on the empirical findings, this research originally develops the concept, identifying that the European Commission is acting as a 'safe guardian' of Europe to enhance its own geopolitical actorness through the enlargement agenda.

1.2 Research Question

With all this in mind, this research seeks to answer to the question: ‘How does the European Commission use strategic communication as an institutional mechanism to construct its global actorness in the context of EU Enlargement?’.

2 Literature review

This literature review section illustrates the European Commission's communication agenda. It further shows the background and current debate and research about European Unions' reform agenda, in the special case of European Union's Enlargement agenda. In addition, it introduces European Actorness theory and how it links to the European Commission's communicative agenda. Additionally, it utilizes qualitative content analysis and critical discourse analysis (CDA) by scholar Norman Fairclough. It concludes by illustrating gaps that justify the relevance of the research and discussing about overall trends currently covered within the field discovered with this different issue areas. Finally, it illustrates the analytical framework of European Actorness.

2.1 European Commission's communication

Rauh conducts a text analysis of press releases and argues that the European Commission's communication shows a strong technocratic style (Rauh, 2023, p. 683) and claims that this is linked to 'lacking clarity of the Commission's own public communication' (Rauh, 2023, p. 684). He further suggests that the Commission institutional ambiguity creates challenges to address and advocate its key message which he refers as 'message clarity', which is seen crucial for the integration (ibid.). He also notes that there is need to communicate supranational politics to citizens because of the public politicization. He analyses 35,000 documents within time period of 35 years from the Commission. His findings show that the text and words the Commission uses might be difficult to understand for the public, since these contain specific jargon that in fact hinders political action (Rauh, 2023, p. 683) and an 'unusually nominal style that gives preference to abstract process over temporally identifiable courses of action' (Rauh, 2023, p. 696).

The findings indicate that the technocratic style hasn't changed during the study's time period and that when there are wider debates about European decision making, The Commission in fact has problems with 'behavioural communication deficit' (Rauh, 2023, p. 684). They also show studies that governments in Europe blame the Commission for policy failures and that the Commission is usually at the centre to be scapegoated by failures of national governments public policy discourse, and those arguments affect the bigger picture of how the public and citizens perceive European integration, so therefore, it is crucial to further study possible communication deficits (Rauh, 2023, p. 683). It is shown that the Commission has the possibility to make part of its public image through media selection but the institutional roles complicate clear communication (Rauh, 2023, p.684) and that it has a technocratic style, which makes it 'harder to understand than political communication from national executives or public media reports on politics and rather resembles scientific discourse' (Rauh, 2023, p. 684). He further points out the need for the research about 'organisational obstacles and/or strategic motives behind the cautious communication of Europe's key supranational institution' (Rauh, 2023, p. 684).

Furthermore, Özdemir and Rauh (2022) have researched how the EU takes influence on Twitter and communicates and enhances its legitimacy through social media with content analysis. Also, existing research about the EU's digital diplomacy highlights the importance of not only understanding how the EU influences its powers in internal and external relations, but also the understanding of how it answers to the challenges (Heidebrecht, 2025, p. 3). The Commission is seen to use digital diplomacy to advance its strategic autonomy, and empowerment is not only due to external pressure but because of internal spillover and its ability to 'leverage existing competencies in a path-dependent system' (Heidebrecht, 2025, p. 3-5).

Nugent and Rhinard (2019) examine and highlight that there is a large amount of academic literature and research about the Commission's ability to act politically and its position in shaping policy outcomes (Nugent and Rhinard, 2019, p. 203). They continue with existing academic discussions about the Commission's

‘political roles’ and emphasize that understanding these roles is more important than the traditional question of whether the Commission’s influence is declining or increasing. They divide their research into four dimensions: ideologically political, policy political, organisationally political, and administratively political (Nugent and Rhinard, 2019, p. 204), to examine and analyze the meaning of ‘political’ in the Commission's tasks and positions, focusing on its responsibilities and actions. Their findings show that even though the Commission's work has been highly political by nature, it has now become ‘more developed and intensified’ (Nugent and Rhinard, 2019, p. 217). They view that this rising ‘political Commission’ is not a total break from the past, but rather a ‘step-change in the degree and visibility of the Commission’s political nature’ (ibid.).

To continue, other research discusses the difficulties about the communication from the Commission, that it is hard to communicate opinions because with 27 different states without a shared common language besides the fact that there is no unified and cohesive common media landscape that Europe and its peoples share together (Lindholm, 2008, p. 34). In the research Lindholm uses text analysis with genre-based methodology to capture the Commission press releases linguistic dimension, which is completed with interviews from fieldwork in the Commission. By suggesting a macro-structural text analysis, Lindholm compares the Commission’s releases from Swedish and French Ministries (Lindholm, 2008, p. 33-36). The framework focuses on ‘the introduction, the quotation and the intertextual references’ (Lindholm, 2008, p. 33) with the aim to find possible special ‘community text patterns’ within texts (Lindholm, 2008, p. 34). Furthermore, Lindholm argues that this approach might be useful since the results show that the Commission is required to aim for strong persuasion, as it is required ‘to convince the reader that actions on the EU level are necessary’ (Lindholm, 2008, p. 51).

Andone’s (2016) study examines the core, argumentative component of communicative practices. With this approach, Andone seeks to revise the question of persuasion in press releases and aims to illustrate the strategic design of these communication materials (Andone, 2016, p. 68). Furthermore, it is explained that existing research on press releases and argumentative analysis illustrates that the

Commission communicates indirect criticism regarding the member states' reduced ability to manage problems, and Andone highlights the need for the EU to act for these claims, and argues how this benefits citizens (Andone, 2016, p. 69). In research, it is used pragmatic, authority, and fear appeals as argumentation categories to analyze the need for the EU to act. Further, it is stated that the Commission's 'argumentative pattern may structurally be strong enough to convince the addressee of the necessity, desirability and acceptability of EU action' (Andone, 2016, pp. 83–84). Andone focuses on 'sound and effective argumentation' and reminds the reader that behind the text, 'the ultimate goal is to persuade the addressees to form and maintain a positive view of the EC and the added value of its actions' (Andone, 2016, p. 83). However, the analysis critically finds that 'quotations function as weak authority arguments that are not likely to be accepted by the addressees if they are not further supported by other argument types' (Andone, 2016, p. 78). Furthermore, it is observed that 'fear appeals, which should induce urgent action, are weakened by pointing at negative consequences which are not supported by arguments' (Andone, 2016, p. 84).

Scholars also examine the Commission's communication strategies and preconditions for them to be presented in the news by examining media coverage of 54 legislative acts (Müller et al., 2022, p. 509). They share the viewpoint that their findings differ from traditional bureaucratic research, which shows 'that bureaucracies strategically aim to maximize reputational benefits and minimize reputational damages through targeted communication strategies' (Müller et al., 2022, p. 511). Their findings suggest that 'if a regulation is less politically conflictual, they are more likely to promote the commission's policy preferences, whereas they adopt a more passive style of communication in the face of political conflict' (Müller et al., 2022, p. 520).

2.2 The EU's Enlargement and external action

Schimmelfennig (2021, p. 17,51) uses the concept of 'Europeanization' to explain how 'EU's external governance is designed to transform the EU's international

environment by extending the scope of EU policies and by 'Europeanizing' non-member states' (Schimmelfennig, 2021, p. 117). In this multilevel governance, especially the member states transform and pool their sovereignty and share their decision making to supranational levels (ibid.). It is identified that the slow Europeanization in Western Balkans is linked to 'enlargement fatigue' facing the EU's member states. Since the negotiations are 'very slow yet varied pace' regarding accession, besides unclear points in the Union's policies, which have made obtaining structural reforms harder (Keukeleire and Delreux, 2022, p. 277). Regarding the ENP, they note point from various scholars that the Commission 'technocratic methods' have 'resulted in the application of enlargement-related internal processes in external contexts where these did not work' (Keukeleire and Delreux, 2022, p. 283).

Also, even ENP has a two-dimensional element between EU and partners, the de facto is described as asymmetrical (ibid.). It is seen that there is a problem that neighbor states have limited administrative capabilities or political will to implement reforms thoroughly (ibid.). It is also noted that it is a problem that neighboring states have limited administrative capabilities or political will to implement reforms thoroughly (Casier, 2022, p. 24). It is seen that the EU lacks a systematic effect on conditionality since membership is not guaranteed in return, even if candidate countries make proper reforms. Instead, these countries may carry out procedural democratic reforms instead of substantive ones (Casier, 2022, p. 25).

Furthermore, Casier identifies a critical 'democratization-stability dilemma' regarding southern partners: when democratization is seen as potentially destabilizing a country, it easily gets deprioritized (ibid.). While Casier highlighted the problems of 'lip services' and internal failures, Keukeleire and Delreux put their focus on structural effects, that the EU's technocratic methods and offering membership for candidate countries would make the reforms worth of investment before the actual and certain promise of becoming a member (Keukeleire and Delreux, 2022, p. 273).

It could also be viewed that obtaining the desired objectives and through the capability to control external and outside entities, is a great tool to measure EU's effectiveness (Szumowski, 2024, p. 83). This 'EU effectiveness is measured by acquiring the desired objectives and capability to control other international entities and the environment' (Szumowski, 2024, p.83). In particular, he talks about the cohesion between the Union's declarations and how it actually performs, and what it tells us about how the EU is describing its rhetoric and normative values and how its actual actions and outcomes are seen to show how legitimate the Union is; so it is there to see what the Union declares and what are the actual outcomes and what it actually declares to say (Szumowski, 2024, p. 84).

Furthermore, Tonra discusses the geopolitical turn seen in the Union and what he describes as a 'Westphalian mirage' when the Union is seeking to become a state-like sovereignty instead of its institutional framework and culture (Tonra, 2025, p. 86). He uses the term hybrid global actor (Tonra, 2025, p. 83) as the Union has usually shaped its power politics with norms and economic incentives (Tonra, 2025, p. 89). He talks about that if the Union tries to have state-like features, like 'executive authority' (Tonra, 2025, p. 90), it might face the problem of 'bulldozing' its original principles and suggests 'hybridity' for the Union (Tonra, 2025, p. 84). Tonra identified in the literature that this is the "geopolitical Commission" that the Commission has made of itself (Tonra, 2025, p. 114). This also emphasizes and is based on the material that the Commission is trying to use discursive powers in an attempt to create an illusion about being a state-like actor when, in fact, actually it is not, based on Tonra's reasonings (Tonra, 2025, p. 109, 125).

Importantly, existing research about the EU's digital diplomacy highlights the importance of not only understanding how the EU influences its powers in internal and external relations, but also the understanding of how it answers to these challenges (Heidebrecht, 2025, p.3). The Commission is seen to use digital diplomacy to advance its strategic autonomy, and empowerment is not only due to external pressure but because of internal spillover and its ability to 'leverage existing competencies in a path-dependent system' (Heidebrecht, 2025, p.3-5).

Rieker and Giske discuss existing research about ‘multilevel governance’ and differentiated integration, noting that there is a major problem in academia to capture the ‘multi-actor nature’ of European foreign policy (Rieker and Giske, 2024, p. 35). They emphasize the need for comprehensiveness, suggesting that researchers must move outside the narrow scope of CFSP and external relations because the Union is increasingly viewed as a global standard setter (Rieker and Giske, 2024, p. 35). They also describe the EU as a ‘complex and fragmented multi-level governance structure’, which suggests ‘the inclusive approach’ meaning not only analyzing treaties but also analyzing informal and flexible arrangements (Rieker and Giske, 2024, p. 36). But they want to remark that it is not often in academia that the scholars also acknowledge it site many policy processes that are enacted at the formal framework of the EU, but still closely linked to its policy site.

Therefore, they suggest that research should have more inclusive approach to foreign policy, which further advances the analysis and makes it researcher-wise possible to capture the actual function of EU foreign policy. They note that it might be challenging because of the rising characteristics of DI and also with other background events (Rieker and Giske, 2024, p. 36) Differentiated integration (DI) is seen as a characteristic of the EU’s foreign policy, which is used to handle diverse views between states. However, this diversity makes it a ‘complex and fragmented multi-level governance structure’, which suggests an ‘inclusive approach’—meaning not only analyzing treaties but also informal and flexible arrangements (Rieker & Giske, 2024, p. 36).

Furthermore, this research also identifies that institutional divisions have created problems for the EU to perform its external policies where the Commission has main control of the Community and where the member states have control over foreign policies supplemented by the Council Secretariat on the other hand (Morgenstern-Pomorski, 2021, p.39). Importantly, these divisions have been the main reason for the need to advance and reform new institutional instruments regarding EU’s foreign policy. Another obstacle is also that member states share different viewpoints on how the foreign policy should be conducted and by which institutional mechanisms, and that new reforms need unanimity from member

states in voting (ibid). Due to this, these different viewpoints contradict between Eu-sceptics and supporters of the further integration (Morgenstern-Pomorski, 2021, p. 39-40).

2.2.1 European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP)

EU's enlargement is not solely about the traditional foreign policy between nations, but it also represents external action, which can also include 'activities that do not aim at changing others' behaviour, but at maintaining relations, or internal activities that produce (un)intended external effects' (Gstöhl and Schunz, 2021, p.3). One example of this is when the EU can use its own market political initiatives to change behavior of others in the external environment and bring them closer to its own interests. This external action is linked to concept of Europeanization from Schimmelfennig (2021) where Commission's ENP acts as an instrument to advocate Unions norms and rules outside of the EU before official membership.

The European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) is the foreign policy framework aiming at bringing the EU and its Eastern and Southern neighbors' closer to their mutual benefit and interest. This policy is the EU's most powerful tool regarding the structural foreign policy on its neighbourhood with two key features: enlargement allows the EU to pursue stability and peace on the continent, and it enables the transformation of various structures in neighboring countries eager to join the EU. Therefore, it is a primary instrument for conducting structural foreign policy (Keukeleire and Delreux, 2022, pp. 228–229).

It is identified that the slow Europeanization in the Western Balkans is linked to 'enlargement fatigue' facing the EU's member states. Since the negotiations are proceeding at a 'very slow yet varied pace', this, alongside unclear points in the Union's policies, has made obtaining structural reforms harder (Keukeleire and Delreux, 2022, p. 277). Furthermore, it is noted that the Commission's 'technocratic methods' have 'resulted in the application of enlargement-related

internal processes in external contexts where these did not work' (Keukeleire and Delreux, 2022, p. 283). In addition, it is also seen problematic that there is a decline of the EU's structural power and a rise of other powers (Keukeleire and Delreux, 2022, p. 301). It is seen that there are mixed results from the ENP that relate to the policy's ambiguity, and it was conceived by the majority of member states as a way to avoid further enlargement (Keukeleire and Delreux, 2022, p. 281).

2.3 European Actorness

The theoretical framework for the analysis is the concept of actorness. By the concept of actorness, the researcher can study EU's capabilities, possibilities, possible boundaries and prerequisites to make a stand on the international and domestic sphere, its position to hold power and accountability.

2.3.1 European Actorness in political science research

Scholars review the term actorness and analyze it in different ways. First this section introduce the chosen approach to this research from Bretherton and Vogler (2006). After, it introduces current and main academic works concerning the concept of European Actorness and also, the scholarly work how Bretherton's and Vogler's basic concepts of Presence, Opportunity and Capability are discussed in European actorness research. Simultaneously, the analysis wants to examine how the conceptualization is most applicable in terms of Commission's enlargement agenda and communication.

This research utilizes based on the classic literature of EU actorness, Bretherton and Vogler's (2006) conceptualization for the main analysis. It categorizes EU's actorness involving three pillars:

1. '*Opportunity*, which denotes the external context of ideas and events that enable or constrain action' (Bretherton and Vogler, 2006, p. 24).

2. '*Presence*, which captures the ability of the EU, by virtue of its existence, to exert influence beyond its borders' (Bretherton and Vogler, 2006, p. 24).

3. '*Capability*, which signifies the ability to exploit opportunity and capitalize on presence' (Bretherton and Vogler, 2006, p. 24).

Klose (2018) determines 'actorness as an entity's capacity to (re)-imagine and realize roles for its 'self' in (specific contexts of) international affairs' (p. 1144). She further introduces that this 'capacity' comes from the interaction of social and material dimensions and assets, with 'creative action' and with both the global and local actors' expectations (Klose, 2018, p. 1144).

The term originated from the scholar Gunnar Sjöstedt, which included the idea of actorness as a 'capacity to behave actively and deliberately in relation to other actors in the international system' (Sjöstedt, 1977, p. 16). Rhinard and Sjöstedt (2019) examine the EU's actorness by 'actor performance': the kinds and quality of transactions originating from the EU system towards the external environment (Rhinard and Sjöstedt, 2019, p. 5). Another important concept is 'cohesion' and it is understood as 'shared preferences regarding the goals of external action in a particular area' (Rhinard and Sjöstedt, 2019, p. 13). These same scholars also use the concept of component performance which includes the thought that when partners see the EU succeed in negotiations, it strengthens cohesion among member states (Rhinard and Sjöstedt, 2019, p. 21).

Drieskens (2021) discusses the concept's application in the EU's external action and the challenges and opportunities with the use and definition of the concept. The research uses it with the case of Lisbon Treaty Reforms, illustrating that different conceptualizations when working with actorness in the same case will give different meanings depending on the EU's observed status (p. 1). It tells us about the evolved history of the term actorness and classic literature, discussing global influence and direct impact, active capability, causal importance, cohesion, and the council's powers. There has been a possible transformation and trajectory within the research field, where scholars seem to understand what the term means,

with a seeming consensus on what it actually constitutes to be an internationally active actor globally (Drieskens, 2021, p. 2).

Rauh (2025) also discussed about Bretherton's and Volger's main theories opportunity and recognition but also discusses about important dimension of recognition drawing on scholars Jupille and Capraso (1998) (Rauh, 2025, p.797-798). This is because Union is not a sovereign state and it is dependent on de facto recognition and its legitimacy is depended on outside actors recognition how influential or relevant player it is (Rauh, 2025, p.798). Recognition is linked to the fact that EU's legitimacy is based on outsider opinions and from this recognition, outside actors opinions matter to determine how relevant and influential actor EU is (Rauh, 2025, p. 798). Within academia, there is a shared viewpoint that 'the external recognition of the EU by third parties is an important observable implication of its international actorness' (Rauh, 2025, p. 792).

He draws on the concept of presence to illustrate that EU's existence and market power creates adaptive pressures for external actors, besides the opportunity factor, which illustrates the cohesion between shared interests and issues and the EU's saliency to answer these collectively (Rauh, 2025, p. 798). However, he sees that EU's power and capacity to act are challenged and that the greater pooling of EU foreign policy remains constrained by veto powers of individual member states (Rauh, 2025, p. 797).

Dorosh et al. (2025, p. 439) builds upon the framework from Bretherton and Vogler's (2006) and adds that evaluating how an international actor performs can be additionally measured by concepts as autonomy, which contains the principle of sovereignty, and leverage, which involves power and influence (Dorosh et al., 2025, p. 439). Another important concept is inner integrity, so-called cohesion, where is critical for the agency that the actor has inner cohesion. There is a distinction between value cohesion, which involves how the member states share the same basic values and targets, and tactical cohesion, which involves the ability to coordinate and fit differentiating interests together, for example, through compromises (Dorosh et al., 2025, pp. 438–439).

Regarding the concept of geopolitical actorness, Riga and Lika (2024) discuss the concept regarding ‘the idea of being a geopolitical European Commission adapting to current geopolitical turmoil’ (Riga and Lika, 2024, p. 1). However, this identity shift from a normative actor is still under discussion, and in their research, they examine what the prerequisites are for the European Commission to be this geopolitical Commission (Riga and Lika, 2024, pp. 2–3). They identify that it is linked to the deficiency that the EU’s autonomy is facing: its dependency on the consensus of states and institutions makes it difficult to make changes to its diplomacy and common foreign policy. In practice, this makes it hard to declare EU’s own geopolitical position and, thereafter, ensure its own safety (Riga and Lika, 2024, p. 4). Furthermore, they identify that a lack of unity is hindering the EU’s actorness, which mostly stems from the identified inconsistency in its foreign policy (Riga and Lika, 2024, p. 4).

Based on this definition, geopolitical actorness is not just geopoliticization: it is also about how capable the EU is to uphold a rule-based order, and it describes more about how the Commission is seeking regional leadership alongside a strategic positioning of the EU in world affairs (Riga and Lika, 2024, p. 12). However, achieving this level of geopolitical actorness is not without severe institutional constraints. Also, they identify that a lack of unity is hindering the EU’s actorness, which mostly stems from the identified inconsistency in its foreign policy (Riga and Lika, 2024, p. 4). It is seen that this inconsistency to address common foreign policy has to be further improved (Riga and Lika 2024, p.3-4). It could be viewed that EU’s geopolitical actorness and further strengthening it could involve more effective implementation of policies and that nations should further establish more measures to answer to responses and crises which involves and touches different nations and elaborate multilateral policies (Riga and Lika, 2024, p.10). Despite these internal obstacles, external pressures provide new pathways for institutional empowerment. As Riga and Lika point out, ‘transnational crises and geopolitical upheavals serve as catalysts for the rejuvenation of the EU’s foreign engagements, presenting a unique opportunity for transformation’ (Riga and Lika, 2024, p. 5). This highlights how the Commission can utilize external turmoil not as a paralyzing threat to overcome,

but as a strategic opportunity to legitimize and construct its own geopolitical actorness.

Another relevant analytic lens would be to examine the EU as a normative power (NP) and for an example Szumowski noted that the EU is facing a late Westphalian environment and transition from a traditional as an economic actor to political actor (Szumowski, 2024, p. 84). He has one pillar which is 'alternatives for proposed narratives', where the EU is giving normative alternatives and he said that the actorness is based on how it's perceived and proposes value-based narratives against other realistic and hard power politics globally (Szumowski, 2024, p. 84). Szumowski explains that Normative Power Europe (NPE) is based on three critical features: 'the success story of a wielder, alternatives for proposed narratives, and cohesion between declarations and actual performance' (Szumowski, 2024, p. 84). From this perspective, the EU's effectiveness is viewed as its 'capability to control other international entities and the environment' (Szumowski, 2024, p. 83). However, it is important to note that there is a significant dilemma or 'gap between declared values and intentions and actual performance' (Szumowski, 2024, p. 84).

2.3.2 Power – but what power? The EU as global actor

Fahey and Mancini study the concept with the thought that focusing on the EU's goodness, this picture presented it to be a good humanitarian actor, to examine it linked especially regarding external trade, and whether or not these principles are seen in its actions (Fahey and Mancini, 2022, pp. 1–2). Also, scholars discuss the EU's potential shift from being a normative actor. By normative power, a concept introduced by Ian Manners (2002), it is meant that the EU uses in its initiatives soft and humanitarian acts of goodness in order to persuade in its own interests, in contrast to the international relations concept of hard power, where states use coercion, military threats, and a hard stance in negotiations and in its public image in global politics. Persuasion is understood in this sense by the definition of 'a social process of interaction that involves changing attitudes about cause and effect in the absence of overt coercion' (Checkel, 2001, p. 553).

Traditionally, neo-functionalist school of thoughts highlight EU's normative power dimension and the that 'goal of EU's international policy as protecting and promoting its values but not ensuring its security through rendering power politics' (Dorosh et al., 2025, p. 429). In contrast and as a critique, realist believe that the EU stay as a weak actor in the international atmosphere (ibid.) and that it continues to stay 'independent or autonomous centre of power as long as it lacks either traditional coercive (ie.military power) (Dorosh et al., 2025, p. 437).

Furthermore, the war in Ukraine has made it a necessity for the EU to change. The EU has shifted from being seen merely as an economic actor to becoming a geopolitical actor (Dorosh et al., 2025, p. 431). Traditionally, the Commission has been described and has self-identified as a distinctive actor in international politics, specifically as a soft, civilian, normative, or some other alternative type of power, seeking to export security and stability to its neighborhood and beyond (Dorosh et al., 2025, pp. 428–429). However, the thoughts argued in traditional normative and civilian power analysis—that the EU is only advocating its values and norms and does not exercise hard power politics—are now seen in a new light because the EU has to respond to the Russian threat and ensure its own security (Dorosh et al., 2025, p. 436).

Based on the existing research, it it's seen that the European Commissions Communication and European actorness research is focused on external dimensions of the European Commission's political communication and politics. Scholars address the need for more studies regarding the press releases and there is lack of research regarding the internal communication from the Commission. Also, there is need for more resent research about the current situation and trajectory to see whether this addressed technocratic style and political communication have improved and what are the trends in current communication and main themes regarding the enlargement.

3 Methodology

3.1 Qualitative analysis

The goal in qualitative research is to understand the actors from their point of view (Ronkainen et al., 2013, p. 81). The choices in qualitative research are understood as the researcher's own choices and active decisions, which are clearly argued and justified. The research employs an inductive approach, since I wanted to be open for new ideas to emerge and be also open to see the actual style of the Commission's language (Ronkainen et al., 2013, p. 556).

The collected material is collected with a purpose which creates an entity, a 'case'. In this case, the data process analyzed has to be logical and planned and carried out with a thought. Regarding qualitative research, it is also important to think about the replicability of the phenomenon on a macrolevel, or in other cases, and think about the questions of validity regarding the question of objectivity in research. I also recognize my own role and interpretative solutions, and I recognize that these are choices that I made during my analysis. Even if research is aiming for objectivity, this is acknowledged that it is not practical in theory, especially in this research framework, but this is seen as a strength in this research because of its flexibility (Ronkainen et al. 2013, p. 560-561).

The collecting of materials illustrates and connects new dimensions during the analysis, which I was open during the research, and it brings new insights to the matters and issues in societal levels (Ronkainen et al., 2013, pp. 556–557). I kept this in mind when using inductive approach with interpretive thoughts when collecting and analyzing the material. After organization, I selected materials to analyze; the analysis becomes from basic observation of the changing language

sphere that not everything was 'technocratic' goes more in depth and more. I conducted the analysis which was based on the points mentioned above. After the analysis, I went for theoretical analysis where I examine it in depth, analyzing this based on the theory and examining its roots based on the review regarding qualitative research (Ronkainen et al., 2013, p. 558).

Specially, a suitable method for this research is discourse analysis, and specially the critical discourse analysis (CDA) from scholar Norman Fairclough (2013). Within the analysis, I chose mainly to focus on level 1 and 3 from his CDA framework and the second dimension was put less emphasis on within the analysis. This methodology allows analysis of how language, communication, and textual representations contribute to the construction of meanings within European Unions' institutions. It also allows to explore the ways in which institutions and actors articulate, negotiate, and reproduce their values and beliefs. The research aims to answer the question how and how something is represented through language in this specific material from this specific time and context, since 'qualitative observation of a social reality is unique to that place, point in time, and observer' (Van Bavel and Dessart, 2018, p. 12).

Critical discourse analysis highlights the 'role of the language as a power resource that is related to ideology and socio-cultural change' (Bryman, 2012, p. 690). CDA was chosen because of its interpretive dimension for the research: it is more meaningful than coded methods, and the purpose of the research is give insightful and meaningful analysis, where transparency and coherency are taken into account by telling the reader the different steps during the process. The best way to reach the meanings behind enlargement agenda and press releases in this case to analyze existing through constructivist methods, to analyze meanings and values behind words. Constructivist approaches share the view 'that our ways of talking do not neutrally reflect our world, identities and social relations but, rather, play an active role in creating and changing them' (Lowndes et al., 2002, p. 1). The questions of validity have to be acknowledged that compared material represents the same agenda of focus in different media outlets for transparency of the findings.

3.2 Critical Discourse analysis

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) focuses on language and underlying social structures and practices (Carta, 2019, p. 81). There are 'three competing perspectives on discourse analysis (PDAs): constructivism, critical realism and poststructuralism' (Carta, 2019, p. 81). Based on the post-structuralist school of thought, most international relations scholars' definitions agree that discourses are not just 'groups of signs' (Foucault, 2011, p. 291) but rather structures—that is, 'sociocultural resources', which are used to make sense of the social world—and practices—'structures of meaning-in-use', which dictate the rules through which social meanings are assigned to things and social interactions are framed (Laffey and Weldes, 2004, p. 28).

Discursive meanings analysed in the text involve the construction of 'social identities, social relations; and systems of knowledge and meaning' (Jørgensen and Phillips, 2002, p. 68). Social practices produce ideological effects which the researcher explains, and the research critically aims to examine possible unequal power relations (Jørgensen and Phillips, 2002, p. 63).

It is also discussed about the limitations when studying rhetoric. The reason regarding critical discourse analysis is that the study focuses on rhetoric and communication, and it is not actually analyzing how the enlargement is happening in reality. The study's limitation is that it does not focus on the recipient's response, but on the underlying message within this communication, focusing only on the enlargement press releases. The analysis shows that these wordings have macro implications and bigger extended meanings, but it doesn't see how it goes in actual practice. As Szumowski (2024, p. 84) discussed, in research there is usually a gap between what the Union is saying to do in declarations and what it is actually achieving by actual performance. This is all acknowledged in this limitations for this research. A key point in discourse analysis is acknowledging that the meanings are not solely universal or objective.

3.3 Critical Discourse analysis framework from Norman Fairclough

Fairclough's model was used as a tool to examine the press releases and political guidelines (Fairclough, 2013, p. 10).

1. *Description (textual description)*: The first level in his model is the description which involves the textual description (Fairclough, 2013, p. 10). During this dimension in the analysis, I'm looking at language with a bigger lens (Fairclough, 2013, p. 10). In this part the researcher acknowledges the metaphors like European family versus strategic partner, and also the passive forms of language for an example as reforms are required (Fairclough, 2013, p. 10). Words can for an example in this level to be analyzed to took away the political responsibility and present requirements as natural phenomena (Fairclough, 2013, p. 10).

2. *Discursive Practice (Interpretation)*: The second dimension examines the production and consumption of the texts (Fairclough, 2013, p. 10). This involves questioning the target audience of the press releases—whether they are aimed at creating cohesion among member states regarding enlargement or directed at external international representatives to project authority.

3. *Social Practice (Explanation)*: The third dimension links the text to wider concepts of power and ideology (Fairclough, 2013, p. 11). In this phase, language is explained through discursive meanings, focusing on how underlying dimensions of language are linked to power dynamics. For example, it analyses how the Commission leverages its role as a 'safe guardian' to determine what is considered 'European' and normalizes its hierarchical influence.

4 Philosophy of Science

Critical theories question the positivist view and seek to challenge assumptions, beliefs, and concepts, seeing reality as being socially constructed. Critical approaches focus on power relations and question values. They also challenge the idea that there is an objective reality, viewing it instead as being constructed and subjective, shaped by different external factors; therefore, it cannot be argued to be objective. This paper is also arguing and aiming not only to find 'subjective reality' but seeks to analyze how Commission constructs the existing reality and uses language to rational construct this aspired reality. This section of the paper illustrates the epistemological and ontological reasoning behind the chosen realist-constructivist approach.

The basic epistemological foundations used in the research are both realism and social constructivism to obtain a more critical approach and to gain a more nuanced understanding through a critical lens. On the one hand, social constructivism, for example by Wendt (1992, 1999), holds the idea that reality is socially constructed mainly by our own ideas and values, which are the main drivers and explanations in the research. Classically, in contrast, realism for example by Carr, (1940) views that the international system is inherently anarchic and dominated by actors which are mostly concerned with preserving and enhancing their own interests.

Besides the critical discourse analysis from Norman Fairclough, this study employs realist-constructivist approach based on classical scholar Barkin (2010). Regarding realist constructivism, Barkin argued that the study of power and security through a realist lens gets advanced when it is understood also how power is socially and linguistically constructed by constructivism, since 'any given approach is unlikely to be by itself a sufficient basis for research' (Barkin ,2010, p. 163). Also, Jennifer Sterling-Folker argued that realism and

constructivism 'need one another to correct their own worst excesses' and saw that there are benefits when there is common ontological ground in research (Sterling-Folker, 2002, p. 74).

The study does not seek to examine the Commission's communication as an attempt to distribute information, but it is an institutional mechanism which builds geopolitical actorness (Bretherton and Vogler, 2006, p. 24). A realist-constructivist approach allows this research to navigate between the traditional division of realism and constructivism (Michaels, 2022, p. 101), in that it can both acknowledge rational interests and security, and also ideas and intersubjective meanings (Michaels, 2022, p. 102). This will be employed in analysis where the Commission is seen as a rational actor, which is a realist school of thought (Michaels, 2022, pp. 102–103). The Commission is an actor that seeks to maximize its influence through a enlargement agenda, interests and autonomy (Michaels, 2022, p. 105). This is complemented with constructivist meanings, using discourse analysis to focus on language and how language makes meanings and constructs reality (Michaels, 2022, p. 102), and how actors can achieve their realist goals through discursive practices (Michaels, 2022, p. 102). To illustrate, enlargement is not only seen as a geopolitical necessity. Geopolitical necessity is not just an observation, but it has discursive meaning to make the reader feel a sense of urgency, which therefore legitimizes political choices behind the Commission's agenda (Andone, 2016, p. 83).

I found a strength in this practice with Michaels' concept of practice sensibility (Michaels, 2022, p. 112). It's making it possible that I can analyze how the Commission is making its choices and uses its language (Michaels, 2022, p. 112). Michaels talks about inefficient causation (Michaels, 2022, p. 116) from the scholar Lebow (2014, p. 44) which involves the idea that the researcher is not looking for a direct causal mechanism, but the indirect and inefficient causation (Michaels, 2022, p. 116), and it allows the researcher to examine those processes and mechanisms that the Commission is practicing in its communication. By the terms in realism, Commissions is seen as a rational actor, which enhances its own agenda and geopolitical position through enlargement agenda, while constructivism allows to analyze how these goals are linguistically advocated

through language. These are analyzed as processes and mechanisms and not as direct or indirect cause-benefit transactions.

This helps to analyze how the external opportunities become present with wordings and capabilities from the Commission to communicate its agenda (Bretherton and Vogler, 2006, p. 24). Michaels' approach regarding realist constructivism (Michaels, 2022, p. 101) is making it possible to not only talk about discursive idealism (Michaels, 2022, p. 101), so that this research can acknowledge the real-world limitations and actors' strategic nature of communication and critically analyze the different power relations.

Constructivism usually highlights intersubjective knowledge (Michaels, 2022, p. 102) whereas realism acknowledges nations and the leaders and human nature's limitations (Michaels, 2022, p. 102). Michaels also highlights that individual decision-maker limitations are setting frames for social construction (Michaels, 2022, p. 102).

5 Material

5.1 Overview of the material

The empirical material for this research consists of official documents from the European Commission. The empirical material chosen comes from internet base European Commission press release archive and Ursula von der Leyen's political Guidelines with further explained and justified special scope further, which is elaborated and explained in this section of the paper.

The primary material was collected from the European Commission's Press Corner database, which provides press material directly from the Commission's Spokesperson's Service. The material from the European Commission's press release archive was systematically filtered by selecting the document type 'press release' with the filter of the policy area 'EU's Enlargement' with the timeline of one year 04-2025 to 04-2026. The search result where 13 press releases and all these 13 documents were analyzed in the analysis section. This timeline with the most recent material gives novelty to the field, fresh perspective and more nuanced understanding of the EU's enlargement, which is constantly evolving and shaped by external factors.

These 13 official press releases are chosen since these are the part of the press releases that the Commission in itself identifies and presents to audience present the Enlargement during the chosen time period. The 'enlargement' in this case consist of the criteria determined by the Commission in itself and not based on researchers point of view what are the main press releases concerning the enlargement. It remains unclear how Commission determines the selection criteria, where audience navigates to find different topic when searching from

press releases archive the specific subject area and information of the EU's issue area. This is important to note, because this is also what the Commission wants to represent to recipient when looking for different EU's issue areas from official sources. The findings that the reader finds it's what Commission 'represents to be' and what kind of view the reader will have regarding the EU's enlargement or what Commission presents to be the main press releases concerning the enlargement.

In addition to the press releases, the research utilizes the 'Political Guidelines for the Next European Commission 2024-2029' by Ursula von der Leyen. The selected material from this document is under the headline of 'A global Europe: Leveraging our power and partnerships' with subtitles of 'Enlargement as a geopolitical imperative' from page 25 to 26 (European Commission, 2024, pp. 25–26). This was also the newest official macro-level guidelines from the Commission which also adds value to the research.

Together, these selected documents provide the most accurate discursive representation of how abstract policy phenomena is communicated and advocated to the public and political audiences. These documents reflect the European Commission's goals and provide the best discursive meaning of how phenomena that might be abstract to citizens are communicated and advocated to the public.

This offers an interesting and highly important research area, since these documents, in addition to targeting politicians or decision-makers, are further interpreted by different media outlets, through which they eventually reach the citizens. These documents highlight what are seen as the most important issues and importantly, these texts have not yet been interpreted by third parties but represent the authentic view advocated directly by the Commission. This increases the documents authenticity and credibility, as shown with exact quotes presented from the material.

5.2 Data Collection and Selection of Cases

The document quality was assessed using the criteria of authenticity, credibility, representativeness, and meaning (Bryman, 2012, p. 565). The temporal context of the event and phenomenon must be taken into account in research. During the research, I reflected on the collection of the material and what kind of motives and needs might have been behind the need to publish material and what kind of voices and perspectives the material represents and what perspectives are absent from the material and what this tells us about our time. Also, I thought about what kind of norms and ideologies and what kind of scientific reasoning might have been behind the material. The materials allow for different interpretations, and one's own choices when telling the interpretation of the material must be justified (Ronkainen et al., 2013).

Within discourse analysis, analysis focuses on the formal features of vocabulary, grammar, and sentence coherence, through which discursive practices are analyzed, and discourses and genres are realised (Jørgensen and Phillips, 2002, p. 69). When analyzing the texts, I try to find sentences which indicate the EU's position towards its objectives and also towards others and what kind of wording EU uses within its texts. The research carries out to answer the question how something is represented through language.

Official documents enrich the view of the current situation regarding the Commission's communication regarding enlargement by focusing on the most recent press releases. The official material is the primary source for the analysis, since this captures the official and authentic communications without interpretation outside of the Commission and delivers official message and objectives in the press releases. This is also because they carry out the bigger societal meaning, since they are further used by various medias and experts and officials outside and within EU. This also carries one important note and limitation in research regarding its societal impact: the official materials represent elites' points of views which are further framed by the media and the study can not address how the message is interpreted or reached from various actors. It is noted that in the case of political communication, without analyzing the receivers and the impact, and by focusing solely on the content, one will not know whether the communication has an effect on the audience (Hague and Harrop, 2007, p.

122). The study cannot address how the message is interpreted or reached by various actors. Therefore, the one limitation and perspective in this research is how the Commission is seeking to advance its actorness, but the research cannot objectively measure how well it achieves this goal. However, it importantly illustrates the communication strategies of the Commission.

Existing research discusses that the Commission has increased its presence in social media (Özdemir and Rauh, 2022). However, press releases are the most long-standing communication channel and have not been getting attention from the scholars for research. Another hindrance regarding social media is that it remains unclear which segments of the wider public it actually reaches (Rauh, 2023, p. 689). Therefore, press releases provide a consistent channel to research and analyze the Commission's communication, especially within these times when its political power has increased (Rauh, 2023, p. 689).

Within the selected 13 press releases and political guidelines, the specific quotes for the analysis were chosen using purposive sampling (Bryman, 2012, p. 416). The selection focused on finding the parts where the Commission is talking about itself as an actor, like 'the Commission stands ready', focusing on answering the research question how the Commission is constructing its own actorness through the enlargement agenda. Within these, a second dimension was also to evaluate and identify possible emotive and charged words besides the potential technocratic change in language that Rauh (2023) noted and examine how the Commission is arguing for its own actorness.

6 Analysis of the Political Guidelines 2024-2029

This section presents the Table 1 of the findings of the Political Guidelines.

Table 1: Analysis of the Political Guidelines 2024–2029 (European Commission)

Key Quote	Linguistic Element (Level 1)	Social Practice / Power Relations (Level 3)	Actorness Dimension
<i>'History is calling once again'</i>	Historical metaphor.	Creates a feeling of destiny. Takes away the political nature of the enlargement and creates the sense that the Union has no choice but to continue.	Opportunity: External factors and crises are represented as an inevitable necessity to act.
<i>'Moral, political and geostrategic imperative'</i>	Aggravated words and strong adjectives.	Tells the reader about values and the changing nature of enlargement, framing it as a moral obligation.	Presence: The EU is in itself saying that they have moral power.
<i>'Accession to the EU will always be a merit-based process'</i>	Conditional, strict and passive phrasing.	Creates a 'Safe Guardian' role where the Commission controls the criteria and tells the member countries that everything is under control.	Capability: It has the capability to control this process, showing everybody that they are guarding this.
<i>'EU rose to the'</i>	Hero of the	Takes a stance with a 'We	Capability / Opportunity: Tells

<i>challenge' /</i>	day /	can do it again' reasoning,	about resilience, showing
<i>'Europe will</i>	Historical	almost making a heroic	confidence that because they
<i>rise'</i>	success.	effort for the reader. Draws	have done this before, they have
		legitimacy from the past to	the capabilities to do it now. The
		continue as an actor.	Commission uses this as an
			opportunity.

The analysis is carried out by first analysing the textual levels. In the second part, the analysis carries the reader simultaneously through the three pillars in their own subsections and analyzes the actorness through these three pillars: Opportunity, Presence, and Capability.

The political guidelines tell that: 'The celebrations marking 20 years since the largest ever wave of enlargement allowed us to look back at an unprecedented success story. It is a powerful reminder that Europe is a continent of peace, where democracy and freedom have blossomed. ...History is calling once again. We have the historical responsibility to secure our European continent, and this includes Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia and the Western Balkans. ... But this will not be an easy journey. Accession to the EU will always be a merit-based process – and each candidate will be assessed on its own progress towards meeting all criteria'. (European Commission, 2024, pp. 25–26).

What is interesting in this 'History is calling once again' (European Commission, 2024, p. 25) is the linguistics. This observation is historical metaphor and it also creates a feeling and a 'sense of destiny' to the reader, suggesting the Union has no choice but to continue for the common good and it takes away the politicalness when it is framed like this regarding the Commissions actorness, this creates an opportunity for the Union when external factors are represented as a necessity, taking away the idea that there is actually a political choice behind their doings. That is, it takes away the politicalness of the enlargement. It creates the sense to the reader that this is destiny, and the Union has no choice but to continue. This creates, regarding the actorness part, an opportunity for the Union when external factors are represented as a necessity.

Second from the Commission and Ursula von der Leyen that the enlargement is a 'moral, political and geostrategic imperative' (European Commission, 2024, p. 25). These are really strong adjectives which tell the reader about values and the changing nature of enlargement, framing it as a moral obligation. Regarding actorness, it could be seen as presence, where the EU is in itself saying that they have moral power.

In this 'Accession to the EU will always be a merit-based process' (European Commission, 2024, p. 26), the phrasing is really conditional, strict and passive. It is creating the Commission a Safe Guardian role where the Commission controls the criteria and tells the member countries that everything is under control through a quality-based process. It also tells candidate countries and actors outside of the EU that EU accession is really strict. This sentence puts the Union on a golden pedestal: it is not something easy to access, but something valuable and attractive that requires a lot of work and real layers. These core values are obligated and desirable; only when candidate states obtain these desired universal values can they become a part of the Union. This tells about the EU's capability and actorness. It has the capability to control this process, showing everybody that they are guarding this.

This 'EU rose to the challenge' (European Commission, 2024, p. 26) is also a historical success, indicating that something has happened before so it can be done again. It takes a stance with a 'We can do it again' reasoning, almost making a heroic effort for the reader. Regarding actorness, this is how they draw legitimacy from the past to continue as an actor. From the capability perspective, it talks about resilience, showing confidence that because we have done this before, we have the capabilities to do it now.

7 Analysis of Press releases

This section presents the Table 2 of the findings of the Press releases.

Table 2: Key Discursive Themes in the European Commission Press Releases (2025–2026)

Press Release Focus	Key Quote / Discursive Element (Level 1)	Social Practice / Power Relations (Level 3)	Actorness Dimension
Ukraine Support (1)	<i>‘Anchoring Ukraine firmly within the European family’</i>	Emphasizes inclusion and shared culture ('us' vs. 'them'). Creates a sense of belonging rather than just an administrative partnership.	Presence: Acting as a magnet; presenting the EU as a safe, warm, and desirable home.
Ukraine Recovery (5)	<i>‘Not just its top donor, but a key investor in its future’</i>	Shift from a passive humanitarian donor to a rational, strategic player. Economic integration is used as an active geopolitical investment.	Capability: Using financial instruments to advance power politics and strategy.
Western Balkans (4)	<i>‘Accelerator into the European family’</i>	Family metaphor creating an inclusion/exclusion dimension. Defines who belongs to the home and shares the same values.	Presence: Shaping external partners' views and expectations.
Enlargement Package (9)	<i>‘Enlargement partners’</i>	Changing identity terms. Removes the distance of "third countries" and creates a sense of closeness and friendliness.	Presence: Shaping external partners' views by creating a sense of friendliness.
Security & Defence (12)	<i>‘Top priority for Europe's security’ /</i>	A metaphor of 'stepping up'. It tells a success story about	Opportunity: The Commission uses the

<i>‘The Commission stands ready to move forward’</i>	operationalizing the EU's security geopolitical crisis as an commitments, symbolizing that the Commission is ready to take hard power actions.	opportunity to symbolize it is ready to move forward.
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In next section, the paper continues to introduce the press releases and main findings emerged from the material.

7.1.1 Press release 1: EU reaffirms unwavering support for Ukraine

The first press release in the timeframe concerns Ukraine: ‘The European Commission has disbursed an additional €1 billion tranche of its exceptional Macro-Financial Assistance (MFA) loan to Ukraine, to be repaid with proceeds from immobilised Russian State assets in the EU, reinforcing the EU's role as the largest donor since the beginning of Russia's war against Ukraine. ... The President states: ‘...this disbursement and agreements are also an investment in a shared common future. We are backing Ukraine's impressive reform efforts and deepening our ties—from space, security and defence to building a thriving business environment. Ми з вами. We are with you.’ ... Marta Kos, Commissioner for Enlargement: ‘This is about more than reconstruction: it is about anchoring Ukraine firmly within the European family and accelerating its path to EU accession’ (European Commission, 2025; von der Leyen, 2025; Kos, 2025).

In the first press release, Ursula von der Leyen highlights that ‘we are backing Ukraine's impressive reform efforts and deepening our ties’ and adds that ‘we are with you’ (von der Leyen, 2025). This tells about economical help and symbolizes collectivity and the country's future membership, showing they are already part of Europe. The rest of the press release describes ‘reinforcing the EU's role as the largest donor since the beginning of Russia's war against Ukraine’ (European Commission, 2025). Regarding these sentence's goal, it could signal that the Commission is trying to convince all the parties about the funds.

Marta Kos also says in her quote that ‘This is about more than reconstruction: it is about anchoring Ukraine firmly within the European family and accelerating its

path to EU accession' (Kos, 2025). This signals strategic intent and change, describing how the Commission is making cohesion and lasting ties to new members. Talking about the 'European family' further emphasizes these ties: they are not just partner countries or aspiring members, but people who share the same culture and closeness.

From a Critical Discourse Analysis perspective, particularly on the level of social practice (Level 3), this family metaphor creates an inclusion and exclusion dimension—definition of 'us' versus 'them' and establishing a sense of belongingness, and who has a sense of belonging to the EU. This illustrates the EU's presence (Bretherton and Vogler, 2006, p. 24) where EU is acting as a magnet and presenting access to the 'European family' as entering a safe, warm, and desirable place. The Commission discursively creates an image of the EU as a 'safe haven', making accession a highly attractive goal.

7.1.2 Press Release 2: Black Sea Strategy

The second press release concerns the Black Sea region: 'The European Commission and the High Representative have adopted a new strategy to foster a secure, prosperous and resilient Black Sea region. ... President Ursula von der Leyen stated: '...an active role of the European Union is crucial in advancing security and peace in the Black Sea region with Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine.' ... Marta Kos, Commissioner for Enlargement, stated: 'We are investing in a common future anchored in security, prosperity, and resilience. This strategy will also reinforce our political role as a reliable actor in the Black Sea region' (European Commission, 2025; von der Leyen, 2025; Kos, 2025).

This tells about that financing is needed because it is for the common good and collectivity. In this Black Sea strategy, it is openly stated that it will reinforce the political role as a reliable actor in the Black Sea region. Ukraine, the Republic of Moldova, Georgia, Turkey, Armenia, and Azerbaijan are described as partners.

Ursula von der Leyen's quote describes that 'an active role of the European Union is crucial in advancing security and peace in the Black Sea region with Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine' (von der Leyen, 2025). Regarding actorness, this tells us about a window of opportunity to use Russia's war for the Commission to reinforce its political role in the region, as openly mentioned here. It is also described that the EU enlargement process is attracting investment to change regional security and resilience, and that a coordinated approach with Turkey is important, describing it as an EU partner of strategic importance.

7.1.3 Press release 3: Global Gateway and Global Strategy

The third press release concerns the Global Gateway strategy and global investments: 'the Commission and EIB announce a more flexible guarantee of €5 billion to boost global investments. ... Global Gateway serves as a European response to global infrastructure needs, offering transparent and value-based partnerships to foster economic growth worldwide. Jozef Síkela noted: 'This agreement strengthens our presence globally, helping to position Europe as a trustworthy and reliable partner around the world.'" (European Commission, 2025; Síkela, 2025).

In the third press release, the Global Gateway is not described as just some project, but as an EU strategy to boost global connectivity through sustainable partnerships. It tells the figures that it seeks to mobilize up to €300 billion in public and private investments by 2027. It is described as a European response to offer transparent and value-based partnerships. The 'value-based partnership' gives the Global Gateway rhetoric meaning, as it uses value and moral-based words when describing the project and partners. Jozef Síkela also says in his quote that this agreement strengthens our presence globally (Síkela, 2025), helping to position Europe as a trustworthy and reliable partner around the world.

7.1.4 Press release 4: Western Balkans Growth Plan and the 'European Family'

The fourth press release concerns the Western Balkans Leaders' meeting and reaffirms the commitment for the swift delivery of the Growth Plan. The language includes emphasizing integration and belonging: 'Commissioner for Enlargement Marta Kos and the leaders of the six Western Balkans partners gathered in Skopje for a high-level meeting dedicated to the EU-backed Growth Plan for the Western Balkans. ... The Reform & Growth Facility is an ambitious common tool and commitment to implement more than 600 ambitious reforms for which the EU is providing €6 billion in financial support. ... Marta Kos stated: 'The Growth Plan is the Western Balkans' accelerator into the European family – it is an essential element to speed up and deepen integration with the EU' (European Commission, 2025).

Using the word 'partners' within the text, it describes an 'ambitious common tool and 'commitment' to implement more than 600 reforms for which the EU is providing €6 billion in financial support. Marta Kos says that the Growth Plan is the Western Balkans' accelerator into the European family (Kos, 2025) and explains that this is an essential element to speed up and deepen integration within the EU. The metaphor about 'European family' creates a sense of belonging creates an inclusion and exclusion dimension for 'us' and 'them'—who belongs to the family and who has a sense of belonging to the EU. This tells about actorness and presence: the EU acts as a magnet, presenting the EU family as a safe, warm, and desirable place.

7.1.5 Press release 5: Ukraine's Recovery and the Shift to a 'Key Investor'

In this fifth press release about Ukraine's recovery, it is stated that: 'the EU reaffirms its role as Ukraine's strongest partner. Not just its top donor, but a key investor in its future. This is solidarity in action. We are backing Ukraine's impressive reform efforts and deepening our ties. We are with you. This disbursement and these agreements are also an investment in a shared common future, anchoring Ukraine firmly within the European family' (von der Leyen, 2025).

The fifth press release concerns the new €2.3 billion agreements package for Ukraine recovery efforts announced at the Ukraine Recovery Conference 2025. A quote says: ‘it shows the EU's steadfast commitment to Ukraine's recovery and its future in the EU', meaning the money and package show steadfast commitment: ‘The President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, unveiled today a new €2.3 billion package of agreements ... to support Ukraine's recovery and reconstruction efforts. It shows the EU's steadfast commitment to Ukraine's recovery and its future in the EU. ... The President said: 'Today, the EU reaffirms its role as Ukraine's strongest partner. Not just its top donor, but a key investor in its future. This is solidarity in action. Ukraine is moving closer to the EU every day ... Europe stands with Ukraine — today and tomorrow’ (European Commission, 2025).

This wording—how the Commission describes itself as a 'key investor'—shows in discursive terms that it is not only providing financing for humanitarian needs but acting as a strategic and important investor. It is especially interesting that the donors are not only shown as figures and linked only to the candidate country's needs: it is openly linked and Commissions way to ‘brag’ itself after telling the figures. After this, a line says Ukraine is moving closer to the EU every day and that Europe stands with Ukraine today and tomorrow. This tells partners that the Enlargement and Ukraine's ties to EU are deepening and that the investment are ongoing and strong.

7.1.6 Press Release 6: Ukraine's Independence Day Support

Sixth press release concerns the EU's delivery of an additional over €4 billion to Ukraine ahead of its Independence Day, which signals besides the monetary aid a nationalist symbol, where the assistance is also a geopolitical message: ‘The EU delivers another strong signal of unwavering support by disbursing €4.05 billion to the country. ... With this, the EU sends a clear message: our solidarity with Ukraine is unwavering’ (European Commission, 2025; von der Leyen, 2025). In

this press release, it is told that the EU together with its members has condemned what has occurred to Ukraine, and the President is saying that 'today's disbursement of over €4 billion shows our commitment' and also states that: 'when Ukraine is strong, Europe is stronger' (von der Leyen, 2025). This repetition of the word 'unwavering' symbolizes and strengthens the EU's image as a committed, reliable security partner.

7.1.7 Press release 7: Support To Moldova

The press release describes that the EU delivers an additional €18.9 million support and calls on businesses to invest in the country (European Commission, 2025). The Commission justifies this support by linking it directly to European integration: 'The European Commission has disbursed an additional €18.9 million to Moldova under the Reform and Growth Facility, reaffirming EU's steadfast support for the country's reform path. ... President von der Leyen said: 'Moldova continues to deliver on its reforms agenda and demonstrate its commitment to the European path. ... Investing in Moldova's economic growth is an investment in European Integration. Because a strong Moldova contributes to a stronger Europe. The EU is committed to supporting Moldova every step of the way on its EU path' (European Commission, 2025).

It notes that this additional amount to Moldova via the Reform and Growth Facility is reaffirming the EU's steadfast support for the country's reform path. There is also a quote that as an EU candidate country, with the support of the Growth Plan and single market, providing unique opportunities to businesses is the message that the European Commission sends on enlargement, and we advocate and affirm that (European Commission, 2025). There is also in the quote section a Marta Kos citation that 'we also call on investors to invest in the country' so the reform work sustains that (Kos, 2025). When directly calling businesses to invest in the country, the Commission strategically links economic opportunities to political commitments. This shows the Commission's capability: it uses financial leverage to show conditionality and link candidate countries into the

European market, where economic investments act and works as political tools for continuing Europeanization.

7.1.8 Press release: 8 Cross-Regional Cooperation

The eighth press release focuses on strengthening cross-regional cooperation with Black Sea countries, the South Caucasus, and Central Asia: ‘In the meetings, participants affirmed their commitment to deepening cooperation in areas of common interest, enhancing mutual resilience and promoting more connected, secure and prosperous regions. Participants also discussed ways to enhance cooperation on shared security interests’ (European Commission, 2025).

There is a part where the participants highlighted their commitment to deepening cooperation in areas of common interest, resilience and promoting more connected, secure and prosperous regions. There is also text that says it is open that the Black Sea is of strategic importance to the EU and tells that Ukraine has dangerous spillover effects across the region and that problems like Moscow's military aggression require our collective response (European Commission, 2025). The language here is heavily technocratic and relies on bureaucratic jargon but advocates the co-operative nation of Enlargement globally.

7.1.9 Press release 9: 2025 Enlargement Package

The ninth press release covers the adoption of the 2025 Enlargement package. It shows a highly strategic discursive shift regarding how candidate states are defined: ‘We are more committed than ever to turning EU enlargement into a reality. Because a larger Union means a stronger and more influential Europe on the global stage. But enlargement is a merit-based process. Our package provides specific recommendations to all our partners. ... EU accession is a unique offer, a promise of peace, prosperity and stability. With the right reforms and a strong political will, our partners can seize this opportunity. ... Gradual integration of the aspiring Members into the Single Market strengthens ties with the Union already before their accession’ (European Commission, 2025; Kos, 2025).

The press release concerns the 2025 enlargement package which shows progress towards EU membership for key enlargement partners (European Commission, 2025). Marta Kos writes that the European Commission is now presenting a comprehensive assessment of the progress made by the enlargement partners, and this year the momentum for enlargement is high on the priority list again at the EU (Kos, 2025). It also confirms that these advantages have been felt by current member states and that the EU is more committed than ever to turning EU enlargement into reality, because a larger Union means a stronger and more influential actor on the global stage.

She says enlargement is a merit-based process and that ‘EU accession is a unique offer, a promise of peace, prosperity and stability. With the right reforms and a strong political will, our partners can seize this opportunity’ (Kos, 2025). This sounds like the EU acting as a donor giving a gift, implying upcoming members should be grateful for this one-of-a-kind offer that is not given to everybody. Using the term 'enlargement partners' changes their identity by not describing them as third countries; they are partners, part of the process, and not distant. This presence shapes external partners' views by creating a sense of friendliness.

7.1.10 Press Release 10: Western Balkans Infrastructure and 'A Lived Reality'

The next press release is about how the Commission delivers a €171 million support package for infrastructure and businesses in the Western Balkans: ‘The European Commission has announced a €171 million of support to boost infrastructure development and private sector growth across Western Balkans partners. ... Marta Kos, Commissioner for Enlargement, noted: 'Investing in our Western Balkan partners is key to bringing them closer to the EU. ... From advancing infrastructure to enhancing business development, these investments are creating real opportunities for citizens and making the EU a lived reality across the region’ (European Commission, 2026).

It is stated that ‘The Growth Plan is the Western Balkans' accelerator into the European family. It is an essential element to speed up and deepen integration within the EU. These investments are creating real opportunities for citizens and making the EU a lived reality across the region. Investing in our Western Balkan partners is key to bringing them closer to the EU and reinforcing the EU's commitment to sustainable growth and regional connectivity’ (Kos, 2025).

When it is described that ‘these investments are creating real opportunities for citizens and making the EU a lived reality across the region’ (Kos, 2026) it further emphasizes the Europeanization effect. Kos tells us that ‘Investing in our Western Balkan partners is key to bringing them closer to the EU’ (Kos, 2026). This phrasing tells that they are ‘our’ partners, that it is part of us, and that we are investing our own ‘profits’ and ‘common good’ by investing in the Western Balkans and to the European integration.

7.1.11 Press Release 11: Western Balkans and Single Market

The eleventh press release announces the 'Roam Like at Home' initiative for the Western Balkans: ‘The Growth Plan brings forward benefits of EU membership by progressively integrating the Western Balkan partners into the EU's Single Market. This phased approach delivers tangible benefits for citizens and businesses already before full membership, while remaining firmly anchored in the enlargement process’. (European Commission, 2026). The Growth Plan brings forward benefits of EU membership by progressively integrating the Western Balkan partners into the EU's Single Market (European Commission, 2026). This phased approach delivers tangible benefits already before full membership.

7.1.12 Press release 12: Drone production

The press release tells how the EU takes preparatory steps on financial support for Ukraine and boosting drone production (European Commission, 2026). The President states: ‘Today, we are taking the necessary preparatory steps to mobilize

this year's budget and procure defense equipment, with a focus on Ukraine's cutting-edge drone industry. With this we send a clear message: the Commission stands ready to move forward' (von der Leyen, 2026). This investment is not just financial support, but it is also a metaphor of 'stepping up' and saying that this symbolizes that the Commission is ready to move forward. Henna Virkkunen tells in a quote that 'Today's decisions mark a significant milestone in operationalizing the EU's security commitments', that 'Ukraine must be in a position of strength', and that this is a 'top priority for Europe's security' (Virkkunen, 2026). This tells a success story about a significant milestone in operationalizing EU security commitments.

In this press release, in discursive terms, the Commission highlights the EU's security commitments, framing this as a 'top priority for Europe's security' and demonstrating the Commission's unwavering commitment to its geopolitical goals to the public. These security commitments and geopolitical goals are advocated with statements that 'Ukraine must be in a position of strength - on the battlefield and at the negotiating table'. This is further advocated to be a 'top priority for Europe's security'. Using words like 'battlefield' and 'negotiating table' illustrates the discursive rhetoric in Commission language, showing how the language is not solely normative reasoning to the public but advocating that the Commission is an accountable and strong actor, which is capable of acting strategically to ensure safety.

7.1.13 Press release: 13 Returning Ukrainian Children

The last press release is about the EU, Ukraine and Canada co-hosting a high-level meeting on returning Ukrainian children, featuring a quote about unwavering commitment and solidarity with Ukraine, that we will bring the world together to demand accountability (Dombrovskis, 2026). It highlights the EU's security commitments, framing this as a "top priority for Europe's security" and demonstrating the Commission's unwavering commitment to its geopolitical goals. This last press release differs greatly, and it is seen that the purpose of Commission is not to advocate geopolitical enlargement but is solely focuses on

normative measures and humanitarian issues regarding the war. In this, the EU stands as global actor with Canada, who is working transnationally and positioning its own diplomacy to act as an actor who is capable of defending justice. This is done by framing, where von der Leyen is discussing about 'stolen childhoods'. Also, in here it is also seen Commission acts as an 'safe guardian' to others, with wordings that require demands such as 'demand accountability' and 'demand sustained international support' illustrate the discursive rhetoric in Commission language, how the language is not solely normative reasoning to the public but advocating that Commission is accountable and strong actor, which is seen in this quote about showing commitment and solidarity to Ukraine, that 'we will bring the world together to demand justice' and 'and ensure those responsible face consequences' (von der Leyen, 2026). This differs from other press releases since here solidarity is linked to humanitarian needs. This shows how the Commission is not only guarding the enlargement processes technical criteria's but also takes a role to protect and guard global justice.

8 Analysis

8.1 Opportunity

The opportunity dimension of the analysis contains observations of the ‘external context of ideas and events that enable or constrain action’ (Bretherton and Vogler, 2006, p. 24). Another measure observed from the opportunity perspective is the opportunities the EU has when there is a ‘match between whatever is salient in the international context and the EU’s ability to contribute by virtue of its internal competences’ (Rauh, 2023, p. 798). The events happening in the world are giving the Commission the opportunity to advocate its reform agenda and enhance its actorness. Therefore, the Commission is not only aiming to events, but it also actively uses this as an opportunity for to advocate the need for the enlargement.

What is interesting in this ‘History is calling once again’ (European Commission, 2024, p. 25) is the linguistics. This observation is that it is a historical metaphor and it also indicates and creates a feeling like it is destiny, taking away the idea that there is a political choice behind actions. That is, it takes away the politicalness of the enlargement. It creates the sense to the reader that this is destiny, and the Union has no choice but to continue. This creates, regarding the actorness part, an opportunity for the Union when external factors are represented as a necessity.

Also, the wordings that the enlargement is ‘moral, political and geostrategic imperative’ (European Commission, 2024) are really strong adjectives which tell the reader about values and the changing nature of enlargement, framing it as a moral obligation.

The next press release tells how the EU takes preparatory steps on financial support for Ukraine and boosting drone production. The President states: ‘Today, we are taking the necessary preparatory steps to mobilize this year’s budget and procure defense equipment, with a focus on Ukraine’s cutting-edge drone industry. With this we send a clear message: the Commission stands ready to move forward’ (von der Leyen, 2026). This investment is not just financial support, but it is also a metaphor of stepping up and saying that this symbolizes that the Commission is ready to move forward. Henna Virkkunen tells in a quote that ‘Today’s decisions mark a significant milestone in operationalizing the EU’s security commitments’, that ‘Ukraine must be in a position of strength’, and that this is a ‘top priority for Europe’s security’ (Virkkunen, 2026). This tells a success story about a significant milestone in operationalizing EU security commitments.

8.2 Presence

Presence contains the actors ability to make itself visible and seemed ‘attractive’ by the others (Dorosh et al., 2025, p. 439), how Commission is making it seem favorable and highlighting its good attributes. It also contains the Commission’s ‘ability to shape the perceptions, expectations and behavior of others’ and ‘presence, which captures the ability of the EU, by virtue of its existence, to exert influence beyond its borders’ (Bretherton & Vogler, 2006, p. 24). This is done by advocating more member states enter to in EU’s market and the more countries are involved in trade and businesses and integrated to EU’s markets, the more it has market power.

The Growth Plan for the Western Balkans is described by Marta Kos as an ‘accelerator into the European family’ (Kos, 2025). There is a metaphor about family and a sense of belonging, and it makes an inclusion and exclusion dimension for the ‘us’ and ‘them’, who belongs to the family and home and who has the sense of belonging to the EU. This tells about actorness, presence, that the

EU is acting as a magnet as access to the EU family, that the EU is a safe and warm place to be and that is something desirable, and it also creates an idea about the EU as a safe place and a desirable place. Furthermore, 2025 enlargement package and 'enlargement partners' is telling about that it's changing their countries' identity by not describing them as third countries, but that the parties are partners, they are part of this process, they are not third countries. They are not distant. They are close. And this presence tells about shaping external partners' views by making a sense of friendliness.

8.3 Capability

The perceived capability of actors involves action or inaction and the means and tools Commission has in order to take aimed actions by 'formulating goals and making decisions' (Dorosh et al., 2025, p. 433) and it includes 'ability to exploit opportunity and capitalize on presence' (Bretherton & Vogler, 2006, p. 24). It involves ability to embrace resource dimension and coherence, collaboration and legitimacy and sticking to common values (Dorosh et al., 2025, p.439).

In the 'Accession to the EU will always be a merit-based process' (European Commission, 2024, p. 26), the phrasing is really conditional, strict and passive. It is creating the Commission a Safe Guardian role where the Commission controls the criteria and tells the member countries that everything is under control through a quality-based process. It also tells candidate countries and actors outside of the EU that EU accession is really strict. This sentence puts the Union on a golden pedestal: it is not something easy to access, but something valuable and attractive that requires a lot of work and real layers. These core values are obligated and desirable; only when candidate states obtain these desired universal values can they become a part of the Union. This tells about the EU's capability and actorness. It has the capability to control this process, showing everybody that they are guarding this.

The 'EU rose to the challenge' (European Commission, 2024) indicates also a historical success, indicating that something has happened before so it can be

done again. It takes a stance with a 'We can do it again' reasoning, almost making a heroic effort for the reader. Regarding actorness, this is how they draw legitimacy from the past to continue as an actor. From the capability perspective, it talks about resilience, showing confidence that because we have done this before, we have the capabilities to do it now.

9 Discussion

The rhetorical choices identified in the analysis are not merely words; they carry profound meanings that shape global politics and economies (Fairclough, 2013, p. 11). They play a role in determining how billions of euros are allocated and how future events are framed. A key rhetorical aspect is that what the Commission places on the media agenda dictates what is at stake—not only within European countries but also in broader global relations. The words and issues prioritized on the agenda actively shape the roles of international actors and events. It is also essential to briefly examine the intended audience of these press releases. While the material analysis might initially suggest that these communications are primarily aimed at the candidate countries themselves, the underlying strategic reasons are much more far-reaching. The messaging is often directed at current member states to build cohesion and justify the Commission's agenda (Lindholm, 2008, p. 34; Andone, 2016, p. 83). Overall, it is evident that the Commission is shifting its role from being primarily a financial aid provider, humanitarian helper, and market power to becoming a strategic global and geopolitical actor through the enlargement agenda (Dorosh et al., 2025, p. 431). This identity shift illustrates that the Commission is not acting as a passive entity, but rather as a rational actor that does not merely react to crises but actively uses them to advocate its own position and agenda in the global sphere (Michaels, 2022, p. 105). This is strongly indicated in the material, for example, where President von der Leyen has emphasized that the EU is not only the 'top donor' but a 'key investor' in Ukraine's future (von der Leyen, 2025). The Commission utilizes mechanisms such as the Ukraine Facility and the Western Balkans Growth Plan as instruments through which candidate countries are integrated to be a part of the EU's security and value systems. Furthermore, it is seen that the strong and warm 'family' metaphor completely changes when the Commission talks about Turkey: it becomes 'a strategic partnership' with relations based on transactions.

10 Conclusion

Overall, it is evident that the Commission is advocating also its own agenda, which is intrinsically linked to strengthening its own actorness and position (Bretherton and Vogler, 2006, p. 24). However, it is also a direct response to global events, framed as a necessity. A key dimension of this analysis was to examine whether the Commission discusses its own goals, the member states' goals, or the future member states' goals, and whether this is presented as an obligation. The enlargement instruments and press releases demonstrate that the European Commission is effectively enhancing its actorness and capability, not only through rhetoric but with concrete measurements.

It is definitely seen that the Ukrainian crisis, in particular, has changed the rhetoric of the Commission's technocratic language: it is warmer, and in times of crisis, it aims to create a sense of belongingness by stating that new member states are already anchored to the 'European family' (Kos, 2025). This Europeanization is visible in family metaphors, portraying that the EU's values are universally good and that accession to the Union is a trophy and a triumph, making it an attractive and desirable goal for the candidate states. It also simultaneously notes to current member states that everyone benefits from this and that these are investments in everyone's shared futures (von der Leyen, 2025). Based on previous academic and scholarly work, the EU's enlargement is not merely a technical process, but a security and geopolitical necessity.

By utilizing the concept of actor performance, it can be observed how the EU is not only an actor but how it executes its powers and what kind of outcomes and effects its actions actually have (Rhinard and Sjöstedt, 2019, p. 21). Furthermore, this can be examined as an instrument to see how the Commission advocates its own interests and beliefs through market initiatives and by shaping others' behaviour to match and benefit the Commission (Gstöhl and Schunz, 2021, p. 3).

The goal of this research was to see how the European Union's institutional framework or mechanisms enable further advancement of the European Commission's priorities in the special case of EU enlargement. Again, it was seen that the Commission is using its communication as a tool to further advocate its power. Even if it is not explicitly clear in the context, combined with realist constructivist methods in the analysis, the underlying discourses revealed how it uses enlargement as a mechanism to enhance its capability and presence. It was seen that this technical process of enlargement carries a bigger and more in-depth meaning. It is not simply a question of enlarging the land; it has become not only a technocratic process, but also a cultural, political, and existential inevitable necessity that the Commission has to answer and advocate for other people to support.

The second observed pattern was seeing the shift from 'top donor' to 'key investor', and how the Commission advances its own role. They were not seen just as donors; they were also seen to have power motives, and it was seen how they were advocating their own interests and power position, and this was advocated to be for everyone's safety.

It was also seen how the power was advocated as the 'safe guardian' which follows criteria. The 'merit based process' was seen as a process to advocate to the member states that they have everything under control. By constantly repeating that accession will always be a merit-based process, the Commission discursively positions itself as a 'safe guardian'. It places EU membership on a golden pedestal, portraying the Union's universal values as highly desirable while reassuring current member states of its strict institutional capability and control over of the process. The core values of the Unions are the ones which are obligated and desirable and only when candidate states obtain these desired universal values can they become a part of the Union. This tells about the EU's capability and actorness. It has the capability to control this process, showing everybody that they are 'guarding' this.

It was also seen in the Europeanization and building the common 'we'. We are not just partners but building a common 'European family' which created inclusion, and this inclusion meant that EU's values were something desirable, and this is creating the attractiveness of the EU. Also, in the analysis, it was seen how crises were advanced as an opportunity and or as a call of history. At the same time, the direct responses to global events were also framed as a necessity. Dimension of this analysis was to examine whether the Commission discusses its own goals, the member states' goals, or the future member states' goals, and whether this is presented as an obligation or opportunity.

The enlargement instruments and press releases demonstrate that the European Commission is effectively enhancing its actorness and capability, not only through rhetoric but with concrete measurements. It is definitely seen that the Ukrainian crisis has changed the rhetoric of the Commission's technocratic language: it is warmer, and in times of crisis, it aims to create a sense of belongingness by stating that new member states are already anchored to the 'European family'. The Europeanization is visible in family metaphors and show that the EU's values are universally good and that the accession to the Union is a triumph, making it an attractive and desirable goal also for the candidate states.

It also simultaneously notes to current member states that everyone benefits from the enlargement and the monetary and cultural cohesion, and that these are investments in everyone's shared futures. Based on previous academic and scholarly work, it is viewed that EU's enlargement is not merely a technical process but framed as security and geopolitical necessity which also include cultural and existential value questions. Furthermore, regarding the EU's market politics, this can be examined as an instrument to see how the Commission advocates its own interests and beliefs through market initiatives and by shaping others' behavior to match and benefit the Commission.

With all this in mind, this all shows that the EU's enlargement is not solely based on humanitarian needs but is clearly grounded in geopolitical and strategic foreign policy. Enhancing bureaucracy and forming alliances with external partners is advocated in terms of the Commission's and member states' own safety and

economic security. Existential values behind enlargement were seen with discursive meanings and identified to be related to EU's own survival and identity by position it as an 'matter of historical imperative'. The distinctive realist and critical approach—where the Commission is not only seen as a normative and altruistic humanitarian actor, and not just solely having a focus on the candidate countries in the enlargement agenda—reveals the significant shift in how the European Commission is actively evolving its own actorness in times of crisis.

Looking to the future, the European Commission 2026 work program states that the Commission will soon present 'pre-enlargement policy reviews' (European Commission, 2026). The transformation is recognized by other institutions; as the European Parliament states in its March 2026, it 'welcomes the forthcoming pre-enlargement policy reviews as an essential step in preparing the Union for new members' (European Parliament, 2026). The discursive and strategic evolution of the Commission's actorness is an ongoing process, and the research illustrated its importance in shaping Commissions actorness and that this evolution will continue to shape the European security framework in the years to come.

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