

In-between a dream and a nightmare? Assessing the impact of ‘Wartime Politicisation’ on EU enlargement policy after 2022

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Abstract

The brutal start of Russia’s invasion in Ukraine in February 2022 had numerous unexpected consequences. One of them was that it brought enlargement back at the top of EU’s agenda. This was also followed by a revitalisation of EU’s own internal dilemma between prioritising deepening or widening, together with the increasing contradictions between member states on how should enlargement proceed. It is thus relevant to assess whether this geopolitical shift had an overall positive or negative impact on the EU. In this context, the main aim of the article is to assess the various forms of ‘wartime politicisation’ between 2022 and 2024 among the main policy actors in EU’s public sphere around the topic of advancing its enlargement policy. In end, the article demonstrates that ‘wartime politicisation’ can have both stabilizing and destabilizing effects on EU and discusses future avenues of research.

Keywords: enlargement, European Union, politicisation, Ukraine, war, Western Balkans

Introduction

“Enlargement is no longer a dream!(...) I believe we must be ready - on both sides - by 2030 to enlarge”. This was a ground-breaking statement made by Charles Michel, European Council President, at the Bled Strategic Forum in August 2023 (European Council, 2023). The part that makes this sentence particularly provocative is the fact that this is the first time when an EU official advances publicly a date for potential future EU accession, namely 2030. Another part is its comparative temporal dimension – ‘no longer’- which can be interpreted as an official recognition that enlargement was until that point ‘a dream’, at least from EU’s perspective. This political observation made by a high-level EU figure also confirmed that in the shadow of the war in Ukraine, a new chapter of EU enlargement policy began, transforming it more into a reality than a ‘dream’. Starting from this policy metaphor, it is relevant to assess the main geopolitical shifts that favoured bold and

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unprecedented enlargement decisions that might have pervasive effects for many years to come in reshaping EU's neighbourhood.

Two major decisions illustrate how geopolitical shifts influenced EU's enlargement policy. In June 2022 EU leaders took the historical decision to grant the two former Eastern Partnership (EaP hereafter) countries Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova candidate status, and this was followed in December 2023 by another historic decision to open EU accession talks with the two countries. Both decisions, that were unthinkable before February 2022, have recalibrated the policy and scholarly debates on EU enlargement and its future evolutions. Moreover, these events also redrew attention to the EU's other candidate countries from the Western Balkans, long-awaiting to advance in the EU accession process for the last 15 years.

The war in Ukraine was a game changer for the countries in the region: four of them have already started accession negotiations (Albania, North Macedonia in July 2022, while Montenegro, and Serbia were already in negotiations for almost a decade), one has received candidate status and finally started negotiations in March 2024 (Bosnia and Herzegovina BiH hereafter), and the last has formally applied for membership and remained waiting for EU's response (Kosovo¹). And what is more important, this rapid and unpredictable series of events came after almost a decade of stagnation in these countries' EU accession, as it has slowed down and even lost its importance on EU's priority list soon after Croatia's accession in 2013. In this context EU's decision to include the three former Associated Trio from the Eastern Neighbourhood together with the Western Balkans (WB hereafter) as candidate countries, under the same 'treatment' of Copenhagen criteria and staged process of attaining membership, received ambivalent reactions among various policy actors. On one hand this decision was met with enthusiasm and expression of solidarity and support for Ukraine and the other countries threatened by the Russian Federation military moves, on the other hand there were voices inside the EU that started to contest this perspective and even to try to block further steps in the process (like Hungary's moves against EU's military support for Ukraine in 2023). Moreover, these decisions had their share of controversy and also triggered a debate on internal reform that would prepare the EU for future enlargement that put the Union's cohesion to the test. In this context, it is relevant to assess whether this momentum was perceived by the major actors in EU policy making more of a 'dream' or a 'nightmare' or something in between - to continue with Charles Michel's metaphor mentioned in the opening.

Scholarly debates argued that one can recognise politicisation when there is an 'increase in polarisation of opinions, interests or values and the extent to which they are publicly advanced towards the process of policy formulation within the EU' (De Wilde, 2011, p. 566). As such, the main assumption of this analysis is that the

¹ This designation is without prejudice to positions on status and is in line with UNSCR 1244 and the ICJ opinion on Kosovo Declaration of Independence.

public debates around the ways in which the enlargement process with the new candidates should continue in the context of Russia's aggression in Ukraine became an arena for increasing politicisation in the EU. Therefore, it is relevant to map the main positions in this debate and the main forms of politicisation around the topic of enlargement between 2022 and 2024.

There is an extensive literature studying how different EU crises have influenced the EU decision-making processes and the outcomes of European integration through politicisation (Brack & Gürkan, 2021; Ferrara & Kriesi, 2021). I opted for a postfunctionalist theoretical framework for the current analysis, as it allows to identify the actors, the mechanisms and the outcomes of politicisation in the specific context of EU's enlargement policy. This way, at the theoretical level the article also builds on previous works on politicisation inside the EU (Butnaru Troncotă & Ioniță, 2022; Haapala & Oleart, 2022). In order to tackle this aspect, it is important to focus mainly on the changes in the policymaking processes that were generated by the war in Ukraine in the field of EU enlargement. By empirically examining Costa's (2018) three scope conditions of politicisation in the context of EU enlargement policy between 2022 and 2024, the article brings novelty by outlining the ways in which 'wartime politicisation' can have both stabilizing and destabilizing effects on EU.

The article proceeds as follows: first, it provides the theoretical synthesis of the main literature on politicisation inside EU in the context of multiple crises and their consequences; second, it shortly presents the methodology, third it sets the scene by analysing how enlargement was politicised before the war in Ukraine and in the fourth section it delves into the main case study along the three main categories, with a specific focus on the main policy proposals on EU reform, as well as debates around its decisions between 2022 and 2024. In the end, the article concludes by discussing the theoretical and policy implications of these findings and proposes avenues for future research.

1. State of the art on politicisation during EU 'poly-crisis'

The fact that European integration has become increasingly politicised in the course of the recent decades is a commonly agreed observation in the mainstream EU studies literature (Börzel & Risse, 2020; De Wilde, 2011; De Wilde et al., 2015; Grande & Hutter, 2015; Hodson & Puetter, 2019; Hutter et al., 2016; Kauppi et al., 2016; Statham & Trenz, 2013; Zürn, 2019). This section summarises a selected politicisation scholarship on the normative debates about how it impacted European integration, as well as the connections between the specificity of EU crises and the outcomes of politicisation that were under scholarly review.

Studies on politicisation started from the observation that European integration has become over the years an increasingly salient and controversial topic in domestic politics in Member States (MS, henceforth). Soon it evolved as a research agenda on

its own, most visibly after the Eurozone and sovereign debt crises, in connection to growing Euroscepticism and public contestation over the EU. For the last decade, this polysemic concept was at the core of the debates between new intergovernmentalism, neo- and post-functionalists (Wallace et al., 2020). One of the biggest challenges when analysing it was that it takes different forms across time and space and across different EU levels of governance.

Postfunctionalist authors brought consistent contributions to the conceptual clarification of politicisation. In one of the most important contributions on the topic, Hooghe and Marks (2009) regard politicisation as a fundamentally constraining force for the integration process. They explained that EU policies have become more prominent and the source of competition in the domestic (party) politics of MS, leading to contestation and even Euroscepticism. Another strand of research has focused on the drivers and mechanisms of politicisation (De Wilde et al., 2015; Grande & Kriesi, 2016) as well as on the differentiated nature of EU politicisation, looking more at the way that it varies across actors, time and context. Zürn (2015; 2019) studied the politicisation effects on the EU political system including decision-making and on specific policies. More recent contributions show that there are national specificities of EU politicisation, as it takes place in different forms and degrees in different EU MS (Haapala & Oleart, 2022; Kaeding et al., 2024; Mercenier et al., 2023).

The concept was discussed as being of an ambivalent nature, with different theoretical strands pointing more towards either the positive or the negative effects it has on EU integration process at large. As suggested by Bressanelli et al. (2020, p. 331), while postfunctionalists tend to see politicisation as a constraint for functional problem solving at EU level, it may also work as an enabling mechanism for political and institutional actors to advance their substantive goals. More empirically rich studies have recently showed effects of the domestic politicisation of EU in France and Germany (Schuette, 2019) or the unexpected effects of politicisation on EU during the Covid-19 crisis (Oleart & Gheyle, 2022).

Another accepted observation in the literature is that different crises impacted EU integration in different ways. The 2010s crises have constituted ‘moments of truth’, in which the EU has experienced a very evident ‘return of politics’ (Van Middelaar, 2020). The literature highlighted that a decade of EU ‘polycrises’ (Zeitlin et al., 2019) brought a more visible and ambivalent politicisation of EU policy making. Scholars in the field argued that EU crises are likely to increase interdependence among EU MS and produce particularly strong demands for policy coordination and intense preferences related to the incurred costs and losses (Schimmelfennig, 2018). Further, Ferrara and Kriesi (2021) argued that diverse combinations of crisis pressures generate four decision-making scenarios in the EU, each of which can be ascribed to different combinations of analytical insights from neofunctionalism, intergovernmentalism, postfunctionalism and federalism. More specifically they showed that crises have the power to change EU policy making

practices. They offered an encompassing theoretical construct linking crisis pressures and integration in the EU, that allows a systematic analysis of actor networks and politicisation dynamics in different crisis situations. Other recent research on politicisation talk in more differentiated terms based on scale, agency, framing and effect on institutions, advancing in the empirical measurement of controversy within and between political arenas (Bremberg et al., 2022; Mercenier et al., 2023).

As it was underlined, the ‘politicisation ‘at the top’ is mostly visible in the increasingly contestational nature of interactions among EU actors’ (Schmidt, 2019, p. 1019). According to Costa’s (2018) categorisation, there are three main elements of politicisation: 1. ‘the permissiveness of political opportunity structures’, 2. ‘the activities of political entrepreneurs responsible for decisions in the process’ and lastly, 3. the nature of public contestation. To illustrate how politicisation takes place, the case study will follow these three categories in the context of EU enlargement decisions taken between 2022 and 2024 and the policy debates around them. This theoretical perspective was chosen for interpreting the current case study because it helps mapping the main positions around the EU’s strategic decisions on the sensitive topic of enlargement at times of war. This allows to look at various interactions between the top ‘political entrepreneurs’ in the EU (the Commission and the Council – with a focus on two of the most influential MS - Germany and France) on the topic of enlargement and on how EU should be reformed in the context of the most recent enlargement decisions, adding also Eurobarometer data in order to check whether there was public contestation in MS on the topic of enlargement in the studies period.

2. Notes on methodology

In order to assess the impact of what the article calls ‘war time politicisation’ on EU enlargement decision-making processes, there is a need to place politicisation within the EU institutional arena. These aspects are essential during major crises such as the ones associated with the war in Ukraine. Thus, the empirical part includes a selection of different types of data that allowed me to assess the three elements from Costa’s (2018) categorisation in the specific context of enlargement decisions between 2022 and 2024. This period was selected because it represents a timeframe when several crucial Council decisions on enlargement have taken place both in the Eastern Neighborhood and in the WB. I relied on secondary data (public statements of EU’s main ‘political entrepreneurs responsible for decisions in the process’ - Ursula von der Leyen, President of the Commission, Charles Michel President of the Council, and Joseph Borrell, High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy), public documents such as Council conclusions or the Commission’s Progress Reports, whereas for assessing the nature of public

contestation I put together a selection of public opinion data from Eurobarometer and from two independent think tanks.

In terms of actors responsible for politicisation, the intergovernmental level is as important as the supranational one when it comes to enlargement, and it is even stronger in times of global crisis. The nature and the extent of politicisation in the current EU enlargement context remained less explored in the literature. MS' positions on enlargement are determined by significant differences across national contexts and this aspect is important for assessing the impact of wartime politicisation. This is a gap that the study tries to fill, by putting together both the Commission and the Council as relevant elements of the analysis. As such, a specific attention was given to the positions of France, a traditionally reluctant actor on enlargement decisions, that held the centre stage of EU's policy debates in the studied period. First, because it held the Presidency of the Council of the EU in the first months after the war started (from 1 January to 30 June 2022). Second, because it was the one to launch the European Political Community (EPC hereafter) in May 2022 as a response to the war in Ukraine (French Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2022). The EPC became the newest inter-governmental framework intended for foreign policy coordination among like-minded countries inside and outside EU. And third, because it also launched in September 2023 together with Germany a report to reform the EU for the sake of future enlargements, that received a lot of public attention. These specific events will be analysed as instances of 'wartime politicisation' involving key actors when it comes to reshape EU's foreign and security policy, including enlargement – the Commission, the Council and key MS such as France and Germany. To deepen our understanding of how 'wartime politicisation' of EU enlargement policy took place, selected speeches of high-ranked EU officials and their decisions from the studied period were selected in a chronological order (see Annex 1).

3. Insights on how enlargement was politicised before the war in Ukraine

In this section I will argue that politicisation it is not at all something new for the EU and it will be contextualised as it manifested before the start of the war in Ukraine in the winter of 2022.

EU accession is a lengthy, time-consuming and complex process. As a policy issue, enlargement topics involve certain veto points that can be used by some MS and there will be continuous negotiations between EU members with different preferences on the speed and feasibility of enlargement. Hillion (2010; 2015), Elbasani (2013) and others showed how enlargement got less technocratic and became an increasingly politicised process, with decisions taken by the Council, irrespective of the Commission's recommendations. In the case of the WBand especially Turkey studies showed a sort of 'nationalisation' of the enlargement policy with each MS following their own national foreign policy priorities (Balfour

& Stratulat, 2015; KerLindsay et al., 2017). Moreover, politicisation increased also because some MS' constitutions require a referendum for ratification of a new accession treaty, which leaves future membership decisions in the hands of national electorates, not only at the decision of the states in the Council. Consequently, the lack of progress in EU enlargement to the WB has undermined the credibility of the EU and the effectiveness of its enlargement policy (Fouéré, 2022).

Additionally, Bélanger and Schimmelfennig (2021) showed that the enlargement discourse was significantly more restrictive during the 2010s, with the enlargement process losing salience and becoming increasingly contested in national Parliaments of MS. Moreover, scholars showed that this reluctance to enlargement in some MS is the result of 'domestic politicisation' that differs from one country to another (Economides et al., 2024; Wunsch & Olszewska, 2022). This more politicised situation was also facilitated by the so-called 'national constitutional requirements', that were included in Article 49 (2) TEU, bringing tighter parliamentary control France, implying that future accession should be ratified by referendum or in the case of Germany Bundestag's opinion is required before opening accession (Hillion, 2015, p. 27).

After the last enlargement wave with Croatia in 2013, several MS called for a 'halt' in the process, accusing forms of 'enlargement fatigue'. In 2014 President Juncker infamously announced that for the 5 years of his mandate EU would not take any major decision on enlargement and that had a great negative impact on demotivating the candidate countries in the WB to speed up reforms in the process (Troncotă, 2014). Next, more substantial internal discussion in the EU on the direction and format for an EU fit for the future enlargements were included as part of the Future of Europe debates (2017-2019) and further as part of the Conference on the Future of Europe (2019-2022).

Out of all the main stages of EU accession, opening negotiations with candidate countries is one of the most important and it is not simply a political decision following a unanimous agreement in the Council. In fact, the decision of opening negotiations with a candidate country is crucial because it is followed by a lengthy process of normative harmonisation to the *acquis* that requires big efforts from candidate countries and this process is supervised by the European Commission. France took the forefront of this debate, using also its veto in the Council to block opening negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia in November 2019. After Greece's two-decade long veto against North Macedonia on the name issue, the French veto was one of the strongest gesture of 'politicising enlargement' that a state could do to affect the course of the EU accession process. This was followed in 2020 by another rather unexpected veto against North Macedonia this time by Bulgaria.

Before the French and the Bulgarian vetoes, based on its annual 'technical' assessment on the status of reforms, the Commission offered recommendations to the Council to open negotiations with both Albania and North Macedonia (European

Commission, 2019). But the MS' opposition proved that certain 'technical issues' of EU accession in candidate countries are turned into political matters that affect MS' national interests (and this is when politicisation takes place). Issues such as the low pace of rule of law reforms in Albania, lack of electoral reform in BiH or the stalemate in the normalization process between Serbia and Kosovo were more prone to polarization, contestation, resistance and ultimately the use of *veto* in the Council, behind closed doors, where the Commission has no more power.

More visibly since the financial and migration crises, the EU has proved more divided and inward-looking. As such, the (perceived) 'absorption capacity' of the EU has deteriorated. This capacity to absorb new members, also known as 'the fourth Copenhagen criteria' lead several researchers to conclude that EU developed a rather more 'transactional' approach of the EU accession with the WB countries determined by the interests of individual MS (Stratulat et al., 2021). The main argument to be stressed here is that EU's role transformed in its interactions with the candidates from the WB from a 'transformative power' (Moise, 2015) to a 'transactional power' influenced by MS' attempts to block enlargement decisions. This approach has favored the politicisation of enlargement process, either by adding extra demands to or by compromising on the formal accession criteria for the already very weak states from the Western Balkans. In many EU MS there has been a strong debate about enlargement, but the slow process of negotiations with the countries in the region, and the use of veto powers in the European Council against continuing accession talks with Albania and North Macedonia, have also caused loss of credibility. Overall, in the beginning of 2022 the mood around EU enlargement was at one of its lowest levels in a decade.

4. Forms of 'wartime politicisation' of EU enlargement policy between 2022 and 2024

4.1. The war in Ukraine as a 'political opportunity structure' for membership talks

It is important to assess the types of policymaking processes that were generated by such a disruptive event as the war in Ukraine in the field of EU enlargement. Looking at a chronology of all relevant events and EU high-level decisions in the field of enlargement between 2022 and 2024 (see Annex 1), we can easily argue that such a situation was unprecedented. Despite its tragedies and military losses, the war in Ukraine represented a 'political opportunity structure' that was used as such by the countries interested in gaining a future EU membership.

One first argument in this line of thought is the speed with which strategic decisions were taken in less than a few months. Just days after the Russian invasion started in Ukraine, the country applied for EU membership, followed in a few days by Republic of Moldova and in March by Georgia, all countries that were included

in the EaP and did not have a membership perspective before 2022. Next, the European Council in June 2022 took the first historic decision, by granting Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova candidacy status. In November 2022 the Commission recommended the Council to offer candidacy status also to BiH in its Progress Reports (European Commission, 2022) and in December 2022 the European Council granted BiH candidacy status. This was somehow an unexpected decision, not only because the country was affected by security challenges and political contestation in Republika Srpska, threats that intensified after February 2022, but also because the country was waiting for this decision since 2018 but did not fulfil EU's requirements. The politicisation intensified also when, just few days after the European Council, encouraged by its decision on BiH, Kosovo too applied for membership, being in the most complicated position of all because since the unilateral declaration of independence from Belgrade in 2008 five EU MS (Cyprus, Greece, Romania, Spain, and Slovakia) continue to fail to recognize it as a sovereign state.

Then, only a year and a half after being granted candidacy, in November 2023 the Commission submitted its progress report on the new candidate states (European Commission, 2023b), recommending the Council to start negotiations with Ukraine, Republic of Moldova and BiH (for the last one only if conditions are met). In September 2023, as part of the preparations for the December Council - France and Germany jointly published an expert report with recommendations for EU reform to be fit for enlargement (Costa et al., 2023).

In the end, the second historical decision was taken in December 2023 when the European Council agreed to official open accession talks with Ukraine, while the Commission has also recommended negotiations with Moldova and granting Georgia candidate status. This unprecedented speed of strategic decisions taken by the EU on enlargement raised old concerns among MS whether this policy remains a purely 'merit based process' as it was defined over the last years or it transformed into a geopolitical and strategic imperative that should look more at the strategic threats both the candidates and the EU are facing from the Russian invasion rather than on strict implementation of enlargement conditionality.

Thus, in just a few months EU's enlargement policy grew from 7 countries (the WB and Turkey) to 10 (adding Ukraine, Republic of Moldova and Georgia). That would actually be 9 countries, as Turkey has in fact frozen the accession process over the last years. Out of these 9 only 2 are in full process of enlargement negotiations (Serbia and Montenegro, out of which only Montenegro seems determined to close all chapters in the next years), while Albania and North Macedonia are just in the first preliminary phase of the process, not fully is also because of Bulgaria's conditions to North Macedonia. The other 5 countries left (Ukraine, Georgia, Moldova, BiH and Kosovo) are faced with more unpredictable situations, due to internal political crisis and the full-scale war in the case of Ukraine. Each of them is challenged internally by breakaway regions/ entities that contest

their sovereignty under pro-Russian influence, not being able to exercise full authority over parts of their territory.

However, this series of symbolic gestures of support and solidarity towards Ukraine and the other countries created momentum for something that some MS were already lobbying inside the EU for many years – a needed reform of the enlargement process *per se* and this also restarted the discussion about the role of the EU as a geopolitical actor. This, way, the war in Ukraine has led to a reassessment of approaches to the EU in a number of MS. However, it is important to highlight that this disclosure of European consensus of the Council on offering Ukraine and Moldova EU candidate status should not be interpreted automatically as a common position on the EU's capacity to take in new members. The war also showed the negative consequences of this geopolitical shift that marked EU's enlargement policy. The period between 2022 and 2023 has also visibly heightened instability in the WB, with Serbia being the only country that refused to join EU sanctions on Russia, opening new security crisis in Kosovo and with political crisis and threats of secession in BiH (Butnaru Troncoță & Ghincea, 2024). This is how we can explain EU's shift on Bosnia. The fact that for more than six years the Council did not agree not even to offer candidacy to BiH suggests that in the context of war on European soil the EU no longer wants to keep countries waiting indefinitely (even if they did not respect formal conditionality) but this also showed EU's firm engagement to halt Russian interference in the Western Balkans.

EU is also required to reform its complex decision-making process and get over its internal divisions in order to be able to move forward towards a 30+ union. Both these crucial topics became even more complicated as they occurred at the same and EU is expected to find solutions to both in order to advance with its enlargement commitments. Moreover, new models for 'staged accession' have been proposed (Emerson et al., 2022) that answered both to the concerns of candidate countries for visible progress and to MS' requests for maintaining a strict oversight of rule of law reforms.

These internal debates provoked by the war in Ukraine and by the decisions to start negotiations with Ukraine and Republic of Moldova produced a visible division in terms of foreign policy preferences inside the Council. This was particularly visible in France's proposal of the EPC (from May 2022) and in the context of the Franco-German Report on reforming the EU (from September 2023). These initiatives have developed at the same time with the awakening of a more vocal 'geopolitical EU' in war times (Džankić et al., 2023; Youngs, 2022).

4.2. The main 'political entrepreneurs' responsible for crucial decisions on enlargement – between discourses and actions

The actors that have the highest level of authority in a certain policy field are the ones responsible for its politicisation. That is why we need to have a closer look

at the institutional set up in the field of enlargement in order to discuss what changed after 2022.

The crucial decisions on enlargement are taken by all 27 MS in the European Council. The Commission has traditionally been responsible for carrying out the main administrative-technical aspects of the accession process and it is more often associated with managing the enlargement policy (through its specific Directorate General – DG NEAR). These aspects make EU enlargement not only very geopolitical by its nature, but also raising numerous different political positions. As such, enlargement policy is prone to contestation and a certain power competition between the supranational bodies and the MS, either in terms of when, how or even if EU should continue to receive new members. Molbæk-Steensig argued that “enlargement has (...) moved from the status of *doxa*, a key element in the purpose and *raison d'être* for the EU, to a politicised object that can be discussed and contested in the public fora. Such a politicisation could mean movement from high politics to low politics” (2017, p. 278). In this sense, Mayrgündter (2015) also talks about the paradox of ‘intergovernmental supranationalism’ as the prevailing logic of action in the EU enlargement policy, where both community and national elements are present, with a slightly stronger propensity towards the community dimension than to the intergovernmental one.

The main strategic debates that dominated EU public sphere on the topic of enlargement between 2022 and 2024 implied contrasting positions of various actors regarding the ‘speed’ of the accession process. Some MS advocated for the EU to adapt its enlargement procedures to the ‘wartime’ context, so they supported ‘a speedy accession’ that would be more suitable to the ever-changing geopolitical landscape produced by the war in Ukraine and this model is the so-called ‘fast-track’ accession. Other MS, with a history of already assumed enlargement reluctance, continued to support the need for EU to maintain its rigorous and meritocratic conditionality system no matter the situation the candidates are facing, and that includes a military invasion, and this could be considered a continuation of the status quo that was known to be severely affected by ‘enlargement fatigue’ (the so-called ‘business as usual’ accession).

A closer look is needed on the position of France and its shifts after the war in Ukraine, as they had crucial importance for the unanimity in the Council. After France blocked the opening of negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia in 2019, it became evident that enlargement talks will become more political and less technical. The French position came after that with a series of proposals to reform enlargement in a Non-paper published in November 2019, where it stressed that it needs to focus more on economic investments during the accession talks and better political engagement with leaders of aspiring countries. Wunsch (2017) showed that France’s hesitant stance on EU enlargement towards the Balkans has a long history. Already in 1989, former French President Mitterrand expressed fears of Central and Eastern European countries joining the European Community at the time.

In May 2022 the French EU Presidency launched the EPC which was initially interpreted as a ‘two-tier’ Europe. The EPC was defined as a new intergovernmental forum for political and strategic decisions and its objective would be to foster political dialogue and cooperation to address issues of common interest so as to strengthen the security, stability and prosperity between EU MS and Non-EU MS who share the same European values. The EPC functioned under three head of states summits (organized in Prague (2022), in Chisinau and in Granada in 2023). The initiative was not received with great enthusiasm by the candidate countries. Some critics of this intergovernmental political project have argued that France is trying to propose ‘possible alternatives’ to the enlargement process to mask its refusal to support certain candidate states in the integration process (Morillas, 2022). Analysts described the French initiative as ‘an effort to bind Europeans together geopolitically in times of increasing great power rivalry’, but also expressed fears that the EPC could be used to keep Ukraine out of the EU, recalling the Western Balkans’ own lengthy path towards European integration. (ibidem).

The European Council conclusions from June 2022 expressed an option for a ‘gradual approach’ with the new candidates, stating that building on the revised methodology, the European Council invites the Commission, the High Representative and the Council to further advance the gradual integration between the European Union and the region already during the enlargement process itself in a reversible and merit-based manner’ (European Council, 2022).

EU High Representative Borrell has sparked a lot of debate regarding EU’s geopolitical awakening with a phrase he used during his hearing in October 2019 in the European Parliament, namely that Europeans had ‘to learn to speak the language of power’ (Borrell, 2020). In March 2022, only few weeks after the war started, he revised this phrase by explaining why EU integration model based on rejecting power politics and de-politicising all essential matters is not sustainable anymore in the current geostrategic context: ‘(..)the EU grappled with various crises and shocks: the financial and euro crises, the migration crisis and Brexit. All these triggered intensely political debates about the nature of the EU and the sources of solidarity and legitimacy. These could not be solved with the usual EU tactic of de-politicisation and technical fixes and market-based solutions.’ (Borrell, 2022). He added also bluntly the new vision of EU foreign policy: ‘The war against Ukraine has made it clear that in a world of power politics we need to build a greater capacity to defend ourselves. Yes, this includes military means, and we need to develop them more. But the essence of what the EU did in this crisis was to use all policies and levers – which remain mainly economic and regulatory in nature – as instruments of power’ (ibidem).

This was complemented by European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen that for the time placed the Balkans together with the Eastern neighborhood countries in May 2022 in her third SOTEU speech: ‘So I want the people of the Western Balkans, of Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia to know: You are part of our

family, your future is in our Union, and our Union is not complete without you! We have also seen that there is a need to reach out to the countries of Europe – beyond the accession process. This is why I support the call for a European Political Community – and we will set out our ideas to the European Council.’ (European Commission, 2022).

At the MS’ level the message also targeted the need for reform of current decision-making tools. In his Prague Speech in August 2022, German Chancellor Olaf Scholz called for a “gradual transition” to more majority decisions, for example in foreign and tax policy (Scholz, 2022). This materialised in September 2023, when a Franco-German group of experts presented proposals for the enlargement and reform of the EU, including a transition to QMV for all EU policy decisions. In December, the EU-27 agreed not only to begin accession negotiations with Ukraine and Moldova, but also that the EU would have to be reformed in the coming legislative period in order to strengthen its ability to act. However, the Council did not explicitly agree on what these reforms should look like and whether they should include more majority decisions. In addition, in a separate initiative with Slovenia, Germany presented the idea of introducing QMV for technical decisions during the enlargement process – but not for major political decisions such as admitting countries to the EU.

Moreover, in 2023 a wide debate emerged inside EU about the ways in which EU should prepare for adding new members, especially ones with such particular unsolved issues such as the Eastern neighbourhood countries and the WB. Beyond the displays of solidarity shown in the context of offering consistent financial and military help to Ukraine, certain divisions among MS about how enlargement should further proceed became more and more visible.

Paving the way for their proposals on how to proceed further, in his speech at GLOBSEC in Bratislava on 31 May 2023, President Macron claimed that the EU needed to enlarge and “be rethought very extensively with regard to its governance and its aims.” (French Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2023). In the same public events, Emmanuel Macron emphasized that this was a critical moment “of theoretical and geopolitical clarification of our European Union.” (ibidem). Published in September 2023, the report of the Franco-German working group on the EU institutional reform proposes policies and reforms to make the EU institutions ‘enlargement-ready’. It includes several possible ways to run a larger EU, and of the most debated proposals was giving up the rule of unanimity in the Council and move towards more majority voting. The proposal discusses various solutions such as rebalancing the qualified majority threshold to benefit smaller EU countries using the already existing ‘passerelle clauses’.

With this document issued before the Grenada Council, the internal EU debate on the expansion of majority decision-making entered in 2023 in a new round. Germany is the country that most visibly tried to build a coalition in favour of more majority decisions in light of the difficult decision-making process concerning

foreign and security policy, and the prospect of future EU enlargement. In 2023 a “Group of Friends on Qualified Majority Voting in EU Common Foreign and Security Policy” was formed (Auswaertiges Amt, 2023). This included 11 MS, (including the co-initiator Germany) but also Belgium, Spain, the Netherlands, Denmark, Finland or Slovenia. This ‘Group of Friends’s main task remained to convince all 27 EU states to be in favour of expanding QMV system on topics of foreign policy, including the more sensitive topic of enlargement.

Disagreements between MS stemmed from the strategic fears of small and medium-sized states that large states, namely Germany and France, could dominate EU foreign policy decision-making. Why do some MS oppose such a formula? One simple reason is their population size and the fears that the countries with the largest populations in the EU - Germany and France - would only need a few MS to manage a so-called ‘blockade minority’ to take a decision (estimated of at least 35 % of the represented EU population from at least four states). This reformed system would require smaller states either to always take large states as partners or to get on board many smaller ones. Therefore, for the smaller states the efforts needed into convincing so many other states in building coalitions and protecting their own interest would be exhausting.

Before the Council in December 2023, the deep divisions between MS showed also the increased level of politicisation around the topic of enlargement. On one hand, Austria’s Foreign Minister warned the EU not to forget the Western Balkans, while looking at the region “with a magnifying glass” and at Ukraine with “rose-tinted glasses.” (Hall, 2023). On the other hand, Hungary was another actor actively engaged in politicisation of enlargement as it threatened to condition its endorsement of Ukraine’s accession talks on unblocking the frozen transfers from the EU budget, including the post-Covid Next Generation EU instrument (Camut, 2023). Additionally, there were many fears also that Netherlands under Geert Wilders could easily turn into a ‘brakeman’ of the process, linking enlargement with increased migration (Bechev, 2023). Also, in the beginning of 2024, at the start of the Belgian Presidency of the Council of the EU, in a separate initiative with Slovenia, Germany presented the idea of introducing QMV for technical decisions during the enlargement process – but not for major political decisions such as admitting countries to the EU (Government of Slovenia, 2024). It is really interesting that with this occasion, Slovenian State Secretary Marko Štucin legitimized this proposal by trying to tone down politicisation: “Introducing some technical changes at certain stages of decision-making could speed up the accession negotiations of countries wishing to join the European Union. This would prevent the over-politicisation of the accession process and strengthen it. In the current geostrategic context, the further enlargement of the EU is our priority” (ibidem).

Overall, these internal reforms required to make EU fit for the next enlargement wave remain a divisive issue inside the Union for the studied period, and have engaged a wide array of policy actors who took part in this debate.

4.3. Public contestation of enlargement in prominent MS

In order to have a full picture of ‘wartime politicisation of enlargement’ we need also to include citizen perceptions in some of the most influential MS. Postfunctionalist theory tells us that the more controversies a policy issue sparks among citizens, and the more contested it is, the more politicized that issue becomes. This section presents public opinion polls (Eurobarometer and two other independent bodies) in order to see if and how citizens’ perceptions on enlargement shifted after February 2022. The data exposes a diversity of attitudes towards enlargement, confirming the postfunctionalist premise that enlargement continued to remain a controversial and thus more politicised topic in EU citizens’ perceptions.

Eurobarometer data from June 2023 shows a sobering picture: only 35% French respondents and 42% of German respondents favour enlargement, in the context where at EU level 53% are for and 37% against. Other countries have strong support for enlargement - 67% of Polish citizens, 72% of Croatian citizens, 74% of Spanish citizens, 77% of Lithuanian citizens (the highest level), favour enlargement. Austrian citizens continue to have the least favourable rating at 29% (European Commission, 2023a).

The European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR), a think tank funded by the EU also conducted its own opinion poll in only six EU MS (Austria, Denmark, France, Germany, Poland, and Romania), and published the results at the end of 2023 (ECFR, 2023). The results show a similar picture as the Eurobarometer dominated by mixed feelings among EU citizens towards the potential accession of Ukraine, Moldova and the WB. Similarly with the Eurobarometer data, the poll suggests that there is a clear divide between ‘old’ and ‘new’ EU members on the timing of any enlargement of the bloc. A prevailing negative view on enlargement is visible in Austria, Denmark, Germany and France, compared to Romania and Poland, where support for enlargement is strong. Moreover, the poll found that, while there is considerable support for Ukraine, there is a lesser support for Moldova and Montenegro for example.

One important observation here is that at the level of public opinion and citizen perceptions, France is among the group of countries whose inhabitants are the least favourable to enlargement. This also confirms why France was one of the most active countries in the contestation and further politicisation of enlargement between 2022 and 2024. Moreover, the French citizens belong for decades to the group of Europeans with the most negative attitudes towards the EU’s expansion and this is not a new phenomenon. This became evident from opposing the two British bids for accession in the 1960s to the Eastern enlargements of 2004 and 2007 and most recently to the French reluctance for opening negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia, that culminated also with most recent popular opposition to further enlargement, as these polls show.

Another independent think tank, ‘More in Common’ published its own opinion poll in March 2024, including data only from 4 countries – France, Germany, Poland and Spain. The topic of enlargement was among the main topics of the survey. One of their main conclusions was that most citizens view enlargement not through the lens of principles or solidarity, but of national interest. In France only 34% support Ukraine’s EU membership, and this is less than the 40% in Germany. The other two countries show a slight stronger support - 54% in Spain, 53% in Poland (More in Common, 2024). Compared to all the other countries, France has the lowest level of support for Ukraine’s EU accession (with almost 20% less than in Poland for example) and also the lowest when it comes to enlargement of other countries in general (even lower than for Ukraine – 27%).

Overall, these different opinion polls confirm that the divisions that resurfaced in the Council’s decisions between 2022 and 2024 on how to reform enlargement policy originate in the decreasing support for the topic within certain MS electorates – such as in France and Germany.

Conclusions

Driven by the new geopolitical needs stemming from the brutal full-scale war in Ukraine started in February 2022, the EU enlargement policy has come back on EU’s priority list. In this new geopolitical reality, MS saw their role in the enlargement process growing, as well as the need for ensuring enlargement reform. The main aim of the article was to assess the various forms of politicisation present among the main policy actors in EU public sphere around the topic of enlargement after the start of the war in Ukraine.

The new enlargement process as redefined by the war in Ukraine proved to be a bone of contention not only between candidate countries and the EU, but also between MS and this sparked tensions between the Commission and the Council. The article tried to argue that the war in Ukraine clearly affected EU policy making in the field of enlargement and this was visible in political actors’ behaviours and discourses, but also in citizens’ attitudes towards the EU in various ways. One change highlighted by the analysis was the unprecedented speed with which different EU actors processes took snap decisions on enlargement. Another change was the shift of some enlargement sceptic countries and the case of with France was highlighted, as it stopped opposing enlargement directly, but indirectly it proposed together with Germany a reform of the voting system beyond unanimity. Thus, by illustrating the main shifts in the main actors’ views on enlargement, the article aimed to contribute to the expanding postfunctionalist literature on variations of EU politicisation and its policy effects in times of poly crises. The case study to illustrate such a stance focused on EU’s strategic debates on how to conduct its enlargement policy after Russia’s invasion in Ukraine. Thus, the paper stresses the analytical

relevance of changing EU policy narratives in dire times of war and their capacity to legitimise or de-legitimise ways forward for the integration process.

Overlapping crises in the EU such as Eurozone, migration crisis, Brexit, COVID-19 exposed enlargement to various EU inter-institutional power struggles, showcasing that the process does not revolve mainly around the efforts of the countries aspiring to membership for respecting EU conditionality, but also around EU's inner tensions between its different levels of authority and decision-making. Some of the most 'enlargement-sceptic' attitudes became visible in certain MS such as Greece, France and most recently Bulgaria as they vetoed opening negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia.

Consequently, over the past decade EU faded in its strong commitment to advance the enlargement policy particularly in the WB, which negatively impacted on its transformative role and decreasing credibility. This also coincided with the internal debate over the future of the EU (first the future of Europe debates between 2017 and 2019 during the Juncker Commission and next the CoFoE between 2020 and 2022) and these phenomena favoured politicisation of enlargement. The 2022 Russian military attack on Ukraine has emphasized the role of geopolitics in the region by creating new opportunities, but also new challenges for the EU enlargement policy. The MS made a clear political choice in June 2022: that of granting candidate status to Ukraine and Moldova (and next to Georgia and BiH that continued with opening negotiations). The policy debates around these decisions favoured several versions of a somehow new enlargement model, massively influenced by the war in Ukraine that the article called as 'wartime politicisation of enlargement'.

Between 2022 and 2024 the EU passed through a period marked by several strategic decisions that will reshape its foreign policy and its future and it is relevant to get more insights into what changed in this process. In this eventful period the main EU's internal strategic debates focused not of 'if' EU should offer membership perspectives to the new candidates from the Eastern neighbourhood or to BiH, as all actors agreed on the strategic necessity of these decisions in these exceptional circumstances. The greatest concerns focused rather on 'how' the next enlargement would take place in the future and this is where contrasting positions emerged most evidently between MS and between the Commission and the Council. Consequently, several more vocal MS called for a substantial internal discussion on the direction and format for an EU fit for the future enlargement that would combine both Eastern neighbourhood countries and the Western Balkans. Using the postfunctionalist theoretical categories, the article outlined how the politicisation of EU enlargement after the war in Ukraine lead towards the reinforcement of the 'constraining dissensus' in the EU.

As illustrated by the analysis, after 2022 enlargement came under intense geopolitical scrutiny, revealing EU's own internal political games. The war also showed the negative consequences of this geopolitical shift that marked EU's

enlargement policy. The prospect of an EU with 30 or more very diverse members has gained momentum and at the same time it opened debate on the necessary reform of the EU that lead to increasing divisions in the Council. Enlargement remains the EU's strongest geopolitical tool, while it is also its biggest challenge. In the end the article demonstrated that these events placed the enlargement policy under ambivalent effects of politicisation: being both a 'dream' for the countries whose accession process revitalised or gained momentum, but also a 'nightmare' for the more enlargement reluctant MS that expressed diverging opinions. It outlined the ways in which 'wartime politicisation' can have both stabilizing and destabilizing effects on EU but further research on the main mediating factors of this politization are needed for future avenues of research. This is a relevant observation in the context of EU's 2024 European elections and the prospects of enlargement policy remaining high on the agenda in the next EU institutional cycle.

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Annex 1. Chronology of main events and discourses that marked EU Enlargement policy after the beginning of the war in Ukraine, edited by the author

2022	
January	France starts its Presidency of the Council of the European Union
February	War in Ukraine breaks out, Ukraine and Moldova apply for membership
May	France launches the European Political Community
June	European Council - Ukraine and Moldova are granted candidacy status Bulgaria lifts veto on N Macedonia accession negotiations
July	Albania and N Macedonia start negotiations: 1 st intergovernmental conference. Inaugural meetings of the screening process Start of North Macedonia and Bulgaria bilateral negotiations proposed by France
September	Third SOTEU speech of President of the European Commission Von der Leyen
November	European Commission issues 2022 Enlargement Package & Progress Reports
December	EU-Western Balkans summit (Tirana, Albania) European Council: Bosnia and Herzegovina is granted candidacy status
2023	
August	President of European Council Charles Michel announced 2030 as the next year of enlargement at the Bled Strategic Forum
September	French and German launch proposal to reform the EU to facilitate enlargement Last SOTEU speech of the President of the European Commission Von der Leyen
November	European Commission adopts a new Growth Plan for the Western Balkans European Commission issues 2023 Enlargement Package & Progress Reports
December	EU-Western Balkans summit (Brussels) EU accession Screening process with Albania and North Macedonia completed European Council opens accession negotiations with Ukraine and Moldova and grants candidacy status to Georgia
2024	
March	European Council opens accession negotiations with Bosnia and Herzegovina European Commission launches “Communication of pre-enlargement reforms and policy reviews”

Source: author’s representation