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Enlargement of the EU Towards the East: A Pivotal Change in EU's External Policy?

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Abstract

The EU's Eastern enlargement in 2004 was marked by the entry of mostly smaller states, whose ability to shape the external direction of the EU was questioned. However, the EU's response to the war in Ukraine has shown how important the Eastern dimension of external policy is for the EU and that this Easternisation of the EU has occurred precisely in the wake of the 2004 enlargement. This is due to the fact that these states have been able to push their own narratives in the discourse on the EU's Eastern direction, particularly in the case of the Eastern Partnership. This article analyses the discourse of Central and Eastern European states regarding the Eastern partnership, specifically the narratives of the official documents of three Baltic and four Visegrad group countries in the 2009–2022 period. The analysis made it possible to identify narrative structures and showed that the narratives are relatively similar in the selected countries. Despite the lack of cooperation between the two groups and the West's neglect of the Eastern Partnership policy, they were able to individually strengthen their position in the EU and maintain the discussion about the Eastern Partnership at the EU level as a result.

Keywords

Eastern Partnership; European Union; Easternisation; V4; B3

1. Introduction

The 2004 enlargement of the EU was specific in that it was dominated by Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries and mostly included small countries. This predetermined the perception of these countries' position in the European integration process (Panke, 2010; Wallace, 2005). The adaptation of the new member states (MSs) to the realities of membership was assumed, while their influence on the future shape of the EU was

rather underestimated (Matlak et al., 2018). The ability of the new MSs to determine and manage the EU's external direction was not taken into account, which made them learn the "pointlessness of being small and being isolated, especially in EU foreign policy making, which rests on consensus" (cf. Delreux & Keukeleire, 2017; Edwards, 2006, p. 146). Governing the EU's external direction was a task for the large MSs, or the so-called traditional European core—i.e., Germany and France (Arter, 2000; Panke, 2011).

Nevertheless, historical experience, interdependence with the Eastern European space, and concerns about its development (including fears of Russia's growing assertiveness) posed such a fundamental challenge for the new MSs (Baun & Marek, 2013; Tulmets, 2012) that the EU also began to perceive it. The Easternisation of the EU can be identified in its emphasis on strengthening cooperation projects as well as in its discourse on the policy towards the East (Dangerfield, 2009; Pastore, 2013). A significant milestone was the creation of the Eastern Partnership (EaP) in 2009 (Council of the EU, 2009), which was initiated and strongly supported by the new MSs. The assumption of a weak role for these states in the EU's external direction can thus be challenged, pointing to the role of their discourse (and the narratives they use) on this.

This article analyses the discourse of CEE counties regarding the EaP. Specifically, it focuses on the narratives of official documents of three Baltic states (B3: Estonia, Lithuania, and Latvia) and four Central European states (V4: Poland, Czech Republic, Hungary, and Slovakia); accompanied by two core MSs (Germany and France) and the EU, taken as an umbrella of its major institutions (European Commission, European Parliament, European Council, and Council of the EU), which were involved, in various degrees, in the functioning of the EaP during the 2009–2022 period. Two research questions are set: (a) Which narrative dominates the discourse on the EaP in the B3 and V4 countries? (b) Is the narrative on the EaP of the B3 and V4 countries consistent with the discourse of the EU and the European core?

For the analysis, countries from the 2004 enlargement wave, that can be considered a relatively homogeneous group, were selected, except for Poland, which is a special case. Firstly, it is significantly larger than the other states in this enlargement wave and, secondly, its ambitions to profile its influence were more in line with those of a large state. This was evident after EU accession when it vetoed the EU–Russia Partnership and Cooperation Treaty in 2006. On the other hand, the instability and immaturity of the political scene, the economic parameters, and the reluctance of traditional large EU states to recognise it as a large state place it closer to the group of small states. Simultaneously, we examine the narratives of two large states (Germany and France), who have often been considered the motor of EU integration (Moravcsik, 1998), with substantial influence on EU policies, including their external dimension (Delreux & Keukeleire, 2017). Although their views on the EaP may differ due to the geographical context, their stances towards the EaP may also vary from the positions maintained by CEE countries. The analysis of the discourse and the role of narratives at the level of the MSs allows us to explain how these new MSs perceive and influence the external direction of the EU and its policy towards its Eastern European neighbours. Discourse analysis at the MSs level has not received sufficient attention so far. Studies that examine the role of discourse at the level of the EU institutions and their influence on outcomes can be a starting point for this article (Cianciara, 2016; Schumacher, 2015).

The article is based on two arguments: First, the meaning of the narratives used is not only relevant but essential to the analysis of the actual reality of the external direction of the EU. The article thus subscribes to an approach that can be described as a "narrative theory of action," based on the key role it attributes to

narrative for action and change. Narratives provide a causal mechanism through which the separate sphere of thought can be linked to the dynamic sphere of action (Ringmar, 1996). The individual narratives within the EaP are characterised by a narrative structure (whether in text or verbal statements) and are a kind of storytelling about the issue. In doing so, narratives can be used to manipulate relational differences, certain levels of agency can be emphasised, and other facts can be withheld (Hagström & Gustafsson, 2019), thus defending a consensus on the right course of action and discrediting other alternatives (Curran, 2012). Narratives can activate interests and are also what connect the interests and actions we perform (Ringmar, 1996, p. 89). Second, the narratives of the new MSs on the EaP are not only important for the formation of their actions but also can influence actions at the level of the EU and other EU MSs. It is through the narrative on the EaP that the new EU MSs became important agents of policy, regardless of their formal and informal power. It is also interesting to check whether the V4 and B3 countries reflect their own successful experience (transformation and Europeanisation) in their discourse, advocate idealistic, normative, and value approaches, and promote solidarity towards their Eastern neighbours. A similar idealistic approach that the EU manifested upon the accession of the CEE countries in 2004 (Cianciara, 2016).

The study is structured in several sections: The second section presents the EaP as a part of the Easternisation of the EU after its enlargement in 2004. The third section focuses on the methodological framework, based on the discourse historical approach (DHA). The fourth section presents the results of the analysis of the narratives of the selected countries in line with achieving the objective and answering the research questions. The final discussion places them in the context of EaP reality.

2. The EaP as a Part of the Easternisation of the EU After its Enlargement

The disintegration of the USSR and the aspirations of the CEE states to become part of the West represent a turning point in the European integration process. However, it is only the Eastward expansion of European structures, in particular the EU enlargement in 2004, that confirms this (Sedelmeier, 2005). Moreover, in 2004, the EU involved the countries directly neighbouring the enlarged EU in the European Neighbourhood Policy, and then in 2009, in the EaP (E. Korosteleva, 2011).

While the CEE is undergoing a process of adaptation and transformation, which can be described as Europeanisation (Matlak et al., 2018), changes are also taking place on the EU side. This can be described as the Easternisation of the EU (cf. Cohen, 2007). This is a use of the term in a new context, bearing in mind that the label "Easternisation" is also used when referring to EU/Western/European relations with non-Western/Eastern states/economies (specifically the shift of economic power from the West to the East). Firstly, an important topic of the Easternisation of the EU, which happened even before the expansion, is the impact of the EU's shifting borders on the nature of the integration process: it was politically moved in an Eastward direction (Schimmelfennig, 2021; Sedelmeier, 2003). Secondly, the principle of equality has given the new MSs a formally prominent position in EU institutions and decision-making processes (the Council of the EU is a particularly good example), which has made them potentially important actors after enlargement, given their number and potential for coordination (Schild, 2010; Toshkov, 2017). Thirdly, after the enlargement, the integration process gained a direct border with the post-Soviet space and the importance of policy towards it was strengthened. This may have led to a relative weakening of the importance of other strands of EU external direction, manifested, for instance, by the dichotomy between the EU's Southern/Mediterranean policy and the EU's Eastern dimension (Cianciara, 2009). The EaP project could

confirm this. Fourthly, the CEE is traditionally and strongly linked to the post-Soviet space, which creates pressure on the EU policy-making, as it (the EU) seeks to weaken these (not only economic) ties (O'Brennan, 2006). Simultaneously, the EU is forced to consider the Eastern direction through the security dimension (Cohen, 2007). Finally, the importance of this influence can be seen in geopolitical terms over the last decade. The East of the European continent is a source of challenges and threats for the EU itself, especially given the developments in Ukraine after 2014. The EU is coming into direct geopolitical confrontation with a major actor in this space—Russia (Casier, 2019; Tchakarova, 2017). Conceptually, the Easternisation of the EU can be seen as a complex transformation in terms of the EU's direction (reflected in its actions), the weight of MSs in decision-making processes, and, especially, the emphasis on priorities in a geographical sense, which of course has major political, economic, and power/geopolitical implications.

A special case of the Easternisation of the EU is the EaP, which can be examined both at the EU level and at the level of EU MSs, including those that joined in 2004. At the EU level, this includes a comprehensive approach to the EaP (E. A. Korosteleva, 2011; Łapczyński, 2009; Tyushka & Schumacher, 2021), gradually much more focused on its security dimension (Christou, 2010), power-politics, and geopolitical implications (Crombois, 2019; E. Korosteleva, 2017; Nielsen & Vilson, 2014). At the level of the new MSs from CEE and their relationship to the EaP, not only have their approaches to the EaP been addressed (Adamczyk, 2010; Cianciara, 2009; Copsey & Pomorska, 2014; Tulmets, 2012), but their potential for a stronger position in the EU has been discussed, including their ability to influence its external direction (Dangerfield, 2009; Lamoreaux & Galbreath, 2008; Pastore, 2013). The EaP has proved to be crucial for the new MSs and several studies have concluded that they have had a significant impact on the EU's Eastern policy (Dangerfield, 2009; Pastore, 2013). The new MSs from CEE are becoming active promoters of the further Easternisation of the EU. Interestingly, however, these studies were predominantly produced after the launch of the EaP, with interest declining rapidly. In addition, these studies have not been based on emphasising the role of discourse and the narratives used in this regard. This role has so far been analysed at the level of EU institutions (Cianciara, 2016; Schumacher, 2015). Studying the discourse and the role of narratives at the level of MSs allows the interpretation of how these new MSs influence the external direction of the EU. This being said, we fully acknowledge the difficulty of proving influence and causality (Copsey & Pomorska, 2014). Hence, we focus on the relations between narratives and practices and their correlation with national and EU levels, rather than on causal mechanisms (Ringmar, 1996). This study attempts to fill this research gap and focuses on the monitoring of narratives at the level of the new MSs concerning the EaP. Furthermore, it enriches the current literature by exploring recent events up until the end of 2022.

3. Methodology

The arguments in the previous section are supported by the selected methodological framework, that draws on the DHA, which claims that discourse is both constituted by and constitutive of reality (Wodak & Krzyżanowski, 2008). Thus, it is entirely in line with the idea of narratives leading to action. Indeed, as Wodak and Krzyżanowski (2008) claim, discourse can also mean narratives in a restricted or broad sense of the term. In practice, the DHA consists of two levels of analysis: First, it explores the topics that are discussed in the selected discourses; and second, the in-depth level of analysis focuses on nomination, predication, and argumentation strategies—i.e., the *topoi*. By investigating both levels, the narrative structures are disclosed.

Political discourse and political communication were identified as the relevant fields of action for our analysis (Wodak & Krzyżanowski, 2008, pp. 14–19). The data collection proceeded as follows: First, the genre of strategic documents of the selected MSs was identified (national security strategies, foreign policy strategies, governmental programs, and EU presidency programmes). Additionally, official websites were explored for official statements of the leading political representatives debating the EaP (by using the keyword "Eastern Partnership" in the respective languages and considering linguistic mutations, such as suffixes). Here, one of the limitations of our analysis must be stated for Hungary, as not many relevant documents were found either in English or Hungarian. We compensated by coding statements and speeches given by relevant political representatives (e.g., Péter Szijjártó and Viktor Orbán). The investigated time frame began with the launch of the EaP in 2009 and ended in December 2022. It was ensured that all coded documents were representative of both the selected time frame and all selected countries. Altogether, 279 documents were analysed (cf. Table 1 in the Supplementary File).

Subsequently, the data was analysed qualitatively in the NVivo program. Open or data-driven coding was employed, i.e., the coding was led by data (Gibbs, 2018). Specifically, a small data sample was selected and, based on the initial observations, dominant topics and argumentative strategies were identified and preliminary *topoi* were prepared in NVivo (Wodak & Krzyżanowski, 2008). The argumentation strategies are to be understood as linguistic and cognitive processes of problem-solving which consist of relatively coherent statements. These statements aim to justify what is right and wrong by convincing or manipulating, either openly or implicitly. The identification of the main *topoi* was inspired by previous research (Cianciara, 2016; Pastore, 2013; Tulmets, 2012) but new *topoi* were conceptualised inductively, which is a strategy allowed by the DHA (Wodak & Krzyżanowski, 2008). Subsequently, all the documents were coded, and the *topoi* were amended accordingly. Then the analysis on both levels of the DHA proceeded.

As the in-depth analysis investigates the representation of relevant social actors and their argumentation strategies systematically, it also allows us to determine whether the identified narratives are introduced differently in the selected countries. As the DHA transcends the linguistic dimension of discourse and emphasises the role of a specific context, political and social aspects are taken into account. Hence, this triangulation should decrease the risk of critical bias (Wodak & Krzyżanowski, 2008).

4. Discourse on the EaP in the B3 and V4 Countries: The Narratives Structures Used and the European Context

The application of the methodology revealed several interesting findings. The B3 and V4 states view engagement in the EaP as a means of enhancing international prestige and visibility within the EU, or as the Latvian foreign affairs minister puts it: "to forge closer relations with European partners and further enhance Latvia's image and reputation" (Latvian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2019). The need for prestige stems from the feeling of inferiority (the position of being in between two worlds—the Western and the Eastern world—and their existence as "small states") and a willingness to be considered equal (Kesa, 2012, p. 99; Lamoreaux & Galbreath, 2008). The EaP countries are seen as close partners and neighbours due to their geographical proximity and historical ties (e.g., Latvian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2011; it confirms the thesis of Kesa, 2012 and Pastore, 2013). Indeed, the Baltic countries prefer to be labelled as Eastern Europe rather than former Soviet republics and they perceive the EaP as a part of the same region, considering themselves as MSs of the same European community, using "we" to emphasise the shared identity (Latvian

Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2016; cf. Kesa, 2012; Mälksoo, 2009). Moreover, all countries mentioned the EaP among their priorities for the Presidency of the Council of the EU (Council of the EU, 2022; Estonian Presidency of the Council of the EU, 2017; Hungarian Presidency of the Council of the EU, 2011; Latvian Presidency of the Council of the EU, 2015; Lithuanian Presidency of the Council of the EU, 2013; Slovak Presidency of the Council of the EU, 2016).

This is in contrast with the EU (and its institutions), where, initially, the EaP was largely overlooked in the strategic documents, as the focus was on the Union for the Mediterranean and the EU's next enlargement. The EaP only received more attention between 2011—2014 (e.g., European Commission, 2011), but the focus has varied depending on the external and internal factors. In the B3 and V4, interest seems to be more stable and rather unconditional. Also, Germany has mentioned the EaP in all coalition agreements since 2009 and during its EU Presidency in 2020, being among its priorities. The German security strategy was not finalised by the end of 2022 (cf. Bundesregierung, 2023). However, in the white book on security, a note on the EaP is included (Bundesregierung, 2016). Overall, Germany acknowledges that the EaP project is useful, while simultaneously claiming that it is necessary to reform it (Deutscher Bundestag, 2017, p. 2). Contrarily, France does not mention the EaP initiative in any of its strategic documents. Emphasis has only recently been put on Ukraine as one of the members of the EaP, the rest of the countries remain entirely missing (Hollande, 2017; Sarkozy, 2009).

Identified *topoi* allow us to distinguish individual narratives. The most prominent *topoi* in the V4 and B3 countries are solidarity and assistance, followed by the *topos* of transformation. Solidarity is expressed in terms of the necessity to help partners/neighbours in the region, sharing of experience (Rinkēvičs, 2014), and financial aid, such as development aid (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Poland, 2012) or special funds (Latvian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2014, 2015; Visegrad Group, 2012). In the beginning, as Kesa (2012, p. 98) explains, such policies corresponded to a certain sense of duty and ethics, which could be summarised as "we have received a lot of help; it is now our turn to do the same." Latvia, in particular, prioritised experience sharing with Ukraine after 2019, when it officially supported Ukraine's EU membership (Latvian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2019). The solidarity expressed by the B3 countries seems to be rather unconditional. As for the V4 countries, the principle of "more for more" or merit-based funding is occasionally mentioned to emphasise that the EaP countries should deserve support (Visegrad Group, 2011). However, such conditionality is not key in the V4 and B3 approach. Contrarily, it is crucial to the EU (and to its institutions). The EU documents stress the need to adjust the amount of EU support for partners according to progress in political reforms and in building a strong democracy (European Commission, 2011).

While the *topos* of transformation is present mainly regarding the democratisation of countries or the strengthening of institutions, less attention is paid to economic transformation (e.g., Latvian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2015). This *topos* dominates in B3 countries and Slovakia. Estonia positions itself as an actor who "is able to mediate the reform experience or a powerful reform-facilitator using bilateral projects and hundreds of experts who may help with the transition based on their experience" (Republic of Estonia Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2020). Indeed, countries seem to offer their help rather unselfishly and do not act superior to anyone, as opposed to Germany, which seems to expect the EaP countries to deliver rather than offering them help and advice as equals: "In addition to far-reaching structural reforms (...), the German Bundestag expects a credible and consistent fight against oligarchy, nepotism and corruption" (Deutscher Bundestag, 2017, p. 4). Also, the EU stresses the need for economic, political, and institutional reforms in all

EaP countries (European Commission, 2011) and showed a significant lack of progress because of "the activities of other entities and—sometimes by conflicting—goals" (European Commission, 2013a, 2014).

The *topos* of transformation is also often accompanied by an emphasis on values and democracy-building, as well as compliance with the EU and Euro-Atlantic values. Furthermore, the differentiation element plays a significant role concerning the ability of the EaP countries to transform. The Baltic countries often stress the necessity to integrate countries with association agreements into the Euro-Atlantic community to show them support (Republic of Estonia Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2020; Landsbergis, 2022). Moreover, the *topos* of values include dialogue with Belarus, promoting the rule of law, enhancing public administration, fostering free media, disinformation, and digitalisation (Republic of Estonia Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2020; Landsbergis, 2022; Latvian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2019). Occasionally, the importance of supporting civil society in EaP countries is highlighted (Visegrad Group, 2020), but much less than in Germany, where this discourse dominates the narrative (Deutscher Bundestag, 2017). In the EU, democratisation and spreading EU values were prioritised during the aftermath of the revolutions in Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova, but later these *topoi* became less prevalent, and a decreasing amount of assistance followed (European Commission, 2015).

On the other hand, the documents increasingly mentioned the *topos* of security, particularly linked to stability and resilience. In 2014, the first turn toward security narratives appeared in relation to the situation in Ukraine, hence, energy security and Russia as a security threat were mentioned frequently (European Commission, 2013b). These aspects confirmed the changing attitude of the EU towards the Eastern region, which was accompanied by lower involvement and diminishing responsibility towards EaP partners (European Commission, 2014). Recently, assistance has been linked to stabilisation and resilience as well (European Commission, 2021). Moreover, the *topoi* of security, stability, and resilience are the only present in France. However, only in the context of self-protection, not assistance (Hollande, 2015; Secretariat General de la Défense et de la Sécurité Nationale, 2022). Contrary to the EU and France, stability or resilience are scarcely used in the documents of all countries. In the B3 and V4, the *topos* of security is present mainly in the context of relations with Russia, which is more or less explicitly seen as detrimental (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Poland, 2017). And, while Kesa (2012, p. 98) states that after the accession of the B3 countries to NATO, Russia was no longer a direct threat, the discourse of B3 countries became more openly negative towards Russia after the annexation of Crimea. Views towards Russia slightly differ. After the annexation of Crimea in 2014, negative narratives prevailed (except for Hungary, see the last paragraph in this section). The B3 and V4 countries claim that they recognise the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the EaP countries, mostly in the case of Ukraine. Moreover, the countries acknowledge that the conflicts and separatism in the EaP region might have an impact on their own stability and border protection (Ministry of Defence of the Republic of Slovakia, 2021; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Poland, 2017). Therefore, cooperation within PESCO, the need for the harmonisation of NATO–EU relations, and the role of the joint military advisory and training mission outside Ukraine are stressed (e.g., Landsbergis, 2022; Sprūds & Broka, 2020, 2022).

The *topos* of differentiation is also rather frequent. Overall, support towards the EaP has been significant and almost unlimited since its introduction. Only sporadically were reservations about Belarus raised in the beginning (Visegrad Group, 2011). Later, the differentiation between Ukraine, Georgia, Moldova, and the rest of the EaP became more intense (Czech Government Office, 2015). While Belarus remained portrayed as the most problematic member of the EaP (with particular emphasis paid by Latvia and Lithuania as its

neighbours) and Azerbaijan and Armenia were criticised for the conflict in Nagorno Karabakh and for not complying with EU values (Rinkēvičs, 2013; Visegrad Group, 2016), Ukraine was pinpointed as the most promising member in terms of potential EU membership, especially after the Russian invasion in 2022, or even before (Office of the Slovak Government, 2010). In Czech foreign policy conception, Armenia and Azerbaijan are completely omitted in the section on values and transformation (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic, 2011). Furthermore, EU membership has rarely been offered to the remaining EaP countries in strategic documents. The exception being Latvia in 2009 (Latvian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2009), Poland's stance during Radosław Sikorski's tenure as the Minister of Foreign Affairs (Sejm Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej, 2013), and the programme statement of the Slovak government from 2010 (Office of the Slovak Government, 2010). In the EU, differentiation became more pronounced after 2017, when Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova signed and ratified association agreements with the EU (EaP Eastern Partnership, 2018).

Regarding the *topos* of interest, the EaP is mentioned explicitly in the B3 more often than within the V4 (Republic of Estonia Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2020; Latvian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2014, 2015; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Lithuania, 2016; Office of the Slovak Government, 2012). Moreover, it is very often accompanied by the *topos* of solidarity, particularly in the case of Hungary ("The Eastern Partnership," 2020). Hence, pragmatism seems to be compatible with help. The Czech EU Presidency concludes that the EaP has been supported by the sum of €600 million, which is "an important step for an enhanced EU engagement towards its Eastern neighbours that can be beneficial for both participating parties" (Czech Presidency of the Council of the EU, 2009). This combination is seen predominantly in the times of Covid-19 (2019–2021). Contrastingly, this *topos* was initially much less visible in the EU documents. It only appears in the EaP Eastern Partnership (2018) and is more explicitly pronounced after 2020 (European Commission, 2021).

To sum up, the main narratives are similar across all B3 and V4 countries (Cf. Tulmets, 2008). The most open example of differences is the benevolent stance of Hungary towards both Belarus and Russia, which manifested itself after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, particularly. Indeed, Hungary explicitly claims that it does not interfere with the internal affairs of the EaP countries, since it is none of their business. However, this did not prevent Hungary from supporting the EaP since the beginning ("The Eastern Partnership," 2020). Our findings seem to be more optimistic than the rather negative assessment of the Hungarian stance towards the EaP by Tulmets (2012). In this sense, it is rather surprising that the V4 and B3 countries do not refer to each other in their discourse on the EaP and cooperate rather within their respective blocs. Indeed, Pastore (2013) suggests that geographic proximity is more pronounced by small states in their foreign policies.

5. Discussion: The Narratives in the Context of the EaP Reality

The findings of the discourse analysis and the narratives used, provide arguments for the following discussion. Firstly, for the B3 and V4 countries, the need for prestige stems from a sense of inferiority related to their position between two worlds (West and East), their existence as "small states" and their view as pupils (Lovec et al., 2021) integrating into the EU. Supporting the EaP is about emphasising equality, increasing importance in the EU, and thus raising self-esteem. The B3 and V4 states succeeded in raising the issue of Eastern European and Caucasian states during their EU Council presidencies (2009, 2013, 2015,

and 2018), when they advocated for policy revisions on high-level summits. More recently, they have succeeded in putting the EaP on the common EU agenda. The EaP, firstly, presented an opportunity to play the role of a "bridge" (Lamoreaux & Galbreath, 2008) between Western and Eastern Europe. However, the V4 and B3 countries have become active participants who want to determine the direction of the EaP. This also includes the issue of Ukraine's membership (and subsequently Moldova's and Georgia's), which was already raised by Slovak representatives in 2010 and by Latvian representatives in 2019.

Although Dangerfield (2009) claims that the national interests of V4 members as well as Western countries decrease the impact of the V4, our findings suggest that the discourse of the V4 on the EaP is quite ambitious. The V4 countries actively promote the V4 format, including issues related to the EaP. However, the V4 countries do not coordinate their activities with the B3 countries, even though all surveyed countries present the EaP as a priority and stress their support for EaP partners. While the V4 countries stress the importance of the V4 when dealing with the EaP (Visegrad Group, 2020), the B3 countries perceive the EaP not only as their top priority but also as a matter of promoting the prestige of B3 countries at the EU level. This is a missed opportunity for broader cooperation and progress on the EaP, especially recently, when the EU discourse seems to be converging to some extent with the narratives of the V4 and B3 countries, with the catalyst undoubtedly being Russia's aggression against Ukraine in 2022 (Kaunert & Pereira, 2023).

Secondly, in discussions on the EaP, the B3 and V4 countries are more likely to be critical of Western countries (including concerns about German cooperation with Russia, e.g., Nord Stream and participation in the Normandy format) and EU promises that are not being fulfilled. This is despite the fact that Germany's support was crucial for the creation of the EaP (France has shown virtually no interest in the EaP). The B3 and V4 countries have been pushing for greater accountability, concrete action (e.g., specific projects and cooperative measures), and tangible results, rather than relying on symbolic gestures. Hence, the analysis proves that it is the new MSs as (autonomous) actors, together with external events (e.g., the Russian annexation of Crimea and the invasion to Ukraine), that have maintained the focus of the EU as a whole on the EaP. The B3 and V4 countries have managed to participate in shaping the discourse, while at the same time pushing for a more proactive and assertive approach to solving problems in Eastern Europe.

Thirdly, it appears that the V4 and B3 countries perceive the need for assistance and exchange of experience. This may indicate an awareness that these countries themselves have received significant assistance. Such a perspective is conceptualised with a narrative of solidarity/transformation without emphasising conditionality and the fulfilment of objectives, which is done by both Germany and the EU. This is an interesting finding (given the proximity to an unstable space), as transformation and assistance in both the V4 and B3 countries as well as the path to membership have been linked to the fulfilment of objectives and conditionality. In this regard, it is also significant that while the discourse in France, Germany, and the EU institutions are more affected by external events and view the EaP primarily through the lens of security and resilience, according to the narrative analysis, the V4 and B3 countries tend to maintain a more consistent position towards the EaP. In the long term, they focus on partnership, aid, and transformation. Given the proximity to an unstable space and concerns about Russia, this is a surprising finding.

Fourthly, the pressure for differentiation within the EaP is indeed apparent. The EaP project may become marginalised in the future due to divergent expectations and the perspectives of the actors involved (including the B3 and V4). Moreover, these findings may suggest that the EaP should be seen in the context

of renewal and full acknowledgement of power rivalry in the European region, which implies the impossibility of a partnership between the EU and Russia (Siddi, 2022). This may mean a shift in the EaP format, but it will most probably not change the trend towards the further Easternisation of the EU in the future.

Finally, the analysis of the narratives points to the fact that the V4 and B3 countries often show more normative or idealistic tendencies, emphasising solidarity and value-based approaches (cf. Cianciara, 2016), while the EU (and its institutions) tends to take a more realistic or pragmatic stance on the EaP, taking into account practical concerns and strategic considerations, rather than the idealistic ones which were once manifested upon the reintegration of the CEE region back in Europe (Cianciara, 2016). Such a change has been registered especially after 2015 and appeared in the literature since then (e.g., Wagner & Anholt, 2016). Nowadays, it seems that it has been mainly the B3 and V4 narratives on the EaP which essentially retell the success stories of EU membership. If Ringmar (1996, p. 87) identifies "an analytical distinction between two different kinds of stories: stories we tell about actions and stories we tell about ourselves," the B3 and V4 narratives fall under the second type. Through them, a "presence for ourselves in time and in space" (Ringmar, 1996, p. 87) is created for these states. This may also explain the focus on partnership, solidarity, and the more idealistic approach of these countries. They see themselves as an example of successful transformation without taking into account their own problems (democracy, respect for human and minority rights, respect for the rule of law, and corruption). For the EU and the core countries, the EaP is more of a tool with specific tasks and objectives; the narratives correspond to "stories about actions," having a security emphasis.
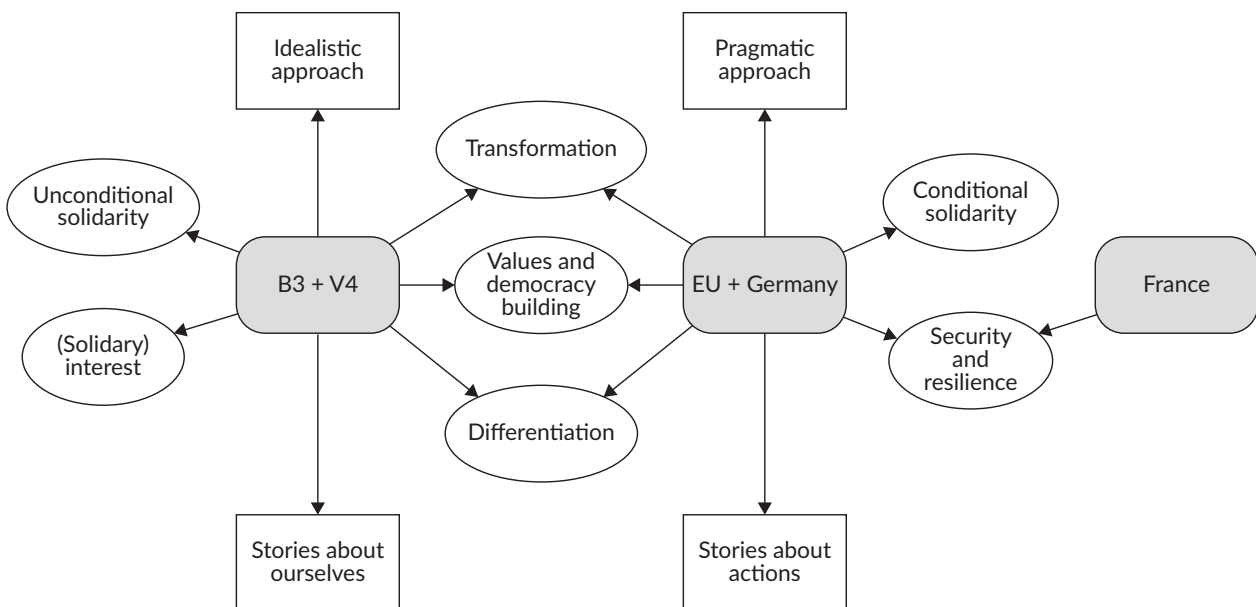
Figure 1. Graphic summary of the main narratives for B3, V4, EU, Germany and France.

6. Conclusion

The analysis of the discourse on the EaP in the B3 and V4 countries allowed the identification of narratives, including narrative structures. The narratives appear to be relatively similar in the B3 and V4 countries.

The new states perceive the EaP project as crucial and have been able to increase their position in the EU through it, despite the disinterest and neglect from the West. Hence, it can be concluded that the V4 and B3 countries have been consistent in promoting the EaP project and its principles, even as they cope with national differences and the evolving geopolitical context. Simultaneously, a dichotomy may be identified between the pragmatic stance of the EU, emphasising conditionality, and the idealistic approaches of the CEE countries, taking an unconditional and supportive stance.

It is thus apparent that the CEE countries have not only added to the discussion but have also successfully kept the EaP on the table. Undoubtedly, this has a positive impact on their prestige at the EU level, and it also represents a step forward towards the Easternisation of the EU. However, the dynamics of the EaP are not exclusively linked to the development of discourse. It appears that the actual dynamics and interest in the EaP also depend on the context of European developments and the evolution of the relations towards Russia. These "external" shocks especially affect the positions of France, Germany, and EU institutions, which not only are manifested through their focus on security and resilience but were also significant drivers of the change in the approach of the EU towards pragmatism (Wagner & Anholt, 2016). At the same time, the weakness of the CEE is that while the discourse has been rather similar and consistent for the V4 and B3, these states have not been able to translate the discourse into common action in support of the EaP as a project. A realistic option may be to build larger supportive platforms for CEE countries (e.g., the Bucharest Nine group) in the future to further strengthen their role in the EU.

Finally, relations towards Russia and the possibility of negotiations on the accession of Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia to the EU will affect the future of the EaP. And while the EaP may change its format or disappear completely (possible differentiation and a shift of interest towards Central Asia), it is probable that (also due to the role of the CEE countries) the Easternisation of the EU remains a solid pillar of the EU's future development.

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Supplementary Material
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