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Arguments used in parliamentary debates on Western Balkan European integration in EU member states

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Abstract

This thesis set out to compare the discourse on possible future European Union enlargement to the Western Balkans in the national parliaments of Estonia, Slovenia, Austria and Ireland. There is a lack of literature present on arguments for Western Balkan enlargement specifically and especially arguments on member state level. Thus, stenographic minutes were analyzed to fill this research gap. Arguments were divided into five categories: economic, security, containment of third actor influence, democracy promotion and moral. The results showed that the status quo strongly favors enlargement with only two out of the 92 statements analyzed opposing enlargement. Security arguments were most prevalent in all of the parliaments under study with the highest frequency of occurrence in the debates of Austrian and Slovenian parliaments. Interestingly, Irish discourse strongly favored moral arguments whilst Austrian discourse is focused on economic and security arguments. For Slovenia and Estonia, a surprisingly small number of statements were present. For Austria, Slovenia and Ireland, there was a significant increase in the salience of the Western Balkan enlargement topic from 2018 onwards.

Keywords

Declaration of Authorship

1. The author hereby declares that he compiled this thesis independently, using only the listed resources and literature.

2. The author hereby declares that all the sources and literature used have been properly cited.

3. The author hereby declares that the thesis has not been used to obtain a different or the same degree.

Prague 3.01.2023 **Ingriin Rääk**

Acknowledgments

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1. Introduction

The aim of this thesis is to investigate the discourse on future possible European Union enlargement to the Western Balkan region. Whilst previous academic literature has looked into reasons for enlargement, relatively little attention has been paid to the Western Balkans specifically. Moreover, whilst reasons for enlargement have been studied to a large amount from the European Union's standpoint, analyses on the views of specific member states are still relatively rare. To fill this research gap, this thesis will compare parliamentary discourse in four European Union member states – Estonia, Slovenia, Ireland and Austria – by analyzing stenographic minutes available on the websites of the national parliaments. The choice for these countries is twofold: firstly, they represent new and old member states as well as states neighbouring the region and states geographically far from the region. Secondly, the parliamentary discourse of these specific states has not been analyzed regarding Western Balkan enlargement before. Parliamentary debates are chosen to be the object of study as parliaments are one of the main venues of politicization of issues. Moreover, national parliaments in the European Union have the task of ratifying the decision to accept a state into the EU and are thus important players in the enlargement process. Thus, the research question is as follows: what type of arguments have been used in the parliamentary debates of European Union member states regarding possible future EU enlargement to Western Balkan countries? Chapter 2 presents a literature review by outlining the arguments used for previous enlargement rounds, the specific arguments used for Western Balkan enlargement and the history of the enlargement process for the region. Moreover, it will present the pre-existing studies on parliamentary discourse on the issue specifically and finally present hypotheses. Chapter 3 will describe how data was collected for this research and explain the choice for categorizing different types of arguments. Chapter 4 will present and discuss the findings. Chapter 5 offers a conclusion to this research and suggestions for future research.

2. Literature review

2.1 Introduction

Enlargement of the European Union (EU) is generally regarded as its most successful foreign policy (Hillion 2010). The largest enlargement to date was the "big bang" enlargement of 2004, upon which eight Eastern and Central European states (Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Hungary, Czechia, Slovakia, Slovenia) and two Mediterranean states (Malta and Cyprus) joined the Union. The 2004 enlargement was and is still considered as possibly the most controversial one as the joining Eastern and Central European states were significantly poorer than old Member States and were still in the process of institution (and in some cases, nation) building, having defeated communist yoke between 1989 and 1991. Some scholars argue that the inclusion of these states was a heavily political decision and economic and institutional aspects were taken less into account than for previous enlargements (Sedelmeier 2014). The political aspect of the enlargement is surely evident, and it has even been argued that "the 2004 round of enlargement was clearly underpinned by the normative imperative of correcting historical injustices" (Pildegovičs 2018). However, it should be noted that all of the enlargement countries had to abide by the conditions of accession and those not reaching those conditions (Bulgaria and Romania) were only allowed to accede later.

The states of the Western Balkans (regarded as the six countries of the Balkan peninsula not yet members of the EU: Serbia, Montenegro, Albania, North Macedonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo) have long aspired to become members of the Union. Whilst EU officials as well as member states have on numerous occasions stated that the Western Balkan states belong to Europe, enlargement to the Western Balkan states, apart from Croatia which joined in 2013, has stalled over the past few years and several scholars and political analysts have pointed to the possibility that this stagnation could lead the states to fall back on their reforms (Corpădean and Herța 2019, Stratulat et al. 2020, Beshku 2021, Bechev 2021, Stratulat 2021, Rita 2021). The importance of the prospect of European Union (and for most of these countries, also NATO) membership for the development of the Western Balkan region post-Dayton Agreement is hard to overstate. Dolghi and Olivia (2011) argue that the hope for future accession was the main driving force in all of these countries for large-scale economic, legal and security

reforms and that a strategic framework for reform was a direct outcome of international organizations' involvement. Grabbe (2014) also notes that the EU specifically had the most significant impact on the transformation of post-communist societies in Europe. Therefore, the insistence of many scholars that delaying the enlargement process will (and in some cases, already has) have negative effects on the countries' economic and democratic development becomes evident. The lack of progress at the EU-Western Balkan summit in October 2021 and EU-Western Balkan leaders' meeting in June 2022 is also a clear example of the stagnation of the enlargement process (Herszenhorn and Bayer 2021, Marusic 2022b). Another EU-Western Balkan summit took palce on the 6th of Dember 2022 and academic literature has not dealt with its analysis yet, however, a glimmer of hope could be seen for the region as the European Council decided to grant Bosnia and Herzegovina candidate status on the 15th of December 2022 ("EU Candidate Status for Bosnia and Herzegovina: A Message to the People and a Tasking for Politicians" 2022). Nonetheless, as the COVID-19 pandemic devastated the region significantly in socio-economic terms thus risking the weakening of institutions in these fragile democracies, in general future accession to the EU has become even more unreachable (Stratulat 2021, Rita 2021, Zweers et al. 2022).

Even though enlargement has been on the agenda of the EU (before 1993 known as the European Community [EC]) almost since its inception and enlargement is often seen from a normative perspective, it is still important to understand why the EU enlarges (and why it decides not to in other cases). Fortunately, previous scholarship has looked into the reasons for enlargement and how they have developed over time. Arguments can be analyzed from both the EU and member state level and whilst there is a body of literature on reasonings for enlargement from the EU's viewpoint, a research gap still exists regarding the argumentation from member states' level. Whilst there are many reasons for the EU as a political entity to enlarge, it is important to understand the differing national viewpoints as the European Union has 27 member states with greatly varying sizes, (political) cultures, national histories and allegiances and the decision to enlarge has to be approved by all (Ker-Lindsay et al. 2017, 513). In the literature, significantly more attention has been put to the justification of the big bang Eastern enlargement of 2004 and presumably many of these arguments apply also for Western Balkan enlargement, however, changing historical circumstances and the specificity of the states of the Western Balkans also calls for separate analysis.

2.2 Categorization of arguments

Long (1997) categorized the argument for the Eastern enlargement (inclusion of the countries of Eastern and Central Europe into the European Union in 2004) into three: identity, economics and security. The identity argument refers to several claims about the inherent nature of the European Union and its mission. The first claim is already present in article 237 of the Treaty of Rome (1957): "Any European State may apply to become a member of the Community.". Article 49 of the Maastricht Treaty of 1993 also stipulates: "Any European State which respects the values referred to in Article 2 and is committed to promoting them may apply to become a member of the Union.". Thus, the European Union can be regarded as having a European mission which is limited by the geographical borders of Europe. Even as the question of where the Eastern border should be set has always been a contentious one, the EU of today is clearly not anymore a Western European project, and if taking the Treaty of Rome verbatim, was never meant to be. The rationale for inclusion of the formerly communist states of Eastern and Central Europe to a shared Europe can be illustrated by a quote from Malcolm Rifkind, the former British Foreign Secretary, to the European Policy Forum in 1996: "we cannot truly call ourselves a European Union if we restrict our membership to the countries of western Europe.... There is a moral obligation ... of saying that if the European ideal is a legitimate and genuine one, then it must be available to all the democracies of Europe who meet the relevant criteria and who aspire to share in the growth of the European Union." (Long 1997, 4).

In addition, during the Cold War the rhetoric of Western Europe was that, unlike the communist East, it was inherently open and welcoming. This carried on to the post-communist times of Europe and thus made it hard for the then-EC to refuse applications without going against its own self-image (however, the EC did refuse an application request from Morocco on the grounds of it not being a European state). This rhetoric was thus used by future member states to argue for their inclusion in the Union.

The third argument relates to the political power of the Union: a larger Union with more members and more economic influence would have more power on the global stage and as the EU has over time developed from a purely economic union to a global political player (exemplified at the time by the creation of the Second Pillar of the EU, the

Common Foreign and Security Policy, with the Maastricht Treaty in 1993), more power is inherently beneficial to it.

Moreover, enlargement has at times been favored by opposing camps vis-à-vis increased European integration. Prior to the 2004 Eastern enlargement, the Southern block (France, Spain, Portugal, Greece) was not very supportive of enlargement due to fears of it inhibiting integration inside the Union. The Northern block (mainly Germany, Denmark and the United Kingdom) did back enlargement but for different reasons. Germany was left at the Eastern border of the Community prior to the accession of the 8 Central and Eastern European countries and thus it had to deal with an influx of both economic migrants from Eastern and Central Europe as well as war refugees from former Yugoslavia. An enlarged and more integrated (Germany's wish being that the EU moves towards a more federal system) EU would benefit Germany economically, security-wise and also redefine its identity as a country in the center of the EU. Moreover, Germany's neighbors – some already in the EU and some waiting to be accepted – were in favor of a more European Germany instead of a German-dominated Europe (a metaphor used often by the German elite [O'Brennan 2014]) as due to the sheer size of Germany it can overpower its relatively small neighbors to the East and thus they encouraged Germany's aim for deeper EU integration. For the United Kingdom and Denmark, enlarging offered a way to oppose Germany's plans of federalization of the EU by hoping to dilute the integration with significantly more members. Thus, enlargement brought to the forefront the differing views on the EU's identity (Long 1997).

The economic pro-enlargement argument claims that a larger single market will add to the prosperity of the EU's member states. Addition of new markets was expected to lead to rapid economic growth, in the short run at least, and lead to more prosperity in the long run due to the logic of economies of scale. Access to primary resources and low-cost labor was presumed to make the EU more competitive internationally. Labor migration was here a very sensitive issue as the states did not wish to attract many low-wage workers to their own countries who could potentially put a strain on the welfare systems, thus reforming the economies of the accession countries and especially providing political stability (as political instability is identified by Smith and Wallace (1994) as more influential in migration than economic concerns) was seen as a way to

prevent large influx of migrants. An enlarged economic Union was argued to also increase the (economic but therefore also political) impact of the EU on a global stage as adding new countries would counter other regional blocks (e.g. NAFTA, APEC) which were formed in the end of the 1980s and the 1990s. At the same time, the cost of enlargement was studied extensively in scholarship prior to the 2004 enlargement and the majority of the studies came to the conclusion that the costs of enlargement outweigh the economic benefits in the short and medium term (Sjursen 2002).

Regarding these arguments and fears it is important to note that contemporary research has found that whilst labor migration did take place after 2004 (with the largest number of migrants coming from Poland, Lithuania having the largest percentage of population emigrating and the main receiving countries being the UK, Ireland and Austria) it was not as significant as some analysts predicted (and was not significant in general for most of the member states) as the new labor force did not exceed 2% even in the most popular countries of destination (Dobson 2009). Moreover, labor migration did not change the labor market structure either in specific receiving countries or in the EU in general to a significant amount. In the main receiving countries the overall economic result was positive as migrants took jobs that were unfilled by locals and did not start to abuse the welfare system in significant numbers (European Commission 2006, Kahanec 2012). Furthermore, large waves of migration were already feared to be resulting from the Greece (1981) and Spain and Portugal (1986) enlargements, however, this did not happen in a very significant amount (Dustmann et al. 2003).

The security argument was perhaps the most controversial one. Higashino (2004) identifies security as one of the core reasons for enlargement. The 2004 enlargement especially was seen in connection to regional security as eight former Warsaw Pact countries joined the Union. References to the security component of enlargement are present in many Presidency Conclusions from 1993 (when the decision was taken to accept candidate countries from Central and Eastern Europe) to 2002 (when accession talks were concluded with the 10 candidate countries). The security argument is multifaceted and could mean several things. Long (1997) argues that economic development and political stability are very much related and thus with the European Union offering a roadmap for economic convergence, increased security through political stability can be expected. As members of the EU, new member states would

also be able to have a dialogue on security issues through Common Foreign and Security Policy, have ties with the Western European Union (a now-defunct organization that used to represent the military side of the European Union, now enforced through Common Security and Defence Policy) and enhance their chances of becoming a member of NATO (it should be noted, however, that all of these states became NATO members already before officially joining the EU). Moreover, in light of the Balkan Wars of the 1990s, similar inter-ethnic conflicts were thought to be likely to break out in Central and Eastern Europe and thus enlargement was seen as a tool to prevent these conflicts from happening (the possibility of these conflicts was highly important as they would have most likely spilled over to the EU member states as well). At the same time, enlargement could not be seen as a sure guarantee for security as Sjursen (2002) argued that enlargement to the Eastern European countries could create a security vacuum further east. This would even more so bring about the need for a common security policy which would however be increasingly complicated as the accession countries with their diverging histories would bring with them new diverging security perspectives, interests as well as neighbors new to the older member states.

Very much related to the security argument (or part of it?) is the argument of seeing the European Union as a promoter of democracy. The development of the self-identity of the EU as a union based on democratic values is interestingly very much related to the enlargement process itself. Originally, when the European Community was created with the Treaty of Rome, there was no mention of democracy in any of the documents. This is significant, as for example the Treaty of Brussels of 1948 (which founded the Western Union) and the 1949 Statute of the Council of Europe both mentioned human rights and democracy as their core values. The move towards a democratic identity started in 1962 when Spain, then still under Franco's dictatorship, expressed the wish to join the Community. As the EC did not wish to be associated with Franco's regime, the Treaty of Rome was reinterpreted whereby certain political and institutional conditions had to be met before a country could join the Community. The Birkelbach report by a Member of the European Parliament that defined these conditions also meant that the European Parliament (EP) was aiming to take a more decisive role in the Community having been a mainly symbolic institution before (first direct elections to the European Parliament were held only in 1979 so the institution could not have claimed democratic legitimacy before). The democratic principles of the EC were once again challenged in

1967 when a military coup took place in Greece and a junta came to power. The EC had six years before signed an association agreement (first of its kind) with Greece and had promised Greece full membership after all necessary issues were negotiated. Again, the EP was the actor most vocally opposing continued cooperation with Greece and after some time of deliberation, the Commission decided to freeze the agreement and stop sending Greece pre-accession financial aid. The EC emerged into a guarantor of democracy in the 1970s when the dictatorships of Greece, Spain and Portugal fell. The discourse (of both applicants and the EC itself) claimed that these countries would have to be included into the EC in order to guarantee the stability of the fragile new democracies and prevent other coups happening in the future. Thus, the 1978 Declaration for Democracy introduced the condition of democracy into the acquis of the Community, Greece eventually acceded to the Community in 1981 and Spain and Portugal in 1986 (De Angelis and Karamouzi 2016).

During later enlargement rounds (mainly for the 2004, 2007, 2013 and future enlargements as Austria, Sweden and Finland did join in 1995 but the state of democracy was not really an issue in these countries), proponents have similarly argued that the EU must enlarge as it is its own *raison d'être* to protect and promote democracy. This kind of argumentation has rarely had public opponents. Here, two interlinked arguments are used: one is about the possible costs for the EU if they did not enlarge and the other is about the moral obligation the EU has for all the states in Europe (Higashino 2004). Similarly, Sjursen (2002) also argues that the enlargement criteria are not only used to assess the appropriateness of certain states to join the EU but also as a way to identify the EU itself and its values internally. Brouwers (2020) has also found that when the Iron Curtain fell and the states of Eastern and Central Europe became liberal free-market democracies, the EU's aim to be a democracy promoter became evident: the Union took the initiative to engage with these formerly communist countries before any of them even applied for membership. Schimmelfennig (2001) claims at the same time that enlargement based on values could be seen as a "rhetorical entrapment" for the EU as proponents can "shame" opponents into accepting it. By the time Western Balkan enlargement became relevant, however, the discursive power of the "grand narrative of post-Cold War rehabilitation" had seriously declined (Brouwers 2020, 32-33).

Sjursen (2002) categorizes arguments also into three: pragmatic, ethical-political and moral. Pragmatic argument refers to arguments regarding economy and security. Ethical-political argument claims that there is a collective "us" in Europe which shares core values and thus states have a responsibility for others yet not members of the EU as members of the same community. The moral argument claims that there are universal values that need to be upheld in EU policy notwithstanding the utility of the policy or the extent of shared values between actors. Piedrafita and Torreblanca (2005) similarly divide justifications for enlargement into three: the logic of consequentiality, the logic of appropriateness and the logic of justification. Whilst the logic of consequentiality correlates with Sjursen's pragmatic arguments, the logic of appropriateness refers to identitarian and habit-based decisions (partly in line with ethical-political and moral arguments of Sjursen) and the logic of justification refers to the context of the discussion and the discursive practices carried out by different counterparts. They come to the conclusion that all three types of logic are used in the enlargement processes. Sjursen's (2002) findings at the same time claim that ethical-political arguments have been the most important ones for the Eastern enlargement. She also argues that whilst the EU has always claimed that the decision to accept certain states to the Union is based on purely objective criteria (specifically set out in the Copenhagen criteria of 1993 for the countries acceding after this date), the EU has prioritized accession of some states over others.

2.3 The specify of Western Balkan enlargement

Although many of the arguments used for the Eastern enlargement also apply for the Western Balkan enlargement (most evident ones being democracy promotion and general stabilization and conflict prevention), both the region's specificity as well as changing historical context have altered the debate on enlargement. Whilst previous enlargements had been an issue for politicians and bureaucrats, following the big bang enlargement of 2004 there has been a move of the policy to the domestic public debate (as has happened with the EU's foreign policy in general [Gora 2021]). This has meant that not only more pragmatic considerations like economy and security but also more substantialist claims on identity (both of the EU and the member states as well as the applicant countries) have been increasingly more prevalent in the debate (Brouwers 2020). The many external factors influencing the process of the Western Balkan enlargement have been analyzed to some extent in relevant literature. The experience

from the 2004 enlargement has in many ways stalled the process as democratic backsliding has been evident in some new member states, most notably in Poland and Hungary. Events like Brexit, Eurozone and refugee crisis have significantly influenced the EU and have slowed both the enlargement and integration processes. Moreover, the poor performance of Eastern Balkan countries of Bulgaria and Romania in fighting corruption does not instill great hope for the European route for the countries of Western Balkans (Vachudova 2014, Petrovic 2022).

The object of democratization is of special significance in Western Balkan enlargement. For the six countries, Freedom House scores for the year 2022 are as follows: 67/100 for Montenegro (partly free), 67/100 for Albania (partly free), 62/100 for Serbia (partly free), 56/100 for Kosovo (partly free), 53/100 for Bosnia and Herzegovina (partly free), 67/100 for North Macedonia (partly free) ("Countries And Territories" 2022). As we can see, none of these countries are regarded as completely free in regards to political and civil rights, a self-proclaimed value of the European Union. Scholarship generally agrees that the EU is a democracy promoter which has an impressive track record especially in the Central and Eastern European countries (Vachudova 2014, Petrovic 2022) and the involvement of the EU in the Western Balkan region has significant wins to show on the record, namely in the beginning of the integration process when the region was catching up with the Union in economic trends. Lack of large-scale conflict in the region for the past two decades could also be regarded as partly due to the EU's (and other Western organizations') involvement in the region (Bessimi and Monastiriotis 2019). However, a paradoxical effect has also taken place: Tema (2011) argues that the process has also led to national democratic deficit. This happens because the democratization process is focusing on formal aspects and not taking into account the local political dynamics out of which under regular circumstances a democracy should develop. This leaves out citizens from the process (and Western Balkan states are suffering from very low activity of civil society in general) and leads the system to be highly dependent on international structures. Decisions are taken to avert conflict but do not necessarily lead to the resolution of the conflict itself. Therefore, the significant participation of Western organizations in virtually every political aspect of these countries has also had negative effects. The national elites have not developed a full level of independence as they are to a lesser or bigger amount still dependent on the EU in financial but also other aspects.

Richter and Wunsch (2020) also agree on the controversial effects EU integration has had on the region as they claim that the EU's political conditionality is partly to blame for the stagnating (if not even declining) level of democratization in the area. The authors explain that the EU's condition for simultaneous economic and political reform opened up opportunities for actors in business to set up clientelist social structures that are highly influential in politics. Moreover, top-down governance left out political competition and stalled the development of structures of deliberation and accountability inside the country. In addition, corrupt elites were legitimized by high-level interactions with Brussels and formal progress towards European integration. The unintended consequence of corrupt elite legitimation is also emphasized by Gafuri and Muftuler-Bac (2020) and Zweers et al. (2022). Halili (2019) identifies the corrupt and self-interested political elites as the main hindrance in the democratic and economic development of these countries. Whilst these criticisms do not mean that the EU should halt its democratization effort in the region, they help understand why the enlargement process has also stalled from the (possible) candidate countries' side.

Security argument is a prevalent one for Western Balkan enlargement. Security in this context can be viewed from several angles as the possibility of rising interethnic tensions as well as growing influence of third actors in the area, issues that are oftentimes interlinked with each other as forces opposing the EU can benefit from destabilizing the region by promoting interethnic rivalries. Security concerns relating to third actors will be explained in detail below, however, security could also refer to organized crime and terrorism (another issue partly related to third actor influence).

Organized crime is unfortunately very prevalent in the Western Balkan region (Halili 2019). Prezelj and Vogrinčič (2020, 547) identify organized crime as the biggest security threat in the region since the end of the Yugoslav wars and the reason why transition and accession processes have stagnated in some of the countries. The prevalence of organized crime has at times led to state capture referring to corrupt connections between "organized crime, business, politics, the security services (intelligence, police, military) and the judiciary" (Prezelj and Vogrinčič 2020, 548).

Organized crime in the region also influences the EU as the region serves as a transit corridor for trafficking weapons, drugs and even humans. Moreover, as the region itself

is a small market for illegal goods, the majority of criminal groups from Western Balkans carry out their actions elsewhere in the world (Kemp 2020). Hadžić (2021, 134) claims that organized crime itself was one of the driving forces behind the destruction of Yugoslavia. Thus, organized crime is a highly relevant problem in the region which already influences the security of the states of the EU and is an issue to be considered if the states were to join the Union. It also stalls the accession process as its widespread presence hinders societal and economic development which is needed to accede to the EU.

Terrorism is another security concern regarding the region, and it is an issue where the EU has identified Western Balkans as a priority region in its external counter-terrorism efforts. Main concerns are religiously motivated, ethnonationalist and separatist strains of terrorism and to a lesser extent also right-wing and left-wing radicalism. The Yugoslav wars in the 1990s attracted to the region *mujahideen* and radical Islamic organizations and this turned the terrorist issue (which in itself was not new to the region, stemming already from the beginning of 20th century) to an international problem. The states of the region are both the source of and a transit corridor for terrorists entering the EU. Whilst there have been very few terrorist attacks in the region itself, terrorists and weapons related to the region have been present in attacks worldwide. Therefore, the terrorism threat originating from Western Balkans influences security worldwide (Kudlenko 2019).

The EU is by far the biggest and most important player in the Western Balkan region, both in economic and political terms. However, third actors' influence in the region has been increasing and whilst this has become a salient topic in political circles and media since the mid-2010s, it still remains an understudied area of research (Prelec 2020). In the context of EU integration, third states in the region studied in literature are the United States, Russia, China, Turkey and the Gulf states (the states most often mentioned in the literature are Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates). Whilst the US does have significant influence in the region, its aims are generally in line with the EU's and thus when talking about possibly negative effects of third actor influence, the US is oftentimes not included. Third actor influence is a complex issue in the Western Balkans (and does not always have to entail negative influence per se) and relates to several often interlinked topics. It should be noted that the aim of influencing the region

varies among actors as Filip Ejdus point outs: "in contrast to Russia, which openly undermined the EU's influence in the Western Balkans, both Turkey and the Gulf States still treat the region as a bridge to the EU" (Prelec 2020, 170).

In the field of security, third actors can and have in some cases supported secessionist forces and promoted inter-ethnic rivalry. Russia specifically is generally regarded to aim at hampering the region's Euro-Atlantic integration by creating tensions and destabilizing the region with all means possible. Even though trade with Russia is marginal for the region, dependence on Russian gas is still an issue (Panagiotou 2022). China's influence in the region is a relatively new phenomenon and, according to Shopov (2022), is not yet fully understood or researched enough. However, he deems this increased attention to the area as "among the most significant geopolitical developments in Europe" (Shopov 2022). Analysts generally argue that with increasing investments to the region (most prevalent in the infrastructure and energy sector), China is aiming to enter the European Union's markets. China's investments and loans to the Western Balkan region are generally not dependent on any additional conditions and that makes them more attractive to the region. This hampers EU's conditionality as a tool to push these states towards necessary reforms, especially in the areas of social rights, sustainability and environmental protection. MEPs have already pointed out with declarations how Chinese factories in Serbia (the state most closely linked to China in the region) pollute the environment and use forced labor. China is not only focusing on investments but has recently also formed connections in politics, media, culture and education (Stanicek and Tarpova 2022). Shopov (2022) also argues that in the light of the Russian war in Ukraine, there is a possibility for increased Russian and Chinese cooperation in the region which could lead to further division between the Western Balkan states and the EU.

Third actors have also been related to increased terrorism and radical Islamist fighters in the region. The increase of radical Islamic fighters originating from the region (most of whom have left to fight for ISIS in the Middle East) is a new phenomenon, emerging mainly from the Syrian War (which started in 2011) and it has happened due to the radicalization of very limited Muslim populations in the region combined with dreadful economic situation and high unemployment rates (especially among the youth). Radical versions of Islam are mainly promoted by Saudi Arabia's Salafism and Iran's radical

version of Shia Islam as well as by other Gulf States. The Gulf states and Iran mainly took interest in the region as a result of the Yugoslav Wars in the 1990s and supported Bosniak fighters both in economic and military terms as the wars represented a good opportunity to expand one's influence in Europe. As mentioned above, the appearance of radical Islamic fighters from the Middle East in the Western Balkan region at the time is seen as the root cause of the spread of radical Islam and the emergence of jihadist fighters from the region in the following decades. Jihadist fighters are not only a security concern when they leave for the Middle East to fight: they are also an important security issue when they return to the region. For Iran, their influence has significantly decreased in the general Muslim population after the end of the Yugoslav wars. However, small radical pro-Iranian factions do exist in the region and as these factions have taken part in recruiting Islamic fighters from the region, they do remain a security issue (albeit not a major one). Saudi Arabia still heavily finances the renovation and construction of mosques and sets up NGOs and charities which help to spread their version of more radical and conservative Islam, an issue that has been spoken out against by moderate Islamic religious native to the region (Koppa 2021).

It should be noted, however, that the biggest influence in Islam in the region is still Turkey and not more radical Salafist or jihadist actors. Turkey's leader Erdogan has set to promote the Turkish version of moderate Islam in the region as a counterpoint to radicalization. From this angle, Turkish influence in the region in religious and cultural terms could surely be seen as a positive phenomenon for the EU and its member states as it helps to counter Islamic radicalization (Koppa 2021). At the same time, Turkey is an important player not only in religious but also cultural terms, promoting Turkish culture and language, renovating mosques and cultural heritage sites. Turkey's influence is not without limits, however, as the idea of a "glorious Ottoman past" does not resonate with the majority of the region's population who see the Ottoman period as an occupation. Turkey is one of the top trade partners for Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina whilst also being an important player in the banking sectors of the rest of the Western Balkan states (Koppa 2021).

The Gulf States (most importantly Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates) also invest in the region for purely commercial reasons. Whilst the large infrastructure projects bring credibility and foster connections with local elites, there is no evidence of any

specific plan or strategy for the region. The Western Balkans are a good investment opportunity for these states as the states aim to diversify their economy and move away from oil-dependence because Western Balkan markets are not as regulated or transparent as their Western counterparts (Koppa 2021).

On the one hand, investments are needed in the Western Balkan region as there is an investment gap present for the region (Hake and Radzyner 2019). Thus third actors could be seen as contributing to economic growth in the region, something the EU would surely like to see. On the other hand, economic ties often come together with soft power linkages. For example, Montenegro could be regarded to be in a "debt-trap" with Chinese loans as the country's debt-to-GDP ratio is almost 100% and over half of these debts are owed to China (Shopov 2022). When the third countries offer nontransparent loans or investments to the corrupt elites in the Western Balkan region, they also often contribute to autocratic tendencies, state capture and divergence from the promotion of human rights issues (Prelec 2020). Thus, whilst the aims of different third actors can vary, economic investments to the region are often treated with apprehension from the EU's side.

In pre-existing literature, third actor influence is often referred to in more tangible and pragmatic terms i.e. in relation to security issues. For example, Rita (2021) argues from a security perspective that distancing between the states of the region and the EU might not only lead to a rise in non-democratic governments but also influence of third actors in the area. Strupinskienė (2021) in her analysis of Lithuania's interests for Western Balkan enlargement also emphasizes the importance of these countries in a security perspective (in her analysis these constitute Russia, China, Turkey and the United Arab Emirates). Panagiotou (2021) has looked into growing Russian influence in the region due to the stagnation of European integration and how this influences security and stability of the region as well as of the EU itself and the likelihood of the Western Balkan states to ever be accepted as members.

The importance of the Western Balkan region for Europe-wide security and relevance for geopolitics has not gone unnoticed for European leaders as the former German Chancellor Angela Merkel stated during her visit to Belgrade in 2021: "We, who are already members of the European Union, should keep in mind that there is an absolute

geostrategic interest for us to include these countries in the European Union." (Bernard and Leloup 2022, 1). Importantly, the security dimension as such has also impacted the rise of Euroscepticism in the Union itself which in turn has increased reluctance for enlargement. A common discourse amongst Eurosceptic parties is that there is a lack of security in the EU which has been brought about by increased immigration and for the Eurosceptic parties in older member states, the Eastern enlargement of the Union is also seen as a reason for decreased security situation. Thus, the linkage between security dimension and enlargement is evident.

As mentioned before, the enthusiasm with which the EU accepted the 2004 and 2007 candidates to the Union has significantly lowered for the Western Balkan states. Petrovic (2022) for example argues that the assistance provided to the Western Balkans has been significantly lower and insufficient compared to the assistance offered to Eastern and Central European states prior 2004/2007. Scholars generally agree that the Western Balkan enlargement is at a stalling point which, it should be noted, has been partly due to the stagnation and even falling back on reforms in the regions' states themselves as well (Economides 2020, Besimi and Monastiriotis 2019, Petrovic 2022, O'Brennan 2018). Nonetheless, as the enlargement is still on the EU agenda and there are no signs of completely giving up the prospect on the EU nor the candidate countries' side, it is important to understand what arguments are used both for and against the enlargement. To analyze the arguments used, this thesis will look at the parliamentary debates of Estonia, Slovenia, Ireland and Austria and identify what types of arguments are voiced in the debates regarding enlargement. The choice of countries aims to illustrate different standpoints: Austria and Slovenia are neighbors of the Western Balkan region whilst Estonia and Ireland are both geographically as distant as possible in north-east and north-west directions. At the same time, Austria and Ireland are old member states whilst Slovenia and Estonia joined in 2004. These four countries have generally been in favor of enlargement, although for different reasons. Debates in the parliaments are chosen as even though accession negotiations take place between Brussels and the (possible) candidate states themselves, after a country is accepted by the European Commission and the European Council to join the Union, national parliaments (as well as the European Parliament) have the task to ratify this decision. According to Gora (2021, 441), parliaments "form key arenas for deliberations on foreign policy issues". Parliaments are one of the main venues of politicization of issues

– defined here as increased salience of the issue, broadened scope of actors and polarization of views in the issue. Moreover, there has been increased parliamentarization observed regarding the EU's foreign policy as the formal capabilities of the parliaments have increased and there has been an evolution of informal practices for legitimization of EU's actions (Gora 2021). It should be kept in mind, however, that parliamentary discourse does not always correlate in full with wider public discourse on the issue (Bélanger and Schimmelfennig 2021). There is a research gap present on arguments regarding Western Balkan states specifically in the national parliaments, thus this thesis aims to add novel data to pre-existing literature.

For this thesis, arguments for enlargement of the European Union to the Western Balkans will be divided into five: economic, security, democracy promotion, moral and containment of the influence of third actors. The economic pro-enlargement argument is virtually the same for Western Balkans as it was for Eastern enlargement: addition of new markets and resources and access to low-cost labor could lead to economic prosperity for both current member states as well as the new ones. Security (conflict prevention and taming organized crime and terrorism) and democracy promotion will be analyzed separately as even though these issues are highly interlinked, in the case of Western Balkans they have partly been counteractive as illustrated above with the EU's promotion of "stabilitocracies" and legitimation of corrupt elites for the sake of political stability and conflict prevention. In pre-existing literature third actor influence has often been analyzed under general security perspective, especially as some third states have promoted secessionist forces and inter-ethnic rivalry. Third states can also stall the EU integration process and undermine the EU's legitimacy in the region. However, in this thesis third actor influence is presented as a separate type of argument as aims for influence for the third states diverge greatly as explained above. The moral argument is related to Sjursen's (2002) ethical-political argument which sees these states as inherently part of Europe and thus rightful members of the European Union.

Considering these factors, the research question will be as follows: What type of arguments have been used in the parliamentary debates of European Union member states regarding possible future EU enlargement to Western Balkan countries? To present necessary contextual information, the thesis will look into the history of the Western Balkan enlargement process. Then, the few existing studies on parliamentary

discourse on enlargement in the member states' parliaments are discussed and based on this pre-existing knowledge, hypotheses for the empirical section will be drawn. Chapter 3 will present the methodological framework for this thesis. Results and discussions will be presented in chapter 4 and a conclusion with suggestions for future research will be put forward in the final chapter.

2.4 History of the enlargement process for Western Balkan states

A long-term strategic plan for the Western Balkan region, named The Stabilisation and Association Process for South-Eastern Europe, was proposed in May 1999 by the European Commission, and adopted at the 3rd-4th of June European Council at Cologne, just days before the official end of the War in Kosovo. Petrovic (2022) highlights the importance of establishing this coherent strategy for the region as Serbia and Montenegro (then one country) and Croatia ousted their authoritarian post-communist regimes and replaced them with pro-reformist and pro-Western powers in a period of just 10 months following the declaration of The Stabilisation and Association Process for South-Eastern Europe. Moreover, as a consequence, all the states of the region except North Macedonia managed to hasten their political and economic reforms by the end of the first half of the 2000s.

A year later, at the European Council of Santa Maria da Feira, it was openly stated that "all the countries concerned are potential candidates for EU membership" ("Santa Maria da Feira European Council 19-20 June 2000: Conclusions of the Presidency" 2000). The official beginning of the enlargement process of the European Union to the Western Balkan states is generally regarded to have been at the Thessaloniki Summit in June 2003. The declaration from this summit gave great hopes for the region's integration to Europe as it was stated that "the EU reiterates its unequivocal support to the European perspective of the Western Balkan countries. The future of the Balkans is within the European Union" ("EU-Western Balkans Summit Declaration" 2003, 2).

Croatia, which joined the Union in July 2013, was the first to apply for membership in the region in 2003. North Macedonia (at the time called the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia) applied for membership in 2004 and was officially accepted as a candidate country in 2005. After gaining independence from Serbia in 2006,

Montenegro applied for membership in 2008 and became a candidate country in 2010. Serbia applied for membership in 2009 and was granted official candidate country status in 2012 after an agreement over regional representation was signed with Kosovo. Albania applied for membership in 2009 and was granted candidate country status in 2014 ("The Western Balkans | Fact Sheets on The European Union | European Parliament" 2022). Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina remain as potential candidate countries as Kosovo is not recognized by five EU members (Spain, Slovakia, Romania, Greece, Cyprus) and Bosnia and Herzegovina still struggles with economic and institutional reform as Republika Srpska, one of the two entities that make up Bosnia and Herzegovina, often blocks any reform and is openly secessionist towards the federal state.

A change in the attitude towards Western Balkan enlargement became visible already in 2006 when the EU narrowed the accession conditions and adjusted the process so that it became more complex and difficult for candidate countries to progress in negotiations. The main aspects of this tightening of conditions were the increase of acquis chapters from 31 to 35, raising the requirements for closing an acquis chapter and an introduction of a clause which defined the accession negotiations as "open-ended process whose outcome cannot be guaranteed beforehand" (Petrovic 2022, 9).

The 2008 financial crisis also had a significant effect on increasing enlargement fatigue and making member states weary of accepting new countries to the Union. In response, the EU began to prioritize the acquis chapters on the rule of law, institution building and economic governance. Croatia, which closed its accession chapters in 2011, managed to avoid this three-pillared approach, however, for the remaining Western Balkan states the tightened conditions came together with the need to conform to the Union's initiatives in finding a solution to the contested statehood status of some of the states. Thus, the Western Balkans states have had to comply with significantly stricter conditions than the 2004/2007 enlargement countries (and partly Croatia too) which only had to fulfill the Copenhagen criteria (Petrovic 2022).

Moreover, the migration crisis which started in 2015 had a significant impact on the discourse regarding the Western Balkan's future vis-à-vis the European Union as the region became one of the main transit corridors for arriving migrants. Border

management became one of the central topics of enlargement strategy reports, aid to the region was increased whilst scrutiny regarding main accession topics was relaxed, mainly in the area of rule of law reform. However, the effects of the migration crisis on the enlargement process did not last long and the EU returned to emphasizing strict conditionality as soon as the migration flow from Balkans decreased and the border issue was desecuritized (Webb 2020).

According to Terzi (2021), the most complicated period for Western Balkan enlargement was between 2014 and 2016 when discourse on the area focused generally only on negative aspects like mass migration, radicalization and the increasing influence of third actors (mainly Russia, Turkey and Saudi Arabia). At the same time, reports, statements and declarations both from the European Commission as well as Council were not mentioning enlargement at all. Change came about in 2017 for several reasons. The topic of migration (and through that also fear of terrorism) from the area lost its salience as the number of arriving migrants dropped significantly and the area became reframed as vital to be integrated to European structures for security reasons. The change in government in North Macedonia which brought to power more progressive and reform-oriented leaders also instilled hope for the future of the region. Moreover, the Bulgarian presidency of the European Council at the first half of the 2018 placed a lot of attention on the topic of Western Balkan enlargement. The start of the change in discourse can be noted at the State of the Union speech of then-leader of the Commission Jean-Claude Juncker where he claimed that "the EU had to to maintain a credible enlargement perspective for Western Balkans" (Terzi 2021, 148). As a nod to this statement, the European future of the region was thus reaffirmed with the adoption of a new strategy by the European Commission, "A credible enlargement perspective for an enhanced EU engagement with the Western Balkans" in February 2018.

In April of the same year, the Commission announced a recommendation to open accession talks with Albania and North Macedonia. Following this, the Council of the European Union voiced their support for beginning accession talks in 2019 (Rita 2021). However, France vetoed the accession talks and decoupling of accession talks of North Macedonia and Albania in October 2019 which was seen as a controversial step and criticized by leaders of the EU as well as other member states. The veto was considered significant enough for the President of the European Council Donald Tusk, President of

the European Commission Jean-Claude Juncker and EU Commissioner for Enlargement Johannes Hahn to directly apologize to North Macedonia and Albania for the delay (Fejérdy 2020). President of France Emmanuel Macron stated that the EU itself must be reformed before it can accept new members (in line with his general reformist views on the EU and NATO and France's position in them) and the accession process itself should be revised, too. As an alternative, the French representatives offered a non-paper with unofficial proposals for reforming the enlargement process. The reformed process would include ideas of gradual association, stringent conditions, tangible benefits, and reversibility. Gradual association would mean a linear way of opening negotiation chapters by thematic blocks (instead of opening many chapters simultaneously) which would also consider the specifics of the country wishing to join the EU. Stringent conditions refer to more precise criteria and verifiable indicators to measure the states' success. The idea of tangible benefits increases financial support to the pre-enlargement states based on their results in domestic reforms. Reversibility of the enlargement process is seen as a necessary measure for when a country falls back on their reforms. These suggestions by the French government were approved by the Commission in February 2020 and included in the new enlargement strategy. The new enlargement strategy also grouped the negotiation chapters into six thematic blocks: fundamentals; internal market; competitiveness and inclusive growth; green agenda and sustainable connectivity; resources, agriculture and cohesion; external relations. According to the Commission, these changes should quicken the process as interrelated issues are dealt with together instead of in opening every chapter individually (Rita 2021). Following this, the French President did not veto the start of accession negotiations with North Macedonia and Albania in March 2020 (Fejérdy 2020, Války 2020). In May 2020, another Western Balkan summit took place after which the Zagreb Declaration was published which restated the European path for the states of the region. However, the declaration was criticized for the vague term of "European perspective" instead of indicating membership as a goal specifically (Rita 2021). In November 2020 and again in November 2021, Bulgaria vetoed North Macedonia's accession negotiations, claiming that for the veto to be lifted, the Macedonian identity, language and history should be interpreted from a Bulgarian perspective, including by North Macedonia itself. For the EU - Western Balkan Summit in June 2022, France proposed a solution to the Bulgarian - North Macedonian conflict by suggesting that North Macedonia include Bulgarians as one of the constitutive ethnicities in the preamble of their constitution.

This proposal was accepted by Bulgaria after which the state lifted the veto on North Macedonia and Albania. At first, political analysts in North Macedonia and in the European Union as well as the Prime Minister of North Macedonia highly doubted that such a proposal would be possible to push through the parliament in North Macedonia as it could be interpreted as putting the separate North Macedonian identity under question (Fouéré 2022, Marusic 2022a, Marusic 2022b). However, the North Macedonian parliament agreed to the French deal in a narrow vote on the 16th of July 2022. First accession conference between North Macedonia, Albania (which was held back together with North Macedonia) and the EU was held on the 19th of July 2022. It should be noted, however, that currently the North Macedonian opposition is seeking to hold a referendum on the 2017 Skopje-Sofia Friendship Treaty, claiming that terminating the treaty would put an end to Bulgarian claims on North Macedonian language and identity (Marusic 2022c). Thus, the Bulgarian - North Macedonian issue cannot be considered fully resolved yet.

Whilst the Bulgarian veto was technically lifted on the 24th of June 2022, no other groundbreaking decisions were taken regarding the Western Balkans. At the same time, Ukraine and Moldova were accepted as candidate countries due to the Russian invasion of Ukraine beginning on the 24th of February 2022 and the following increased security concerns. This was a truly historical decision which was at the same time criticized by Croatia's former Prime Minister Jadranka Kosor as she claimed that accepting Ukraine and Moldova whilst neglecting Western Balkans and especially Bosnia and Herzegovina which also suffered from a bloody war is humiliating to the whole region (Maček and Radosavljevic 2022).

When looking at European institutions, support for enlargement to the Western Balkans has been significantly higher from the European Commission whilst the European Council, representing the opinion of member states separately, has been more reluctant. For example, the Commission recommended the start of accession talks for North Macedonia and Albania in 2009 and 2016, respectively, however, the Council only agreed to this in 2020 (Brouwers 2020). Considering how the Commission is supposed to represent common European interests and leaders of member states are more invested in their country-specific interests, one should not be too surprised by this outcome.

2.5 Studies on parliamentary discourse

Góra (2021) found in her study on the European and national (the UK, Poland and Ireland) parliaments that in the period of 2004-2014 the topics of European Neighbourhood Policy and enlargement became increasingly politicized in the discourse, especially in the European Parliament. Enlargement policy was primarily justified in terms of increased security and importance in the global arena. Arguments against enlargement used the security perspective as well by claiming that enlargement would lead to an "import" of security problems and these arguments were mostly voiced by right-wing parties. This happened as the security situation in the neighborhood in that time frame worsened and the issue of security appeared more in the forefront of discussions. Politicization was especially relevant when debating the issue of Turkish possible accession to the Union. The main polarizing actors in these debates were radical right-wing parties which tied the process to larger issues such as globalization and security concerns.

Bélanger and Schimmelfennig (2021) in their study of both European and some of the member states' (France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Poland and the UK) national parliaments in the period of 2004-2017 found that the issue of enlargement has become less salient following the enlargement round of 2004. The views on (possible) candidate countries have become more negative, framing of the issue has become more connected to "protection" of the EU and the views have become more radicalized along party lines. Socially conservative and nationalist parties are generally more against enlargement than others. There is, however, no clear distinction on enlargement views regarding party division on the left-right spectrum. Moreover, Muslim-majority countries are less likely to be accepted, principally by conservative and nationalist parties. Being politically and geographically closer to the Union at the same time increases the likelihood of being accepted (but this does not apply for economical closeness). The authors however stress that even with these changes having taken in place the general discourse on enlargement has still remained to be positive and inclined towards openness.

Similarly, Wunsch and Olszewska (2022) looked into debates on enlargement in the national parliament of France, Germany, Hungary and Poland in the period 2004-2017.

They categorized arguments into three: normative, pragmatic and institutional whereas normative discourse emphasizes democracy promotion and historical responsibility, pragmatic discourse refers to conditionality and stabilization and institutional discourse looks at internal consolidation of the EU and its administrative efficiency. They found that pragmatic arguments were the most prevalent in all of the countries studied and some attention was put towards institutional claims whilst normative arguments were relatively rare. Only MPs in Poland emphasized democracy promotion as an argument for enlargement whilst Hungarian MPs argued for enlargement as a stabilizing tool whilst at the same time aiming to promote the rights of Hungarian minorities in their neighboring countries. French and German MPs focused on the institutional impact enlargement would have and emphasized the need for strict conditionality. In general, the authors found that institutional and pragmatic claims were prevalent, and the moral and ideological topics of shared European values and historical responsibility were significantly less prominent. The authors came to the conclusion that in recent years (preceding the year 2017) the optimism regarding enlargement has turned to increased caution and pessimism regarding the Union's ability to truly transform (possible) candidate countries and that this has been to a great extent been caused by worsening situation on democracy and rule of law inside the Union itself (namely in new member states).

Even though previous scholarship has extensively analyzed the arguments for Eastern enlargement, the study from Wunsch and Olszewska (2022) is the only one looking into arguments in parliamentary debates on enlargement which also includes Western Balkan enlargement (during the period 2004-2017, Turkish and Icelandic enlargements were also considered). Whilst Bélanger and Schimmelfennig (2021) and Góra (2021) study parliamentary discourse on enlargement, they do not compare different types of arguments per se but draw conclusions on the level of issue salience, politicization and party cleavages. Similarly to this thesis, Wunsch and Olszewska's study includes two old and two new member states, however, France and Germany as large member states could possibly have a different stance on enlargement than small old member states like Ireland and Austria. Like Poland and Hungary, Estonia and Slovenia joined the EU in 2004, however, in the context of Western Balkan enlargement, Slovenia could be hypothesized to have a different view on the issue than Poland, Hungary and Estonia due to geographical proximity and shared history with the region. Moreover, neither

Ireland, Slovenia, Austria nor Estonia are not specifically studied in any of the literature and thus, this thesis could fill a gap in previous research.

2.6 Hypotheses

Considering the finding of previous scholarship on parliamentary discourses and general arguments regarding Western Balkan enlargement, the author presents some hypotheses.

H1: Parliamentary discourse in new member states of Estonia and Slovenia will focus more on moral claims of responsibility of the European Union for all non-member states in Europe.

H2: The security argument will be most prevalent in the parliamentary discourses of Estonia, Austria and Slovenia with the Estonian discourse highlighting specifically the possible influence of third actors in the area.

H3: For Ireland, enlargement will not be a salient topic in parliamentary discourse, but pro-enlargement arguments will be presented mostly in the moral category on the grounds of universal values and political belonging.

For H1, the assumption is that as Estonia and Slovenia joined latest from the countries under study and the Eastern enlargement was partly pushed forward as a political move, there is a sense of common responsibility for support for future accession countries.

The reasoning for H2 is that as neighboring countries, Slovenia and Austria (and with Slovenia having been a part of Yugoslavia), are most aware and most sensitive to security issues and the potential for inter-ethnic conflict in the area. Estonia, at the same time, is very cognizant about the influence of third actors in vulnerable areas, especially in regard to Russia with which the country itself has had a traumatic experience. The support for Western Balkan enlargement from these three countries is also present in the joint statement presented to the EU in June 2019 which was signed by the foreign ministers of these countries (as well as the foreign ministers from Latvia, Lithuania, Hungary, Bulgaria, Italy, Poland, Slovakia, Czechia and Malta). In this statement, "peace and stability" are highlighted as important reasons to support future progress in

the enlargement process ("Joint Statement on the EU Commitment to the Western Balkans' European Integration" 2022).

For H3, previous scholarship has shown that Ireland has been pro-enlargement after the 2004 enlargement round. At the same time, as the country is geographically furthest from the Western Balkan region, is an old member state, does not share any historical trajectory with the region (like Austria and Slovenia) and aims for neutrality in defense terms, it is expected that the issue is not highly relevant in Ireland.

3. Methodology

3.1 Available data

In order to test the hypotheses presented, this thesis made use of stenographic minutes available on the official websites of all of the studied countries' parliaments ("Po Datumu Seje" n.d., "Stenogrammid" n.d., "Find a Debate," n.d., "Stenographische Protokolle," n.d.) . The timeline under study was the last 10 years, specifically from January 2012 to December 2012 (with the last date under study being the 13th of December when the analytical part of this thesis was finished). This time frame encompasses the mandate of three European Commissions: the Barroso Commission (22 November 2004 - 31 October 2014), the Juncker Commission (1 November 2014 - 30 November 2019) and the incumbent von der Leyen Commission (1 December 2019 - presumably 2024 European Parliament elections). During this time frame, the process of European integration of the Western Balkans has been changing: in 2012 and 2013, Europe was still feeling the repercussions of the global financial crisis (which generally negatively affected member states' willingness to support enlargement) and in 2014, Eurpean Commission President Juncker openly stated that the Union will not enlarge during his term in office. However, starting from approximately 2017, a new enthusiasm can be seen regarding enlargement and in 2018, a new strategy for the region was presented by the European Commission. The years 2019-2021 witnessed another set of obstacles in the form of the French and Bulgarian vetos on starting accession talks with Albania and North Macedonia but accession negotiations were finally started in the summer of 2022. Importantly, this time frame also encompasses the start of the Russian War in Ukraine and acceptance of Ukraine as a candidate state which could influence Western Balkan enlargement as well. Therefore, it will be

interesting to see whether these changes in European Union politics are also mirrored in the prevalence and content of analyzed statements. Considering the time frame, quotes from 2012 and 2013 can also mention Croatia's accession as the country joined the EU on the 1st of July 2013.

Quotes by members of parliament on EU enlargement to the Western Balkans were added to a table where the 1) date when the argument was presented 2) name of the person presenting the argument 3) party of the person presenting the argument 4) support or opposition to enlargement 4) type of argument and 5) relevant keywords were specified. As explained above, arguments were categorized into five types: economic, security, democracy promotion, containment of the influence of third states and moral. The tables were separate for the four countries under study. For Ireland and Estonia, the author of the thesis was able to read the transcripts in their original language, for Slovenia and Austria, the author found and translated the relevant quotes by automatic translation with free translation programmes Google Translate and Deepl. To find the relevant statements, keywords „Balkans", „Western Balkans", „enlargement", „European Union enlargement" and the names of the six Western Balkan states in relevant languages were used.

3.2 Categorizing the arguments

3.2.1 Security

There were many arguments present where security was outright mentioned as an important aspect of the EU enlargement to the Western Balkan region. Moreover, arguments that mentioned stability in regards to political stability were also categorized under the security type. Western Balkans have been generally regarded as a region troubled with political instability as a EU report from 2022 points out: "most Western Balkan countries have been facing continued political instability, local political crises, corruption scandals, shrinking space for civil society, tendency towards more authoritarian regimes, along with no progress with unresolved bilateral issues (particularly in the Belgrade-Pristina EU facilitated dialogue)" (Bartlett et al. 2022, 4). Most serious sources of political instability stem from Republika Srpska's secessionist wishes and the unsettled status of Kosovo. When looking at data from the World Bank, the EU average in political stability is 0,74 whilst the Western Balkan five average

(Kosovo's data was not available in this database) was -0,43 ("Political Stability in Europe" 2022). Considering that the index ranges from -2,5 signifying weak political stability to +2,5 signifying strong political stability, it becomes evident that the region is significantly more unstable than the EU. Here, political stability is measuring "perceptions of the likelihood that the government will be destabilized or overthrown by unconstitutional or violent means, including politically-motivated violence and terrorism" ("Political Stability in Europe" 2022). Therefore, it is evident that political instability is a significant issue in the region and a possible source for future violence and thus can be regarded as a security issue (which is why it is also often coupled together both in the studied statements as well as in pre-existing literature). Whilst in the more stable and consolidated democracies of the EU political instability generally refers to instability in government, troubles in forming a government etc., in the Balkans political instability can often lead to more serious breakdown of government and even violence. Political protests that end in violence and even deaths are common in the region and thus, political instability is more directly related to security issues.

3.2.2 Economic

For economic arguments, both statements that referred to the economic benefit of enlargement for the accession country as well as for the member state itself were included. Statements including the word "prosperity" were also included as the meaning behind this word is virtually the same.

3.2.3 Democracy promotion

Democracy promotion was often mentioned together with the issue of rule of law which is a precondition for a well-functioning democracy. In several statements, promotion of common values was also mentioned which was also categorized under the democracy promotion argument type. Common values is a larger term and is often related in the European context also to the protection of human rights and minorities and whether a modern democracy needs to include these issues in order to be considered a full democracy is a philosophical debate, however, for the sake of clarity in this thesis it was presumed that these common values at least partly overlapped with the ideals of democracy and where thus categorized as such.

3.2.4 Containment of the influence of third actors

For third actor influence the arguments were generally straight-forward and either mentioned third actors as such or specified countries whose influence was seen as potentially damaging to the EU integration process.

3.2.5 Moral

A statement was categorized to include the moral type of argument when reference to the Western Balkan's inherent inclusion in Europe as a political entity was made. Moreover, arguments relating to obligation of the EU for this region were categorized as moral. A common moral argument was also related to the member states' own positive experience in the Union and thus a sense of duty stemming from this to offer the same possibilities to other European states.

4. Results

4.1 Findings

Overall, 92 statements from the four countries were analyzed. For the bicameral legislatures of Ireland and Austria, both of the houses were studied. It should be noted that because the number of statements available for analysis was highly variable between states (with 12 statements from the Estonian parliament to 33 statements from the Irish parliament), comparisons of percentages should be regarded as aiming to illustrate general patterns and could only be meaningful when there is a large percentage point difference present. Moreover, one could argue that the difference in the size of the studied parliaments (from Slovenia's 90 seats to Austria's current 244 seats in both houses) does not allow for comparison. However, a larger parliament does not necessarily mean more frequent or longer debates thus the amount of time (or in this case, number of statements) allocated for an issue is still comparable.

In the Austrian Parliament, 26 statements were studied. The security argument was the most prevalent: 20 of the 26 statements mentioned security with 14 out of these 20 only mentioning security and no other types of arguments. This is to be expected because as a neighboring country, potential overspill of conflicts from the region directly influences the state itself. Third actors were mentioned 6 times and economic

considerations 7 times. Democracy promotion was only mentioned once and moral arguments were not present. For third actors, statements mentioned them both in general but also brought out specific countries: Russia, Turkey, China, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates. This seems to point towards the observation that pragmatic arguments like security, third actors and economics are more prevalent in Austria which is plausible since Austria is a neighbor to the region and also an important trade partner. The Eastern enlargement benefited Austria greatly in economic terms as Austria was one of the first investors to the Central and Eastern European region after 1990 and thus Austria's enthusiasm regarding economic opportunities with the Western Balkan region's inclusion to the EU is understandable (Liebhart 2020). The benefits of Western Balkan enlargement in economic terms were clearly stated in 2019 by Carmen Jeitler-Cincelli, an Austrian People's Party MP (the largest coalition partner at the time and also today): "We need the union with the Western Balkans for the following three reasons: to ensure peace and stability and thus remain independent and sovereign as Europe; as a clear amalgamation of a common culture; and so that our economy has sufficient workers and new labor markets at its disposal.". Similarly, Edgar Mayer from the Austrian People's Party claimed in 2012: "Austria is trying very hard and taking the initiative to help these countries, because these countries of the Western Balkans are of course also an area of innovation and growth - we have already discussed this today - for our excellent Austrian economy." Thus, the importance of economic arguments for Austria becomes evident.

For Estonia, as was to be expected, the topic of Western Balkan enlargement was not a salient one and only 19 statements were identified in the given time frame. It should be mentioned that only 12 of these statements clearly outlined reasons for supporting the enlargement whilst the rest merely stated support and did not clarify reasoning. These statements without a clearly stated argumentation were still included due to a small number of statements to be analyzed otherwise and thus to be able to at least get a glimpse of the patterns of argumentations in Estonian parliament. 6 statements clearly mentioned security (or more indirectly stability) as reasoning for enlargement, 4 statements presented moral arguments and economic considerations were mentioned in 1 statement. For moral arguments, two lines of reasonings were used: firstly, that all states in Europe that fulfill the conditions of accession should be allowed to join the EU out of principle (the need to fulfill the conditions was emphasized on 3 occasions) and

secondly, that because Estonia has had a positive experience with EU membership, they should also support further enlargements. Democracy promotion was argued for in 5 statements and third actors were interestingly not directly mentioned in any of the statements. The 7 statements that did not put forth a specific reasoning for enlargement do offer us some other insight however: in 6 of the 7 statements, Eastern Partnership countries are referred to directly and in the 7th statement, they are referred to indirectly as Mart Nutt talks in 2013 about the obligation to open accession talks with all states in Europe that abide by the necessary conditions and the need for the EU move away from a closed and protectionist approach regarding its neighbors. Eastern Partnership was mentioned together with Western Balkan enlargement in the other 12 statements on 6 occasions. Thus, it is clear that Eastern Partnership is a relatively important topic for Estonian MPs.

For Ireland, 33 statements were analyzed. The security argument was a prevalent one with 17 statements mentioning that. Moral argument was also common with 12 statements present. Interestingly, the most common line of reasoning (present in 8 of the 12 statements) was that Ireland has highly benefited from EU membership and thus there's a responsibility for Ireland to also support further accessions. For example, the then-prime minister Micheál Martin stated in October 2021: „On the western Balkans, we agree on the accession programme. It has gone on for too long and too slowly. We have benefited from the European Union journey. We formally joined the EU in 1973 and we have benefited enormously from it. We believe the Western Balkan countries deserve the same". Ireland joined the EU already in 1973 so it is noteworthy that a sense of duty for potential member states is still a salient emotion. Ireland has benefitted hugely from EU membership in economic terms, having been transformed from a relatively poor rural state to a financial hub in mere decades. Two statements from the study also mention how Irish culture and language have benefited from EU membership and how that could also be beneficial for Western Balkan states (North Macedonian concerns about their language and identity vis- à-vis Bulgarian claims was brought out in one of the discussions, possibly signaling that this is an issue where the Irish empathize with North Macedonians). Another issue which was paralleled between Irish and Western Balkan accession to the EU in one statement was the fact that Ireland also had to wait long before it could accede and thus 7 statements also mentioned that the process has been too slow for the region. Third actors were mentioned in 6 statements

with 4 of them specifically bringing out Russia as the negative influence to the region. Economic arguments were mentioned 7 times and democracy promotion 5 times.

For Slovenia, 14 statements with a clear argumentation for reasons to support or oppose enlargement were found. This is a surprisingly small number considering that Slovenia is a neighbor to the region, however, this could be for two reasons: the first one is that the researcher was not able to find all of the statements in the time period, possibly due to having to examine the texts with the help of automatic translation. The other one, however, could be that as a neighbor with common history with most of the states of the region, in Slovenia there is not much need to openly state support and reasoning for support for Western Balkan enlargement as this is an issue a large majority of the population as well as politicians agree on and thus no one needs to be convinced. The data from the statements that were found however shows that unsurprisingly, the security argument was the most prevalent with 8 statements mentioning security issues. Economic arguments were almost as prevalent with 5 statements (technically, two other statements mentioned economic reasons but those were arguing opposition to enlargement). Democracy promotion was mentioned on 3 occasions and moral arguments on 1 occasion. The moral argument used the reasoning that the European Union enlargement policy is a response to end the artificial East-West divide on the European continent and "to the justified desire of the inhabitants of our continent to join the project of a Western and united Europe". Thus, the argumentation uses claims on political belonging and a universal right of all European people to join European integration. Third actors were mentioned twice: once when arguing for enlargement and once when arguing against it. Unlike for the other countries studied, one of the statements in the Slovenian Parliament also mentioned the wellbeing of Slovenian minorities in the region to be a reason for enlargement. Considering that Slovenia is the only country out of the four studied countries with a significant minority population in the region, this should not surprise us.

Out of all the statements analyzed, only two were indirectly arguing against enlargement and they were presented during the same debate by the same MP in the Slovenian Parliament: Matej T. Vatovec. Mr Vatovec was at the time a member of the United Left electoral alliance (the alliance was transformed into two separate parties in 2017) and as the only MP voicing opposition to enlargement, his quotes are interesting

to analyze. The debate in parliament on the 13th of May 2015 was about the ratification of three association agreements regarding Moldova, Georgia and Ukraine: Association Agreement between the European Union and the European Atomic Energy Community and their Member States, of the one part, and the Republic of Moldova/Georgia/Ukraine, of the other part. These agreements "set the foundation for political association and economic integration with the EU, and aim to foster positive developments in the fields of democracy and the rule of law, human rights, and economic development" (Ahamad Madatali and Jansen 2022, 1). Whilst the debate was not about enlargement per se, Mr Vatovec's statements mention association agreements which are a precondition for future enlargement as well as Croatia and Slovenia as already members of the EU. Mr Vatovec states regarding Moldova's association: "In the United Left we protest when such neoliberal agreements are imposed on Slovenia by those who are more powerful than us. It would be hypocritical if we were now imposing them on those who are weaker. Have we really learned nothing from the European integrations in the so-called Western Balkans? What do the people of Bosnia, Serbia, have to gain from the association and stabilisation programmes? What good does it do Croatia and Bulgaria to be members of the European Union if, according to all the development indicators, they are at the tail end of the European Union and cannot get away from it? There is a dark spot on the development map of Europe between Romania and Ukraine. That is Moldova. Moldova is far behind Albania in the human development index, and even behind Egypt, Lebanon and Palestine. Ukraine and Georgia are not doing much better. The experience of the former Yugoslav republics confirms that European integration means more de-industrialisation, more unemployment, more poverty and more emigration. The Moldovans certainly do not deserve this scenario. They need development aid instead of free trade agreements. Instead of a choice between Russia and the EU, they need equal cooperation with all neighboring countries. Only in this case will Moldova be able to develop and one day unite into a single country of equal peoples. Not only does this agreement and the Eastern Partnership policy not make this possible, they even further prevent it. That is why we in the United Left will not support this agreement." A few replies later he states (now the debate is regarding Ukraine's association): "The association and stabilization agreements that the EU concluded with the former Yugoslav republics and other Balkan countries have proven to be harmful in practice. The result was deindustrialization, unemployment, poverty, emigration and general lack of perspective.".

His main argument relates to economic concerns as he claims that European integration leads to deindustrialization, unemployment, poverty and emigration (presumably resulting from the increased economic competition that is brought about by integration with a more developed European economic system). These arguments are to be expected considering the fact that the United Left emerged out of popular protests against growing economic inequality, austerity measures and corruption which started in Maribor in November 2012 but quickly spread across Slovenia. The United Left started as an anti-establishment political movement and eventually grew into a populist party formation (Toplišek 2017). Whilst at first, the party was Eurosceptic, following the failure of Syriza in Greece in 2015 in offering a viable alternative to the EU, the party's ideology changed more towards reforming the EU to be more democratic, to renegotiate European Treaties and to establish an international infrastructure for monetary and economic governance outside of the Eurozone (Toplišek 2019). Considering that these statements are from May 2015, we can presume that at the time the party was still aiming to be more openly Eurosceptic.

Interestingly, Mr. Vatovec also mentions the need to choose between Russia and the EU if one wished to integrate with the EU which he deems unnecessary. The author could not find any academic articles in English talking about the United Left's stance on Russia, however, one of the two parties that formed out of the United Left in 2017 was The Left (Levica in Slovene, in some of the literature this party is regarded as the successor of the United Left) and Mr. Vatovec is currently the leader of the party's parliamentary group. The Left's electoral programme for the parliamentary elections in April 2022 states that they aim to withdraw Slovenia from NATO ("Prihodnost za vse, ne le za peščico (program za državnozborske volitve 2022)" n.d.). The Left also advocated for a peaceful resolution to the Russian war in Ukraine and refused to send military aid to Ukraine (Sinanović 2022). Miha Kordiš, an MP from The Left, stated in an interview in May 2022: "Levica stridently opposes any kind of military aid to Ukraine, as it would only serve to prolong the conflict. Despicable as Putin's invasion is, it did not fall out of the sky. NATO is neck deep in terms of its involvement in the situation. Indeed it was NATO's drive towards the east and its strategy of encircling Russia that destabilised the region in the first place." (Fuentes and Kordiš 2022). In March 2022, the Slovenian parliament voted on a declaration condemning Russian aggression in Ukraine. 67 out of the 74 MPs presented supported the declaration whilst

all of the 5 The Left's MPs, including Mr. Vatovec, abstained ("The National Assembly Condemned the Russian Aggression in Ukraine with a Declaration. Five MPs from the Levica Party and Two from the SNS Abstained" 2022). On the 22nd of February 2022, 2 days before the start of the Russian War in Ukraine, Mr. Vatovec stated at the Slovenian Parliament: "Now the dilemma of some impending war is of course a serious one and something that needs to be looked at carefully. However, I would like to point out one key issue here. I think that the crisis in Ukraine, or rather this battle between these two imperialisms (that of NATO and that of Russia) speaks exactly of why Slovenia's membership in the NATO pact is a mistake. Because if anything threatens us, it is membership in the NATO pact. Now we see the actual consequence of what can happen.". Whilst these scattered pieces of information do not allow to draw any straightforward conclusions necessarily, it seems that The Left is generally a party that does not support the current status quo in European politics on NATO and opposition to Russia. The Left currently holds 5 and in 2015 the United Left held 6 seats out of the 90 seats in the Slovenian Parliament. Overall, one can assume that the positions expressed by Mr. Vatovec in 2015 (and those expressed in 2022) are relatively fringe and do not represent the opinion of the majority population in Slovenia.

4.2 Discussion

When comparing the data from all the four countries, some general conclusions can be drawn. For moral arguments, 36% of Irish, 33% of Estonian and only 8% of Slovenian statements use this claim (for calculating Slovenia's percetages, only statements supporting enlargement are used for the sake of comparability). 0% of statements in the Austrian Parliament presented this argument. Therefore, hypothesis 1 "parliamentary discourse in new member states of Estonia and Slovenia will focus more on moral claims of responsibility of the European Union for all non-member states in Europe" is disproved as Estonia and Ireland are the main states where moral arguments are used. Whilst the presence of moral arguments in Estonia was to be expected as the state joined the EU only in 2004, it is surprising that these claims are not very relevant in Slovenia but are salient in Ireland.

It is important to note that Ireland joined the EU the earliest out of the four countries but still, most of their moral considerations relate to gratefulness about their own success in the EU and the obligation to share the opportunities EU membership provides with others. This certainly relates to the fact that objectively, Ireland has been transformed during its time in the EU, at the same time, the same can surely be said about Slovenia and Estonia and Austria's economy has benefited greatly from EU membership as well. What might be interesting to note is the development of Irish economical standing in the EU. When Ireland joined the EU, the country was a relatively poor rural state. Irish voters were originally also wary about Eastern enlargement of 2004 as financial transfers from the EU were seen as key to legitimizing Ireland's inclusion in the Union and with many new much poorer members joining, Irish voters were afraid of losing out. However, after the Eastern enlargement, Ireland has been a clear supporter of enlargement in the past 20 years (O'Brennan 2018). Ireland became a net contributor to the EU budget in 2013, meaning that for 9 out of the 10 years under study, Ireland was a net contributor ("Annual Report on Ireland's Transactions with the EU in 2018" 2020). Austria has been a net contributor to the EU budget since it joined the Union in 1995 (Blankart and Kirchner 2003) and thus has never been a net receiver and might not feel the same level of gratefulness. Whilst Slovenia and Estonia are still net receivers, they are likely to be less enthusiastic in sharing EU finances with more disadvantaged countries such as those in the Western Balkan region.

At the same time, it should be considered that the arguments presented in the Irish Parliament were often by the same people from two parties: Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael (one of the statements was from an Independent MP with 3 statements from Labour and 1 statement from Sinn Féin). Thus, it could be that these two parties have amongst themselves decided to use moral reasoning as one of the talking points to argue for enlargement. Alternatively, it could reflect a general stance in Irish society regarding the importance of EU membership in Irish economic developmental success and the moral obligation to share the benefits that membership can bring. More broadly, it could point towards a specific Irish political culture and the importance of moral arguments in any debate due to cultural reasons. This is a further question to the experts on Irish politics and society.

Security arguments were most prevalent in all of the four parliaments with 77% of statements in Austrian, 66% in Slovenian, 51% in Irish and 50% in Estonian parliaments referencing this issue. Considering the history of the region and the ongoing tensions, this is surely not surprising. The higher share of security arguments in Austria and Slovenia could partly be explained with the states being neighbours to the region and thus being more influenced by possible spillover effects of security issues.

A connected topic was containment of the influence of third actors in the region which was mentioned in 23% of Austria, 18% of Irish and 0% of Estonian parliamentary statements. For Slovenia, third actors were mentioned in 2 statements but only one of them argued for containment of third actor influence whilst the other argued in essence that Western powers were those exerting too much influence in the region as well as in Eastern Partnership countries and that European countries not yet member of the EU should not have to choose between Russia, a commonly referenced third state in other statements, and the EU itself. This is a very different line of reasoning from other third actor influence statements so only one statement will be considered for Slovenia, making 8% of Slovenian statements be about third actor influence. Hypothesis 2 stated: "the security argument will be most prevalent in the parliamentary discourses of Estonia, Austria and Slovenia with the Estonian discourse highlighting specifically the possible influence of third actors in the area". This hypothesis is disproved as the security argument was the most prevalent in all of the states (and interestingly significantly more prevalent in Austrian Parliament than in others) and third actor influence was not mentioned in the Estonian Parliament at all.

Even though Ireland is geographically as far as possible from the region in Europe and is a militarily neutral country, security arguments are still prevalent. Objectively, security crises in the region cannot really have a spillover effect on Ireland thus Irish concerns for the region's stability could stem from economic considerations (as security issues in the region could negatively affect European economy) as well as moral considerations. Ireland itself has suffered from violence in recent history and the issue of Northern Ireland is especially salient recently in regards to Brexit, thus one could assume that this partly makes the Irish MPs more empathetic to the troubles in the Western Balkan region. The Troubles in Ireland and the Yugoslav Wars are also similar in a sense that they could be considered as civil wars where people from the same

ethnicity (in Ireland's case) or previously from the same country (in Western Balkan's case) turned on each other over religious identity. This could partly go in line with the previous finding that Irish MPs brought out the moral argument the most. From the collection of data, the researcher also noticed that Brexit was often mentioned alongside Western Balkan enlargement. One of the statements by Leo Varadkar in 2018 from the data illustrates this: "I reaffirmed Ireland's support for the eventual accession of the Western Balkan states to the European Union once the necessary conditions have been met. The EU has been a driver of peace and prosperity and the forging of closer links with this region will be of benefit to the countries of the western Balkans in bringing growth and stability. In this regard, I pointed to the important role of the UK's and Ireland's shared membership of the EU in securing peace on this island. I am, therefore, reassured that the countries of central and eastern Europe view Brexit as we do and that we view the Western Balkans as they do." From this statement it seems that Ireland is not only grateful for the economic benefit EU membership has brought about but also the fact that with Ireland and the UK both having been in the EU, peace has been able to be maintained on the island. Thus, it seems plausible to conclude that the specific history and reality of Ireland's politics greatly influences the way Irish MPs relate to the enlargement debate.

Hypothesis 3 stated: "for Ireland, enlargement will not be a salient topic in parliamentary discourse, but pro-enlargement arguments will be presented mostly in the moral category on the grounds of universal values and political belonging.". This hypothesis is disproved as enlargement was a relatively salient topic with Ireland having the most statements on the issue out of the four states studied. Whilst the security argument was the most prevalent for Ireland, moral arguments were also frequent (36%). Universal claims were used regarding European states' right to join the EU as a principle, however, the most prevalent line of reasoning related to Ireland's own positive experience within the EU. Political belonging was not used as an argument (and it was rarely present in the arguments of MPs from the other three states, too).

For the complete lack of mentioning of third actors in the Estonian Parliament, it is important to realize that Estonia has always focused in the foreign policy realm on the threat of Russia. Eastern Partnership countries (as the Russo-Georgian War of 2008 and the ongoing Russian war in Ukraine sadly illustrate) are much more likely to fall victim

to Russia's expansionist policies due to historical connections and geographical proximity when compared to the Western Balkan region. Eastern Partnership countries are also much closer to Estonia and thus, it could be hypothesized that Estonian MP's are too focused on the Eastern Partnership countries to worry about the Western Balkans, especially in regards to third actors (like the Gulf States, Iran, Turkey, to some extent China) that are not very relevant to Estonian politics. Lack of knowledge on these other third states could also be an issue because, as mentioned above, the topic of third actors in the area only became salient in media and political circles in Europe in the mid-2010s and is still understudied in academia.

Economic arguments were present in 42% of Slovenian, 27% of Austrian, 21% of Irish and 8% of Estonian parliamentary debates. The low salience of the economic argument for Estonia is relatively expected due to geographical distance and lack of economic ties. At the same time, trade relations between Austria and the Western Balkans are traditionally strong and Slovenia also has important trade relations with the region ("Slovenia - Market Overview" n.d.). For Ireland, the Western Balkan region is not a significant trade partner, however, as mentioned before, the economic success of Ireland after joining the EU is an important factor for supporting continued enlargement for Ireland and thus economic arguments could be regarded as convincing in the Irish political circles.

Democracy promotion was mentioned in 42% of Estonian, 25% of Slovenian, 15% of Irish and 4% of Austrian parliamentary debates. The lack of mentioning of democracy promotion in Austrian debates could be an issue of pragmatic arguments (like security, third actors and economic) being preferred over other types of arguments in the Austrian political culture. Again, this is a further question for specialists on Austrian politics.

Regarding the time frame of the analysis, it is interesting to note that significantly more statements on the issue were present from the year 2018 onward in the debates in Austrian, Slovenian and Irish parliaments. This coincides with a revival of interest in the region from the EU as a whole from approximately 2017 onwards and a new strategy for the Western Balkan's EU integration presented in 2018. Moreover, for Ireland, there was a signficant increase in the number of statements after the start of the

Russian War in Ukraine on the 24th of February 2022, possibly due to a general understanding that the European countries neighbouring the EU need to be more quickly accepted to the Union in order to avoid these states falling under increased third actor influence. For example, Seán Haughey, a Fianna Fáil MP, pointed out the possible influence of Russia on the 10th of May 2022: „"I also want to say a few words about EU enlargement. A number of countries in the western Balkans wish to join the EU, including North Macedonia, Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro and Serbia, while Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia also want to join. They have completed their questionnaires and these are being assessed by the European Commission for a further report to a European Council meeting. As a general principle, Ireland is in favour of enlargement but joining the EU is a complex and often lengthy process. As the Russian bear eyes these countries up and tries to destabilise them, we need to give them every practical assistance, including financial aid, help to resolve internal conflicts, assistance with governance and public administration issues, help to reduce their energy dependence on Russia and so on. However, they do need to meet the EU criteria and there can be no backsliding from adherence to European values.". On the 28th of June 2022, he called for hastening the enlargement process due to geopolitical considerations: „While welcoming the decision of the European Council to grant candidate status to Ukraine and Moldova, there was disappointment in the Western Balkans and Georgia that their cases for accession were not advanced. Ireland rightly supports enlargement as a general principle. Enlargement promotes peace and stability in various regions and makes sense from a strategic point of view. The Taoiseach and German Chancellor Mr. Olaf Scholz have questioned the need for a unanimous decision-making when it comes to admitting new member states. The French President has spoken about a political community in the neighbourhood of the EU, as the Taoiseach has just said, without full membership, a partial integration into the EU, if you like. Would the Taoiseach agree that, following the Russian invasion of Ukraine, we need to speed up enlargement and give geopolitical considerations an increased weighting in this process?". It is interesting that this geopolitical aspect of the Russian War in Ukraine in regards to the enlargement process is so prevalent in the debates in Ireland (8 out of 15 statements since the start of the war mentioned this issue) but not at all mentioned in the Slovenian parliament and only mentioned twice in the Austrian parliament. This could possibly point to Irish sensitivity on the issue of war due to their national history.

At the same time, one might expect that this aspect would also be salient in the Estonian parliament due to their historical experience with Russia but enlargement was not argued for from this perspective in 2022 at all. On the 22nd of November 2022, however, Prime Minister Kaja Kallas did mention in a debate on Estonia's European policy when talking about Hungary's non-alignment with EU status quo on Russia: „Another area of concern is certainly some countries in the Western Balkans, which also have very close ties with Russia. But our history has shown, and history in general, even now, has shown that everyone who builds their security or well-being on Russia will sooner or later get cheated or get burned. The question is how painful a price you pay for it." Previously in the same debate, she had stated that Estonia supports enlargement (both to Eastern Partnership as well as Western Balkan states) but no clear reasoning was given. It seems that Estonian and Irish perceptions of the countries in the region might thus slightly vary with Estonians being more suspecting of the region due to its ties with Russia.

5. Conclusion

This thesis set out to compare different European Union member states' views and reasonings on possible future European Union enlargement to the Western Balkans. Whilst there exists a body of literature on arguments for enlargement, it is mainly focused on the Eastern enlargement of 2004 and/or arguments from the European Union' side as a whole. Arguments in national parliaments are rarely analyzed. Therefore, this thesis aimed to bridge this research gap by looking into arguments present in the national parliaments of Estonia, Ireland, Slovenia and Austria on the issue. Stenographic minutes were used to gather relevant quotes and categorize them based on the type of argument: economic, security, containment of third actors influence, democracy promotion and moral. The main findings show that, apart from two statements from an MP from a relatively fringe party in the Slovenian parliament, all other statements clearly supported Western Balkan enlargement. Thus, support for the Western Balkan enlargement is clearly the status quo in the parliaments of these countries. The security argument was undoubtedly the most prevalent type of argument with the highest frequency of occurrence in Austria and Slovenia, possibly due to the

states' geogrpahical proximity to the region. Surpisingly, moral arguments were prevalent not only in the new member states of Estonia and Slovenia but even more so in the old member state of Ireland. In general, the Western Balkan enlargement topic was most prevalent in Ireland which is surprising considering the state's geographical farness, lack of historical ties and trade relations. Statements from the Austrian parliament focused on pragmatic arguments like economy, containment of third actor influence and security. For Austria, Slovenia and Ireland, there was a significant increase in the salience of the Western Balkan enlargement topic from 2018 onwards.

Future research could try to find answers to questions which arose from the results that are outside of the scope of this thesis, namely whether there is something specific about Irish political culture that favors moral arguments or Austrian political culture which favors pragmatic arguments (or if these findings are only limited to this specific issue). Moreover, the ongoing Russian War in Ukraine has changed the political landscape of Europe and the whole world and with Ukraine having been accepted as a candidate country of the EU, it has also changed the political implications of the enlargement process. Thus, future research could look more in detail how the discourse on enlargement has or has not changed in national parliaments following the start of the war. Future research could also make use of a larger number of countries studied.

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List of appendices

Appendix 1: Data from parliamentary debates