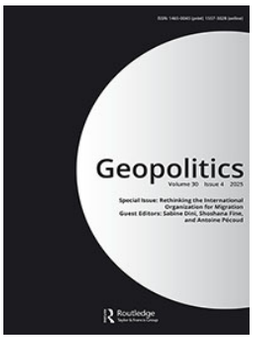

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A Relational Approach to Study Europeanisation via Enlargement

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ABSTRACT

In the wake of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the European Union (EU) has reinvigorated its enlargement agenda, bringing renewed focus to the complexities of Europeanisation via enlargement. This article argues for a new relational approach to Europeanisation via enlargement, which allows us to fully capture the political and relational dynamics of the process. In doing so, it seeks to shift the focus from outcomes-driven analyses that tend to take the EU for granted, to an analysis driven by the core research question: What tensions are generated within the political integration process, in what forms do they manifest, and how are they negotiated? Reconceptualising enlargement as a process of negotiated transitions, the relational approach highlights how EU rules, norms, and values are co-constructed, contested, and redefined through ongoing transactions between the EU and candidate countries. It embraces the interdependencies between actors and policy fields, while challenging assumptions about EU hegemony and the static nature of European values. By foregrounding the political dimensions of the Europeanisation process, the relational approach argues for a long-durée analysis that emphasises *outcome-in-process*. This allows for the introduction of the concept of 'tactical Europeanisation' to illustrate how candidate countries, through acts of doublespeak, navigate and instrumentalise EU conditions, performing alignment with EU norms externally while domestically hollowing them out. Ultimately, this article provides a critical lens to EU enlargement, de-centring the EU, and taking candidate countries' agency seriously, while placing the enlargement process within its wider international context.

After years of stalling and enlargement fatigue, Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, in part, prompted the re-invigoration of the EU enlargement policy, and new countries have been offered candidate member status (Koval and Vachudova 2024; Lovato, Juncos and Maurer this issue). Whereas some have proclaimed the EU enlargement process as the EU's most successful foreign policy tool (Vachudova 2014, 2019), others have been more critical of the process and demonstrated the failures and limitations of how the EU seeks to 'transform' candidate countries (see e.g. Burlyuk 2017; Huszka 2017;

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Luciani 2023; Musliu 2021; Petrovic and Tzifakis 2021). Some have even highlighted that the EU can have a pathological effect on candidate countries (Mendelski 2016). In the light of these critical voices and considering the renewed political focus on the EU enlargement agenda, I argue in this article for new theoretical tools to study the EU enlargement process. This is needed because the hopeful view on EU enlargement that governed much of the early writings in the 2000s and the early 2010s – rooted in a belief in the transformative power of the EU – may no longer be fit for purpose. Indeed, the EU Enlargement process in the Western Balkans presents a 'more nuanced picture of Europeanisation that challenges earlier, more mechanical and optimistic views of this process' (Bieber 2018a, 241). Moreover, the confidence that the EU would be able to democratise its future member states has been undermined by the recent democratic backsliding in, for example, Hungary (Gaweda 2021; Hanley and Vachudova 2018; Sedelmeier 2014), as well as the establishment of so-called stabilitocracies in the Western Balkans (Bieber 2018b).

To be more attuned to the complexities of the EU enlargement process, I argue for the need to step away from EU-centric theoretical models that overly rely on the analysis of conditionality and its domestic impact towards a relational approach in which the EU-candidate relation itself becomes the focal point. As I will argue throughout this piece, this means that we should not only redefine the Europeanisation via enlargement process, but our research agenda should be guided by a new question: '*What the tensions are generated within the political integration process, in what forms do they manifest, and how are they negotiated?*'

Such a shift away from the more common top-down approach that centres on the EU's influence on candidate countries – which is too often an outcomes-focused analysis of institutions and public policies –, is also needed, because the EU enlargement process cannot and should not be reduced to a technocratic exercise. Rather, it is part of a larger political project and has been instrumental in maintaining international hierarchies by projecting Eastern Europe as forever playing catch-up with Western Europe (Kulpa 2014; Kuus 2005) and producing images where the EU is considered to be exceptional in its standards for democracy and human rights. In other words, building on others who have argued that we need to re-politicise the analysis of EU's external relations (Burlyuk 2017; Musliu 2021), I seek to develop a theoretical framework that centres on the *politics of Europeanisation*.[1]

To develop this approach, I draw on the existing critiques of the top-down analysis of EU enlargement (Özdemir 2014; Yılmaz and Soyaltın 2014), and am inspired by Radaelli's (2003) discussion of the different epistemological approaches to the study of Europeanisation. I argue that a relational perspective places the EU enlargement process within its wider relational context and takes seriously how the process shapes and is shaped by the EU's place within the wider international system. Along with this special issue (Lovato, Juncos

and Maurer *this issue*), I step away from a substantialist view of the world that tends to essentialise actors and entities and argue we must take seriously the *relational* nature of the process, and thus embrace a relational ontology that emphasises social processes and relations before entities. Doing so, helps us to avoid the substantialist trap that causes one to overlook the emerging effects of the process itself (Jackson and Nexon 1999, 2019). Indeed, the relational ontology forces us to shift our 'thinking about the world as a noun to understanding it as a verb – to focus on the effects of the blowing rather than the blowers' (Eyben 2010, 388); thus drawing attention to how processes shape and produce those entities involved in it.

In addition to the above, I argue that a new theoretical framework is needed because the top-down focus of the literature has not only been unable to foreground the relational, but it also is too EU-centric. With a few exceptions (e.g. Bilić 2016; Deiana and Kušić 2025; Kulpa 2014; Kuus 2004, 2007; Musliu 2021; Slootmaeckers 2023), the literature has been slow to respond to the call to decentre the EU and question the 'civilisational' assumptions that underpin the EU enlargement process (Fisher Onar and Nicolaïdis 2013). In this article, I seek to head this call by embracing relational thinking that forces us to contextualise and consider that all processes and the mechanisms established to promote norms and values are mutable in time and space (Eyben 2010). Such thinking 'deconstructs a taken-for-granted moral universe' and highlights that values/norms/policies do not exist as an *a priori*, but rather are the by-products of actors' engagement with one another in ambiguous and challenging circumstances' (Emirbayer 1997, 309).

As I will demonstrate throughout this article, a relational approach emphasises transnational interdependence and considers national and non-national as supplementary scales whereby the combination and imbrication of the politics at the different scales produce certain outcomes. This means that international conditions and processes are not just scoping conditions against which enlargement takes place, but are inherently part of the process and shape the way it unfolds and what it can produce.

Overall, the relational approach adds to our understanding of the EU enlargement process because 1) it considers the agency of candidate countries and accounts for interdependencies within the process, both between actors as well as policy domains; and 2) it does not take European values, norms, and policies for granted but embraces the role values and norms play in the process of reproducing international hierarchies and the political nature of enlargement more generally; 3) it pays attention to the effects of the process itself and how, through the process, the content and meaning of EU conditions are redefined and norms as being (re)negotiated; and 4) it overcomes the binary between rational choice institutionalist explanations and sociological institutionalist ones, allowing for both processes to occur at the same time. In sum, the presented theory enables the critical analysis of the enlargement process in

its full complexity and offers 'more nuanced and comprehensive explanations' (Lovato, Juncos and Maurer *this issue*).

Although this article is a theoretical contribution to the Europeanisation literature, it has strong empirical roots. In fact, the theorising within this article draws on a process tracing analysis of how the EU and Serbia negotiated their relationship, based on over 100 semi-structured interviews with EU officials, civil society actors, officials from Serbia's independent equality bodies and state officials.[2] The data were triangulated using document analysis and participatory observations during various fieldwork visits between 2012 and 2023. As such, throughout the piece, I will demonstrate the theoretical arguments through examples of Serbia's EU accession process. Serbia is an exemplary case for the theory as its relationship with the EU has been characterised by both increasing proximity and resistance, which the current approaches to Europeanisation cannot comprehensively explain (Kostovicova 2014; Slootmaeckers 2023).

The reminder of this article makes the case for a relational approach to Europeanisation in step-by-step way. First, I re-define Europeanisation as 'negotiated transitions' so that our understanding of the process can account for the political nature of the EU enlargement process – a redefinition that also exposes the shortcomings of the existing theories. Next, I present the epistemological foundations of the relational approach of Europeanisation via enlargement by developing its underlying research questions. The third step in developing this approach moves towards the analytical implementation of the relational model. In doing so, I demonstrate the additional analytical advantages of the relational approach to the study of the EU enlargement. These advantages relate to 1) the *logic of relationality,*[3] which supersedes the neo-institutional logics of actions, and helps to overcome the duality between the logics of consequences and appropriateness, 2) the formulation of *outcomes-in-process* which actively emphasises feedback loops within the process, 3) the recognition of the transnational nature of policy fields which allows for analyse new phenomena such as tactical Europeanisation, and 4) the relationality of policy fields which allows us to specify EU-level outcomes-in-process.

Redefining Europeanisation via enlargement as negotiated transitions and the promise of a new approach

A key reason to rethink Europeanisation via enlargement – its definition and our theoretical approach to it – relates to the history of the field. Particularly, theories of Europeanisation via enlargement have evolved from those originally focused on member states. Although there are vast differences between the two types of Europeanisation processes – particularly in relation to the scope of the process and the nature of the relationship between the EU and candidate countries (Grabbe 2003) – the same oft-cited definition has been used for both. Defining Europeanisation as:

> processes of (a) construction, (b) diffusion, and (c) institutionalisation of formal and informal rules, procedures, policy paradigms, styles, 'ways of doing', and shared beliefs and norms which are first defined and consolidated in the EU policy processes and then incorporated in the logic of domestic (national and subnational) discourse, political structures, and public policies. (Radaelli 2003, 30)

However elegant and useful it may be, I contend that this definition does not fully address the differences between the Europeanisation of member states and that of candidate countries for two reasons. First, while the Europeanisation of member states is limited to the *Acquis*, candidate countries must also comply with the broadly defined Copenhagen criteria, including issues such as the rule of law, democracy and human rights. These criteria (particularly the political ones), however, often only reflect a set of vaguely agreed-upon principles, shrouded in ambiguity (Mos 2020), and are always subject to contestation, negotiation, and interpretation.[4]

Second, unlike member states, candidate countries cannot upload their preferences to the EU during the policy-making process (Grabbe 2003). Instead, they are expected to consume EU policies without having the ability to influence them, leading to limited negotiating power (Grabbe 2003). Some scholars have even noted that the label of 'accession negotiations' may be a 'misnomer because any EU candidate has to accept all of the EU's acquis' (Vachudova and Koval 2024, 325). However, such a limited and EU-centric view does not allow for the agency candidate countries have within the process. In fact, it is precisely because of the wider scope of the EU enlargement process and the ambiguity of many rules and principles that candidate countries' engagement with the EU can shape how the EU pursues its conditionality and how rules and norms are adopted.

Consider, for example, fundamental values and their role within the enlargement process. Not only do they remain underspecified in EU policy documents and subject to contestation within the EU (Mos 2020), but they also gain their status and meaning through the relationship between the EU and its external others, including candidate states (Slootmaeckers 2020). This being the case, and as Webb (2018) demonstrates in the context of rule of law reforms in Serbia, there is considerable room within the process for contestation and negotiations on the 'meaning' and practical interpretation of EU policies and norms. For example, whilst the Serbian government adopted the Law on the High Judicial Court to respond to the EU's rule of law demands, this law was contested by the Judges Association of Serbia, who argued that it undermined judicial independence (Webb 2018). Yet, the EU failed to engage this contestation.

In other words, EU norms and values cannot be simply transferred to third countries but instead are re-interpreted throughout the process, making the enlargement process 'a process of constructing relational spaces characterised by asymmetric relations in which ideas, rules and norms are constructed,

transferred, adopted, implemented, transformed and rejected' (Bieber 2018a, 245).

Based on these observations, I argue that we need a new definition of Europeanisation that encapsulates the process' fluid and complex nature. To account for the political nature and malleability of norms within the EU Enlargement process as well as to consider its relational nature, I define Europeanisation as:

> a fluid political process of *negotiated transitions* that unfolds through transnational and interdependent processes. It involves the construction, diffusion, contestation, translation and institutionalisation of formal and informal norms, rules, procedures, policy paradigms, styles, 'ways of doing', and shared beliefs. These may emerge as part of the EU's policy processes, but are continuously reinterpreted and reshaped through the transactions and feedback loops of political integration in order to become incorporated into the logic of domestic discourse, political structures, and public policies.

Drawing on insights from norm localisation and translation research (Zimmermann 2017), that highlight the continuous reconstruction of norms in different contexts (Poppe, Leininger, and Wolff 2019), this definition considers Europeanisation as *negotiated transitions*. Rather than focussing on the formal negotiations of enlargement, the notion of negotiated transitions refers to the fact that *the content and meaning of the transformations within the enlargement process are continuously negotiated*. In other words, both the EU and candidate states engage in an ongoing process of defining and redefining the meaning of the conditions of membership as well as the EU's values and norms. This negotiation unfolds through a series of interconnected and interdependent transactions[5] that make up the never-ending relational process of defining and repositioning the relational structure of the EU and the candidate country (see infra).

From this new definition – that emphasises that EU rules, norms, and values cannot be taken for granted—, it follows that the predominant and EU-centric top-down conceptualisation of the EU enlargement process fails to fully capture the complexity of the Europeanisation.[6] I argue this is the case for at least four reasons.

First, because they focus on a goodness-of-fit and adaptational pressure as driver of change (Börzel and Risse 2003; Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier 2005), these theories take the EU, its policies and its institutions as its analytical starting point. By tracing the EU's domestic impact, the top-down conceptualisation of Europeanisation risks overestimating EU effects (Özdemir 2014). Even more problematically, the top-down approach starts from the assumption that there are EU effects (Radaelli 2003), and therefore cannot account for domestic change that occurs in the absence of direct (EU) pressure (Woll and Jacquot 2010). Top-down models tend to consider insufficiently the agency of

candidate countries (Anghel and Jones 2022), and fail to account for interdependencies within the process, both between actors and policy domains.

Second, in line with the substantialist ontology that dominates much of social sciences (Emirbayer 1997), the Europeanisation literature tends to be Eurocentric by taking EU norms and values as an *a priori*. Leading them to ignore that these values are constructed and expressed through transactions of the EU with its others (Diez 2013; Slootmaeckers 2020), and ultimately reinforce civilisational politics by casting the EU as a force of good (Cebeci 2012).

Third, the vast Europeanisation literature tends to have a strong emphasis on the EU's impact on domestic politics with a rather narrow focus on the adoption of rules and public policy. Doing so, it remains blind to the effects of the process itself, nor does it consider how the content and meaning of EU conditions are contested and reshaped (Slootmaeckers 2023).

Finally, the literature tends to assume a fixed logic of action based on inherent actor characteristics (rational or normatively driven), often positioning rational choice and sociological institutionalist explanations in an abstract either/or dualism. Such abstract and unnecessary binary in theoretical models makes us blind to some of the complexities of the process.

Overall, while these theories have their merits, they are not sufficient to explain the enlargement process and its complexities. Regarding the Western Balkans, Bieber (2018a, 241) explained that these countries' accession process presents a 'more nuanced picture of Europeanisation that challenges earlier, more mechanical and optimistic views of this process'; confirming that new 'critical approaches to Europeanisation are important in reconceptualising the dynamics of the relationship between the EU and its member states and countries aspiring for membership'.

In the following section, I present a new relational conceptualisation of Europeanisation. To do so, I take Radaelli's (2003) bottom-up approach as a starting point and further develop it to embrace relationality and transnationality, so that it enables me to capture the complexity of the EU enlargement process as defined above. This first step in developing the relational approach is crucial, as it provides the epistemological basis of future research by specifying the guiding research question for a new generation of Europeanisation studies focussing on the 'politics of Europeanisation'.

From bottom-up to a relational approach to europeanisation via enlargement

Radaelli's (2003) bottom-up approach – although rarely used to study EU enlargement – provides a useful starting point for reconceptualising the Europeanisation process. Unlike top-down approaches, it considers the system

of interactions at the domestic level as the main starting point and not the EU (Radaelli and Pasquier 2007). Europeanisation is understood as a complex transformation emerging from a 'multitude of co-evolving, parallel and not necessarily tightly coupled processes' (Olsen cited in Featherstone 2003, 4). The bottom-up approach 'checks if, when, and how the EU provides a change in any of the main components of the system of interaction' (Radaelli and Pasquier 2007, 41).

Despite its advantages over the top-down approach, it is not yet ready to be used for the study of enlargement. Indeed, I would argue that in its current form, it is not suitable for the study of EU enlargement, because its strong focus on the domestic has come at the expense of a thorough analysis of the complexity of the EU and the wider international processes the process. Indeed, within this approach, the EU-level inter/transactions and policy processes are considered to be a *référentiel* (Muller 2000) – an external ideational framework that guides domestic action. This perspective, then, overlooks the interdependency of the EU and candidate countries, and (re)produces an ignorance of how both European and domestic politics actively shape each other through transactions.

Thus, while a useful jumping-off point, the bottom-up approach still has blind spots, which the relational approach to Europeanisation seeks to account forby arguing that when focusing on the domestic system of transactions, it is important to consider that 1) the domestic is embedded in a transnational relational system of transactions and 2) the EU enlargement takes place in a wider field of political contention and contestation. Thus, research should shift from asking outcome-oriented questions ('if, when and how does the EU alter domestic interactions?') to exploring how normative and political tensions within EU enlargement are negotiated.

This is because, as previously pointed out (see also Lovato, Juncos and Maurer *this issue*), Europeanisation does not occur within a political vacuum and is inherently a bordering process. Here, I am not pointing at the expansion of the EU's geographical borders, but rather that the EU enlargement process also consists of constant negotiations of its symbolic boundaries, i.e. of who and what belongs to the EU and who/what does not. Indeed, the EU enlargement is not just a technocratic exercise in which candidate countries and the EU are getting ready to join together, expanding the Union, but it is also a process through which the EU defines its identity and standing in the world (Kuus 2005; Slootmaeckers 2020). The first step to develop a relational approach to Europeanisation, then, is to shift 'the analytical focus from institutions, policies and cases towards a critical discussion of the EU in global politics' (Orbie cited in Manners 2013, 319), and thus towards the politics embedded in the process.

To justify and formulate the new guiding research question for Europeanisation research, I will briefly demonstrate the politics of Europeanisation by exploring the identity processes inherent to the EU

enlargement process. Building on the close link between bordering processes and identities (see e.g. Meier 2018), I examine the role of EU identity in enlargement as a heuristic to understand how the EU positions itself within its broader context. Identity here can be either an explicit or implicit part of the process. The point of this excursion is not to pinpoint the EU-specific identity, but rather, in line with a relational ontology, to focus on the processes that guide how the EU is positioned and positions itself within its wider relational context, as a means to highlight the relational nature of the EU enlargement process.

In other words, I start from the observation that the EU's identity is 'fluid, consisting of ongoing contestation of complex, multiple, relational identities' (Manners and Whitman 2003, 397;see also Diez 2005; Nicolaïdis and Howse 2002); and constantly (re)constructed through transactions with its different Others. Although identities have a relative and perceived stability that is the 'ongoing accomplishment of practices that represent [the] self and other in certain ways' (Wendt 1994, 386), the fluidity of identities emerges in part through the different othering mechanisms that underpin these identities (Delanty 2006; Slootmaeckers 2020). Identities and othering processes, therefore, are dynamic and context-dependent and exist in a tense interrelationship of contestation. They will inevitably clash as well as contribute to the (re)construction of one another (Diez 2005; Kuus 2005). Moreover, the contestations (or one could say normative struggles or bordering processes) that produce identities do not only occur between the EU and its external Others but are present within the EU itself. Indeed, Diez (2013) has convincingly argued that these principles of democracy and human rights are both the outcome and the continued subject of hegemonic struggles with the EU's external relations (i.e. its Othering processes) as well as those struggles within the EU itself. Consider, for example, the current rise of anti-gender mobilisations and the challenges against gender and LGBT equality that are occurring across the EU (Kuhar and Paternotte 2017). These movements are not to be mistaken as backward, conservative moments celebrating ideas from bygone days but rather they are actively shaping debates on what it means to be Europe and as such are seeking to challenge, reframe and reinterpret the 'the collective destiny of Europe, understood as a standard-bearer of civilisation' (Kuhar and Paternotte 2017, 268).

With norms always being contested and situated within relations (Wiener 2018), the relational conceptualisation of Europeanisation, then, acknowledges that there is a continuation of these normative contestations from within the EU and the transnational arena through the domestic realm. And that this contestation is further complicated and affected by the potential ways in which different identity processes can collide and clash (Slootmaeckers 2020). In other words, the Europeanisation process does not only affect those norms the EU claims to uphold, but all the competing norms within the EU may come into particular tension through the EU's transaction with a specific (third/candidate country's) context. To borrow some of Diez's (2013, 203, emphasis

added) words, Europeanisation via enlargement, then, is best seen as a '*transversal struggle over societal norms*, in which different actors interact on different levels – as opposed to the unidirectional and uncontested imposition of norms, which would only replicate the problems of the old top-down models of Europeanisation'.

Attention to local contestations of norms also highlights the identity of candidate countries, which is inevitably shaped through transactions with the EU (and vice versa). For example, with (parts of the) candidate countries being constructed as the EU's Other (Kuus 2005), the candidate country's Self will also be formulated in relation to the ascribed Other position. Although nationalism and national identity have been recognised as key to understanding resistance to Europeanisation processes (see e.g. Freyburg and Richter 2010; Subotić 2011), more often than not, nationalism and national identity are pre-conceived as pre-existing and fixed. Such a perspective, however, ignores the complexity, relationality, and fluidity of national identities, and therefore risking essentialising resistance.

Instead, the relational approach considers that local resistance is not merely a reaction to EU pressure but rather is a form of a transaction between candidate country and the EU, always already based on past and (imagined/anticipated) future actions of both the Self and the Other. Slootmaeckers (2017) provides a clear example of this through his analysis of Belgrade Pride. Whilst the first ban of the Belgrade Pride by the Serbian state was initially rooted within Serbian nationalist politics, it was the ban that put Belgrade Pride on the EU's agenda, making it a litmus test for Serbia's Europeanness. Serbia's government's shifting stance towards Belgrade Pride – alternating between repression, conditional support, and strategic organising – reflects a calculated negotiation between how the EU responded to bans in the past, domestic political pressures, and anticipated future evaluations of Serbia's handling of Pride by Brussels.

This goes to show that the local is not just responsive to EU pressures but rather a 'complex arena often informed by contradictory ideologies, cultural filters and identities and by ongoing power struggles among different domestic actors. Consequently, the diffusion of norms or lack thereof in the targeted country is also determined by internal struggles over hegemony' (Gordon and Pardo 2015, 424).

Based on these reflections, I conceptualise Europeanisation as a process in which different hegemonic struggles and normative tensions come together in a transnational normative structure – comprised of multiple fields. As represented in Figure 1, I argue that the EU enlargement process is a multi-layered process, in which normative struggles take place both within the EU and candidate countries. Both the EU and candidate countries are conceived as a complex system of transactions, each with its own tensions and Othering processes, which are always embedded in a relational structure. The political integration process – inherent to the enlargement process—, in turn, creates a transnational field in which these

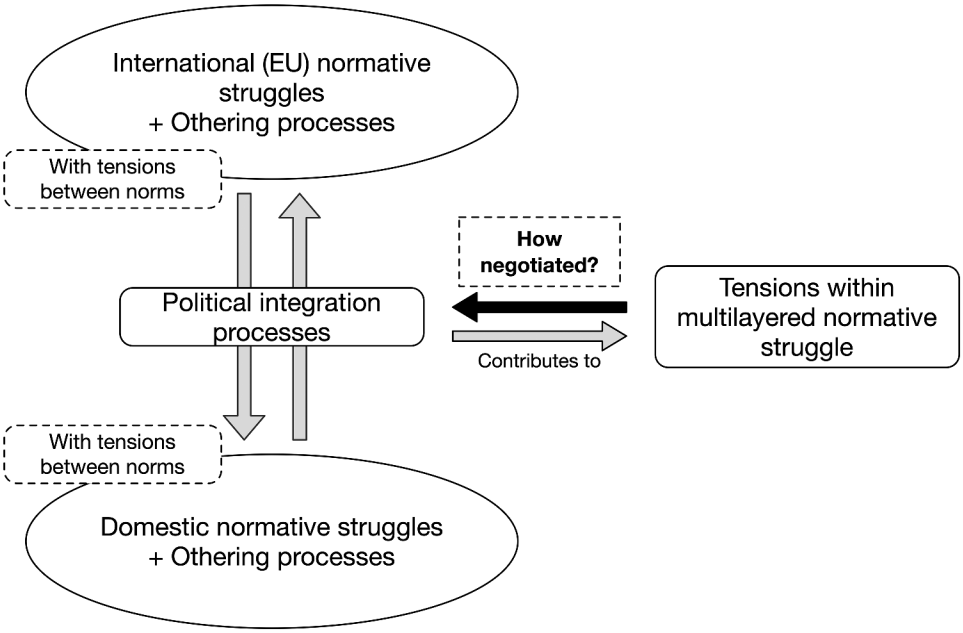

Figure 1. Schematic visualisation of the relational approach to Europeanisation and its guiding research question.

internal normative processes interact and may clash. In other words, EU enlargement is a *political process* in which these (normative) tensions need to be negotiated and/or written out to obtain its goal of political integration. The latter is done through a multitude of political processes in which norms and rules are negotiated through the transactions between the European and domestic level systems of transactions. Meaning, the process of Europeanisation is one where both the actions of the EU and the candidate countries are interdependent, they are shaped by and shape the process as it evolves.

From this follows that the primary research question of Europeanisation literature should not be 'to what extent have EU norms been integrated within the domestic realm?', nor as the bottom-up approach phrases it 'if, when and how does the EU matter?', but rather it should focus on '*what the tensions are generated within the political integration process, in what forms do they manifest, and how are they negotiated?*' Answering this new question will also provide insights into the other questions, but draws much more attention to the process in which this happens, unlike the outcome-focused analyses of the top-down and bottom-up approaches.

The advantage of reconceptualising the EU enlargement process in this relational way is that it overcomes the interest/norm tensions (as they are both situated within relations and are not to be essentialised) and inconsistencies found in empirical studies (cf. Bieber 2018a), but also that it allows for what Youngs (2004, 431) described as the need to examine 'the detailed variations in

human rights policies [as to] transcend the unhelpful tendency to see human rights norms and strategic self-interest either as intrinsically incompatible or automatically commensurate'.

By foregrounding relationality and normative tensions, the relational conceptualisation of the EU enlargement process no longer takes the asymmetrical relationship between the EU and a candidate country for granted and therefore draws attention to a multiplicity of new questions and patterns to study. The most interesting of these new questions relates to what can be called the 'politics of Europeanisation', i.e. what happens when normative struggles and tensions occur as a consequence of the political integration process. Thus, instead of analysing how norms are set within the EU and/or whether these norms are successfully 'transferred' to third countries, I argue that one should analyse how the EU and a candidate country *negotiate* the tensions within the multi-layered normative struggle which has been created as part of the overarching political integration process. The different outcomes as described in the existing literature, as I discuss in more detail below, then become but tactics and tools within the process to negotiate the tensions within the Europeanisation process.

How to study the politics of Europeanisation relationally?

Having presented the relational approach to Europeanisation, the question remains: how can we translate this into an analytical model? How can one analyse EU enlargement as a process of negotiated transitions from a relational perspective? Also here, the bottom-up research design – with its focus on both agency and structure and its ability to de-centre the EU – presents the first building block for the analytical model, albeit with some key modifications to accommodate the relational ontology and the new conceptualisation process.

Figure 2 presents a schematic overview of the analytical framework emphasising the relational and transnational nature of the EU enlargement and Europeanisation processes. This analytical translation can be summarised as follows: because normative and political tensions are always situated within a relational structure, they shape and are shaped by all actors within this structure. Thus, when they occur, they shape both the EU and its approach to enlargement (i.e. the EU system of transactions) and the third country's policies (i.e. the domestic system of transactions). From this point onwards, the tensions and their negotiation can be studied by looking at how the domestic system of transactions contributes (or not) to domestic change, and if, when and how the combination and imbrication of the domestic and EU arenas change the main components of the domestic system of transactions.

It is important to consider that change flows in both directions, i.e. the EU and domestic responses to the tensions within the political integration process

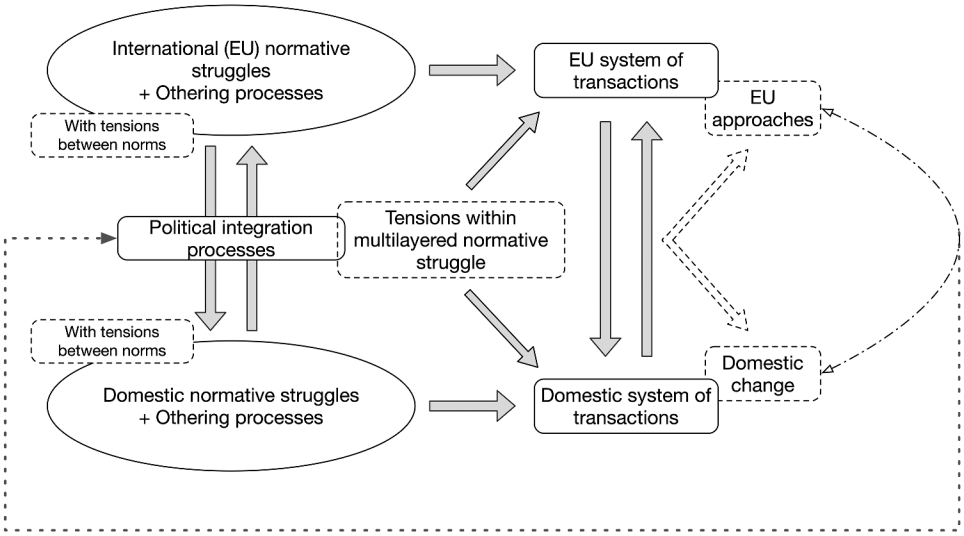

Figure 2. Analytical framework to study EU enlargement relationally.

are transactional, inherently relational, and thus cannot be understood without reference to one another. As part of the negotiated transitions, It is key to recognise that the EU and candidate countries are not interacting, but rather transacting, i.e. they do not act based solely on their own predispositions or characteristics, but in large part in relation to the characteristics and actions of the other actor involved in the transaction, meaning the anticipation of how the other may respond is always already embedded in the transaction (see also Dépelteau 2015, 55).

The framework emphasises how each action taken by either the EU or a candidate country shifts this structure and starts a new phase in the process. In other words, embracing such a relational perspective and considering the fluidness of the process provides some key advantages for the study of Europeanisation via Enlargement. These relate to 1) the *logic of relationality* which helps to overcome the duality between the logic of consequences and appropriateness, and 2) the formulation of *outcomes-in-process* which recognises feedback loops within the process. In formulating these outcomes-in-process (as is done in more detail below), two more benefits emerge including the recognition of the transnational nature of policy fields which allows for analysing new phenomena such as 'tactical Europeanisation' (Slootmaeckers 2023), and a more complex understanding of how the EU responds to normative tensions by drawing on the relationality of policy fields.

Let me unpack these two core contributions a bit more. The first contribution of a relational approach to Europeanisation to our understanding of the enlargement process is the introduction of the notion of the *logic of*

relationality. The logic of relationality is described as a logic of action in which actors make 'decisions according to the degrees of intimacy and/or importance of [their] relationships to specific others, with the totality of [their] relational circles as the background' (Qin 2018, 207–8). Put differently, because 'relations select', one has to consider that an 'actor-in-relations takes action with the relational context as the background [. . .]. In this sense, the logic of relationality has priority over both the logic of instrumental rationality (consequences) and the logic of normative rationality (appropriateness)' (Qin 2016, 38).

This means that what is rational and/or appropriate to do is defined by the relation through which the action finds meaning. Rather than having a priori conceptions about the rationale of actors, the relational approach suggests that actors' rationale for action is situated within the field of relations, in which the totality of relations acts as an 'intangible hand that orients an actor toward a certain action' (Qin 2016, 38). Moreover, because the 'logic of action' is embedded within relationships, the actions taken (described as 'outcomes-in-process' below) can be guided by different logics simultaneously. This is because their meaning-making is situated within the different relationships that are driving the actions.

Consequently, the analytical model to study Europeanisation should not make any assumptions about how tensions are negotiated within the EU enlargement process. Put differently, rather than enlargement being studied through a false binary between rational choice and norm-based theories, the relational approach provides a foundation to unite the existing theoretical models explaining how formal and informal rules guide political behaviour. Indeed, because the logic of relationality is overarching, the new model does not ignore or erase the existing literature and its findings but rather integrates them whilst simultaneously adding complexity to the analysis.

This complexity is added by placing the Europeanisation process within its relational and transnational context, and considering that actions gain different meanings within different relations, sometimes even seemingly contradictory meanings. The relational approach, therefore, allows for the analysis and understanding of the seemingly contradictory empirical findings of the literature within one framework (Slootmaeckers 2023).

The second contribution of the relational conceptualisation of Europeanisation is that it makes feedback loops an inherent part of the analysis of the Europeanisation process. Indeed, as both field and relational theory emphasise processes and constant change (see Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992), the same is true for the transnational field in which the EU enlargement process takes place. It is in constant flux; never settled. The existing Europeanisation literature, however, is unable to capture this fluidity as it seeks to explain seemingly fixed (policy) outcomes in the domestic arena in a rather static way – the notion of 'outcome' after all implies a fixed endpoint. The framework presented here, on the other hand, considers outcomes only as a temporary part within the *long durée* of the Europeanisation process. They

are in constant flux. In other words, the so-called outcomes mark both the endpoints and beginnings of sub-processes. They are in fact *outcomes-in-process*; i.e. temporary tools and moments within the process through which tensions are negotiated. In other words, outcomes-in-process (henceforth also referred to as 'outcomes' for brevity) contribute to the reconfiguration of relations within the field, thereby determining further actions within the field/process.

Europeanisation's outcomes-in-process, the politics of relational policy fields, and 'tactical europeanisation'

To make the above-mentioned notion of outcomes-in-process less abstract, this section looks into what they may look like. Here, the empirical findings within the Europeanisation literature provide a wealth of insights. In particular, it has been highlighted that conditionality is more impactful for salient policy areas in countries with strong support for EU accession (Haughton 2007; Rechel 2008); that compliance with EU conditions is often shallow and reminiscent of partial compliance (Krizsan 2009; Noutcheva 2009); that decisions on conditionality have been subject to geopolitical concerns which have limited the impact of the whole process (Haughton 2007); that the Europeanisation process can have pathological impacts, reinforcing undesired practices rather than inducing change (Mendelski 2016); and finally that national identity processes have played a considerable role in how candidate countries respond to EU conditionality (Freyburg and Richter 2010; Subotić 2011). The fact that these previous empirics can be incorporated in the relational approach further demonstrates the compatibility of this theoretical approach with previous research, while also highlighting how it furthers our understanding of Europeanisation via enlargement.

Based on these findings as well as those from my own research on Serbia (Slootmaeckers 2023), an initial (and by no means exhaustive) typology of at least eight outcomes-in-process can be observed (Figure 3 shows these outcomes-in-process schematically as part of the analytical framework). Two of these outcomes-in-process, namely *hierarchy of tasks* and *perverted conditionality*, can be discerned at the 'European' level (which I will elaborate on below), while another six emerge within the 'domestic' system of transactions.

As a reminder, I am not describing discrete outcomes of the Europeanisation process, rather the empirical findings of the existing literature are re-conceptualised as outcomes-in-process. They represent tools and actions taken by either the EU or the candidate countries in an attempt to negotiate tensions. Because they are but a stepping stone for the next phase within the process, 'outcomes' do not emerge in isolation. They are inherently intertwined. That is, EU and domestic-level outcomes-in-process develop in relation to one another. They are interdependent and located within the EU-

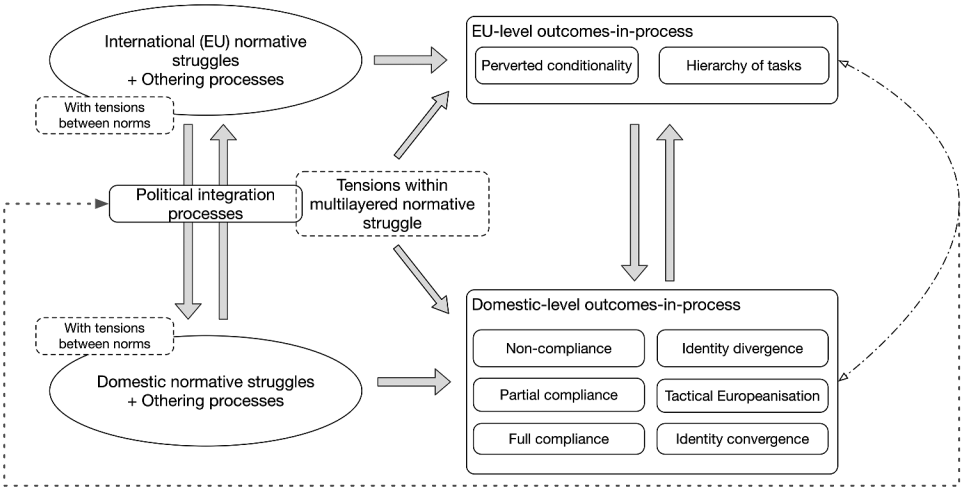

Figure 3. Analytical framework with EU and domestic-level outcomes-in-process.

candidate country relationship, as well as embedded in a wider relational network of different policy fields. Hence, a relational analysis of Europeanisation should resist the temptation to zoom in on one policy field.

To illustrate this point, consider the possibility that actors are part of multiple (policy) fields, creating an interconnectedness of the different logics of fields. Put differently, fields can be related not only through overlapping actors (e.g. actors engaging in multiple (policy) fields) but also through the relationship between the struggles that define fields (e.g. advances in one policy field might affect the possibilities for policies in another field). In other words, by considering the relationality of fields themselves, I maintain that one cannot analyse the developments of one (policy) field in isolation from other fields or scales. Indeed, actions in one field or scale might be inherently related to those (in)actions in another field or scale. A prime example is the way through which regional security (i.e. Kosovo) and LGBT issues have become closely connected within Serbia's accession process (Slootmaeckers 2023).

In the remainder of this section, I will expand on the different outcomes-in-process presented in Figure 3. For clarity's sake, I will discuss the domestic and EU-level 'outcomes' separately, even though the EU and domestic-level 'outcomes' are but part of an ongoing negotiation of the relationship dynamics between both actors and are inherently interdependent. I will focus first on those outcomes-in-process situated within the domestic arena, followed by the ones at the EU level.

Domestic 'Outcomes-In-Process'

The six domestic 'outcomes' capture different ways in which EU norms and policies are negotiated, translated and incorporated within candidate

countries. They also take into account the different (relationally situated) logics of action that underpin these processes, how actors move between these logics, and that these logics are situated within different fields and relations. Although these logics of actions are important and must be incorporated into our analysis because they help to understand how actors are positioned within relationships and how they engage tensions in the enlargement process, the relational approach to Europeanisation differs from existing approaches in that it emphasises the *function* these 'outcomes' fulfil within the politics of Europeanisation.

In analysing the EU enlargement process, the question thus is not how we can best describe the 'outcome' of the Europeanisation process, but rather how particular 'outcomes' are produced by the dynamics of the EU-candidate relationships and its embedded normative tensions and how these 'outcomes' continue to shape the process. In other words, what function do they play within the politics of Europeanisation? Three dynamics of the EU-candidate country relationship are worth pointing out: no political integration (full resistance to conditions), no tensions (no resistance), and tensions within the process (some resistance).

First, when within the relationship between the EU and the candidate country integration breaks down due to extreme tensions, we can observe the 'outcome' of 'non-compliance', and/or of 'identity divergence' (see Subotić 2011, 313–14). Although this 'outcome' is unsustainable if political integration is to remain on the agenda – indeed, in extreme cases, this can lead to a breakdown of the process, as was the case when Iceland withdrew its application to become an EU member —, it can play a core function within the politics of Europeanisation. Indeed, if there is no coming together between parties, either one of these 'outcomes' can strain one policy field of the EU enlargement process, forcing either party to make a compromise to keep the political integration process moving forward.

Resistance and increased tension play a key function within the EU enlargement process to achieve a shift in identity processes or a different emphasis on EU conditionality (see infra) to achieve concessions on how EU norms and values become integrated within the process. Indeed, Serbia's refusal to engage with the EU's International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) conditionality (non-compliance) and the resurgence of anti-EU and nationalistic politics between 2005 and 2008 (identity divergence processes) put heavy strain on the EU integration process (Subotić 2010; Subotić and Carey 2014). To be resolved, a significant shift in the relational structure needs to happen. As such, these 'outcomes-in-process' will either lead to a breakdown of the process (as seemingly happened with Türkiye, or as happened when Iceland withdraw its application to become a member), some form of compliance at the domestic level (through e.g. a shift in domestic politics, as happened in 2008 Serbia) or some changes in the EU's approach to

the enlargement process to reduce strain on the relationship (as happened when the EU signed the SAA agreement in 2008 in an attempt to keep Serbia on an pro-EU path; see infra).

Second, when there are no tensions in the relationship and EU conditions are not being resisted, we can observe 'full compliance' and/or 'identity convergence' (see Subotić 2011, 313–14). Although this outcome-in-process is the preferred 'outcome' of the EU enlargement process (at least from the EU's perspective), the empirical literature has shown this to be a rather unlikely outcome as it implies a complete 'surrender' of candidate countries to the EU's position, or can come at risk when shifts occur elsewhere in the relational structure (including spill-over from other policy domains), leading to renewed shift in cost–benefit calculations and/or in identity processes that reinforce identity markers of the EU or the candidate country, straining previous convergences. This latter has been observed when the identity convergence between Serbia and the EU that led to compliance with the ICTY conditions and the first 'successful' Pride in Belgrade in 2010 came to a quick end after the hostility against Pride and increased tension in Kosovo, leading to consecutive bans on the Belgrade Pride between 2011 and 2013 in which the Serbian government actively presented LGBT rights as a western imposition (Slootmaeckers 2023).

The third dynamic of the EU candidate country relationship requires more attention as it is the one where the translation and negotiation over the content of EU conditions really come to the fore. It is that where there is fake or limited engagement with the EU integration process by domestic elites. This has been described extensively by the Europeanisation literature and relates to the notion of partial compliance or 'shallow Europeanisation' (Noutcheva 2009). A frequent example in the literature relates to the adoption of minority rights in candidate countries and their limited implementation (Brosig 2010; Rechel 2008). This outcome-in-process can be conceptualised as the neutralisation of normative tensions by which candidate countries produce formal changes without much commitment to implementation. Another 'outcome-in-process' that speaks to a similar, yet quite distinct, discrepancy between the adoption of laws and its implementation is what I have labelled *tactical Europeanisation* (Slootmaeckers 2023).

Whereas 'shallow Europeanisation' is perhaps a neutralisation of integration demands by pretending, tactical Europeanisation points to a neutralisation through 'manipulation' of the relational landscape.[7] Indeed, this 'outcome' emphasises that identity (or other relational structures) can also be a tool that can be used by candidate countries to manoeuvre within the multi-layered ideational field of the political integration process and can be described as follows: at the international scale/level, the candidate country engages in actions (or policy reforms) that signal the 'recognition of the EU identity', thereby reducing the saliency of this EU

Self-identity. It is performative in that candidate countries engage with 'identity discourses and performances' that reproduce the EU's identity, and because such performance reifies the EU's Self, the need for the EU to reassert its identity towards candidate countries is reduced (see also Slootmaeckers 2020). As such, the performative recognition of the EU identity by a candidate country allows the EU to consider this country to become similar to (if not a part of) the Self, which promotes political integration. Importantly, however, and this is where tactical Europeanisation differs from the other 'outcomes', the justification for the domestic change is decoupled from the EU. The EU demands and reforms, instead, are domestically performed and discursively represented as foreign to the national identity, yet tolerable. Through such domestic performance, opposite agendas are performed, and one cannot speak of partial compliance, but rather of hollowing out – a reshaping of the meaning of the content of the EU's conditions, norms and values.

In short, tactical Europeanisation takes place when a candidate country has to balance conflicting (normative) demands – it is committed to European integration but does not want to compromise its own identity —, and represents a process in which the relational and transnational nature of the EU enlargement process is the playground to negotiate these tensions. It can be described as an act of doublespeak in which at the international level Europeanness is communicated by performing an alignment with certain 'European identity markers', whilst at the domestic level opposite agendas are being pursued, albeit subtly to not undermine the international (performed) alignment with EU norms. It describes an instrumentalisation of EU identity markers, in which reforms are performed at the international level but domestically being decoupled from the identities, norms and values they are supposed to represent. Tactical Europeanisation is thus different from partial compliance as it discusses the liminal position in which one does not just 'talk the talk', but instead employs doublespeak in which political actions at the international and domestic levels pursue different identities, often leading to a reinterpretation of the content of EU norms. A key example of tactical Europeanisation has been the way the Serbian government handled the Pride Parades in Belgrade since 2014 and the appointment of Ana Brnabić as an openly lesbian Prime Minister (Slootmaeckers 2023). Whilst the allowance of the Pride and the appointment of Ana Brnabić signalled 'progress' to the EU, domestically this had led to Pride having been transformed to apolitical event and the government reinforcing nationalist and heteronormative politics and policies.

Although the balancing act captured by tactical Europeanisation constitutes a precarious position, difficult to maintain, there are two factors that make tactical Europeanisation more likely. First, as tactical Europeanisation is an 'instrumentalisation of reforms' of sorts (see Mendelski 2016), it

predominantly occurs when the EU's measurement of progress is based on outcomes rather than underlying processes and meanings. Secondly, tactical Europeanisation is a viable tactic for candidate countries for issues closely intertwined with the EU's identity processes.

EU-Level Outcomes-In-Process

As mentioned before, not only are candidate countries outcomes-in-process always interdependent with the EU's approaches to enlargement and its actions or 'outcomes', but so are the 'outcomes' of policy fields. It is in this inter-field relationality that we see the outcomes-in-process at the EU level most clearly emerging. Based on the work of Grabbe (2006), which has drawn attention to the hierarchies of policy fields within EU conditionality, and the work of Stahl (2011), which has shown how conditionality is altered when certain conditions are met with strong resistance, the two EU-level outcomes-in-process are formulated: *Hierarchy of Tasks* and *Perverted Conditionality*. These two outcomes describe actions taken at the EU level in order to keep the political integration process going. 'Perverted conditionality' refers to the fact that the EU can sacrifice (some of) its conditions for membership to keep the political integration process going, i.e. allowing a (temporary) sanctioned (if not rewarded) non-compliance (Stahl 2011). A key example is the way in which the EU responded to the identity divergence by Serbia over the ICTY conditionality by providing positive incentives despite non-compliance (Stahl 2011). 'Hierarchy of tasks', on the other hand, depicts the possibility of the EU prioritising one area over another when two or more demands are met with resistance by the candidate country. Within this outcome-in-process, the multiple normative tensions are resolved by compartmentalising the issues, i.e. focussing on one issue at a time. As such, non-compliance in certain areas is left unmonitored or becomes 'strategically unnoticed' in order to first resolve a tension within a different field. We have seen such practice emerge between the EU and Serbia when both LGBT rights and Kosovo demands led to Serbia's resistance, leading the EU to prioritise regional stability over fundamental rights (Slootmaeckers 2023).

Conclusion

With the renewed political attention to the EU enlargement process, I argued in this article that the time is ripe for a re-evaluation of our theoretical approaches to studying Europeanisation via enlargement. Such rethink is warranted, as Bieber (2018a) has maintained, because we need more critical approaches to Europeanisation as optimistic, technocratic and mechanical understandings of the EU enlargement process are unable to capture the recent experiences in the western Balkans fully. Indeed, the predominant top-down approaches tend to present a too outcome-focussed analysis of changes

to institutions and public policies, without considering how the process itself affects both the EU, candidate countries and the content and meaning of the rules, norms and values the EU seeks to diffuse through the enlargement process. With the aim of making the Europeanisation literature responsive to the calls to decentre the EU (Fisher Onar and Nicolaïdis 2013), I advanced a new theoretical approach to Europeanisation via enlargement. Rather than focusing on the domestic impact of the EU in candidate countries, the EU enlargement process is conceptualised as a *process of negotiated transformation* in which EU policies and norms are (re)defined, translated, and transformed with both sides making compromises to further political integration. Such process, I argued, should be analysed through a relational approach.

Contrary to top-down approach asked 'to what extent have EU norms been integrated within the domestic realm?', and the bottom-up approach that asked 'if, when and how the EU matters in domestic politics?', The relational approach shifts the focus to the complexity of the process itself by asking '*What tensions are generated within the political integration process, in what forms do they manifest, and how are they negotiated?*'. While answering the latter question also provides an answer to the earlier questions of the Europeanisation process, it relies on a relational ontological position that foregrounds relations over actors, and process over outcome. Doing so, the relational approach emphasises the 'politics of Europeanisation', i.e. what happens when normative struggles and tensions occur as a consequence of the political integration process.

To answer this new research question, I presented the analytical model that demonstrated how to study the EU enlargement relationally. This model embraces the need for a more longitudinal, multi-scalar analysis of the EU enlargement process that is sensitive to the interconnectedness of (policy) fields. This means that empirical studies of enlargement must embrace Burawoy's (1998) extended case method, actively seek to map the different ways in which EU policies fields are interrelated, and, above all, must analyse the *long durée* of enlargement. Taking temporality more seriously, I further argued that what the Europeanisation literature often describes as 'policy outcomes' are not fixed endpoints, but rather outcomes-in-process. In other words, they are not only the result of the process but also contribute to the reconfiguration of relations within the field, thereby determining further actions within the process.

With the aim of studying the politics of Europeanisation, the presented relational approach seeks to bring new energy to the Europeanisation literature by allowing for a more critical study of the EU enlargement process. By focussing on the effects and politics of the process itself, the new approach highlights new 'outcomes-in-process', particularly tactical Europeanisation. This concept highlights the differential instrumentalisation of reforms and European values in which reforms are performed at the international level to demonstrate

Europeanness, while domestically being de-coupled from those values. Tactical Europeanisation captures the process of doublespeak in which candidate countries use reforms to highlight Europeanness externally, while domestically, the execution of the reforms actively undermines the aims of the reforms.

Notes

1. Whilst this new model is predominantly formulated with reference to political Copenhagen criteria, the application of this approach should not be limited to policy domains.
2. For the more detailed analysis of the Serbian case, see Slootmaeckers (2023).
3. In short, the logic of relationality states that actions gain their meaning through the relational background in which they take place. It is relations that determine the logic of action, rather than an essentialised view of how actors behave (cf. infra).
4. This is not to say that there is no ambiguity within the *acquis*. Quite the opposite, ambiguity can be introduced to support European integration when member state preferences are diverse (Jegen and Mérand 2014). The omnipresence of ambiguity (in all its shapes and forms) is also a reason why the framework presented here – although predominantly formulated with the political Copenhagen criteria in mind – should be seen as applicable to those more 'technical' policy areas. This is mainly due to the ontological and epistemological repositioning offered by the framework.
5. I use the notion of transactions over interactions to describe the action taken by actors. Transactions are more than interactions in the sense that the actions of actors in a transaction are relational (see Dépelteau 2015, 55–65). This means that actors do not act based solely on their own predispositions or characteristics, but in large part in relation to the characteristics and actions of the other actors involved in the transaction.
6. It is important to stress that there is a lot of nuances in the empirical literature of Europeanisation and there have been ameliorative turns – must importantly the domestic turn (Elbasani 2013) and the pathological turn (Mendelski 2016). However, as argued elsewhere, these turns have not fundamentally challenged nor reconceptualised the core theoretical tenets of the literature (Slootmaeckers 2023).
7. It is tactical because candidate countries are not necessarily guided by long term strategy or inherent rationalist account (although they could be), but rather that they assess, read and consider the relational context in which they are embedded and take responsive action that are adaptable to the immediate relational dynamics at play in a given situation.

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