

Riding the Wave? The Impact of the Russian Invasion on MEP behaviour regarding EU Enlargement to the Western Balkan countries

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The 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine is widely seen as accelerating the ‘return of geopolitics’ in EU policy-making, including in enlargement towards the Western Balkans. This article examines whether this geopolitical shock affected enlargement politics in the European Parliament by analysing written questions from the 9th parliamentary term. Adopting an actor-centred perspective, it assesses changes in issue salience, the actors involved, and the framing of enlargement. Across these dimensions, we find only limited evidence of geopoliticisation. The invasion did not significantly change the level of attention to the Western Balkans or the composition of actors engaging with the issue. Most strikingly, explicit geopolitical or security justifications did not increase. Instead, MEPs placed greater emphasis on candidate states implementing reforms and complying with accession criteria. The invasion is thus reflected less in geopolitical discourse than in a renewed focus on conditionality as a vehicle for advancing the Western Balkans’ accession trajectory.

Keywords: European Parliament, Enlargement, Legislative behaviour, Parliamentary Questions, Russian invasion of Ukraine, Western Balkan Countries, Geopoliticisation, Geopolitics, Politicisation

Introduction

Triggered by the 2022 full-scale Russian invasion, the European Union (EU) seemed to have broken the decade-long stalemate in its accession process. Similar to the aftermath of the Cold War and the Yugoslav Wars, this renewed push for EU enlargement has been forged in response to an international crisis (Panchuk 2024, 3129). While much attention has been given to the accession prospects of the ‘Eastern Trio’ (Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia), the war has also unexpectedly reinvigorated the enlargement process for the long-standing Western Balkan countries (WB6)¹. Indeed, within less than two years after the invasion, (preparation for) accession negotiations not only kicked off for Ukraine and Moldova, but also for Bosnia and Herzegovina, Albania and North Macedonia.

This unprecedentedly swift response by the EU to the “sudden fracture in the international liberal order” (Andrione-Moylan et al. 2026, 4) has led scholars to argue that these decisions tap into the wider return of geopolitics in EU policy-making (Karjalainen 2023; Koval and Vachudova 2024). Although the WB6 are not located in Russia’s direct orbit, Dopchie and Lika (2024, 165) highlight two interrelated factors driving the EU’s renewed geostrategic interest in this Southeastern European region. Along with the growing recognition of the EU’s own normative limitations, European policy makers are becoming increasingly wary of potential spillover of the war in Ukraine into the Balkans, further exacerbating existing tensions and undermining efforts to foster a secure and stable immediate neighbourhood. Karjalainen (2023, 648) points in this regard to the growing awareness of risks associated with “grey zones” in the EU’s “inner courtyard” (Tzifakis et al. 2021), referring to the ongoing competition for influence and power in the region between different regional and global actors (Keil 2023, 119).

While most studies examining the implications of the Russian invasion for EU enlargement have been centred around the (European) Council, the Commission or on the wider (inter-)institutional developments (see for instance Genschel, 2023; Karjalainen 2023; Butnaru-Troncotă, 2024), this paper focuses instead on the European Parliament (EP). As the EU’s only directly elected institution, the EP lies at the “core of politicisation of European integration” with its “conflicts and allegiances reflecting the broader political struggles of the EU” (Chueri and Törnberg 2024, 2), a feature that is also evident in debates about EU widening (Karjalainen 2025, 198). Besides, the Parliament combines a limited set of formal competences with a wider range of informal instruments in EU enlargement policy. Formally, its role is confined to veto power at the final consent stage of accession, as the process is primarily driven by the European Commission and ultimately controlled by the member states acting unanimously in the (European) Council. Against this background, informal tools such as agenda-setting, budgetary prerogatives, scrutiny and inter-parliamentary diplomacy (see Jansen et al. 2025 for an overview) make the European Parliament an important player for the contestation of enlargement policy, whose positions

¹ By WB6 we refer to the six Western Balkan countries that are targeted by the European Union enlargement policy. Albania, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina are currently candidate countries while Kosovo* is categorised as a potential candidate. (*This designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with UNSCR 1244/1999 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence).

are taken into account by the Commission and the Council in their handling of, and decision-making on, particular accession trajectories. Over time, a substantial body of research has shown that EU enlargement has moved away from a predominantly technocratic logic and has become increasingly politicised (see for instance Hillion 2015; Butnaru-Troncotă 2024), with “decisions taken by the Council irrespective of the Commissions’ recommendations” (*ibid.*, 182). As such, political vetoes, often rooted in member states’ national foreign policy priorities, have frequently shaped both the timing and direction of candidate countries’ progress. These intergovernmental dynamics are central to understanding patterns of parliamentary engagement with enlargement, particularly in moments of crisis. For instance, the escalation of the war in 2022 was followed by the relaxation of several long-standing blockages, pointing to renewed political movement at the member-state level. Against this wider political setting, the article examines how engagement with enlargement evolved within the European Parliament in the aftermath of these developments.

Following Hogan’s (2019) revised concept of critical junctures, which treats political agency as decisive for policy change, and building on the premise that EU-level actors respond strategically to bottom-up pressures (Bressanelli 2020, 332), this study adopts a micro-level perspective focusing on the behaviour of Members of the European Parliament (MEPs). This angle is particularly appropriate given the relative policy freedom that MEPs enjoy within the EU framework, as no government emerges directly from a majority in the Parliament (Whitaker 2011, 8). Going beyond roll-call votes and speeches, we focus on written parliamentary questions (WPQs), thereby addressing a second understudied aspect in the literature on the European Parliament and legislative behaviour more broadly (Sorace 2018, 299; Brack and Costa 2019, 227; Chiru and Dimulescu 2011). By drawing on the concept of ‘actor-centred geopoliticisation’ (Andrione-Moylan et al. 2025), we examine whether and how MEPs were affected by, and potentially leveraged the 2022 full-scale Russian to advance their political goals in the EU enlargement process towards the Western Balkan countries during the 2019-2024 legislature². The 9th parliamentary term presents a particularly compelling case, as it was marked by a rise in Eurosceptic actors on the one hand, and the emergence of a renewed external threat on the other. Together, these developments prompt the question of how external geopolitical pressures intersect with internal political divisions in shaping parliamentary engagement with the Western Balkan region. Empirically, our study does not capture this geopoliticisation process in its entirety; rather, we focus our analysis on three specific, observable dimensions to assess how MEPs responded concretely to the geopolitical shock. As such, we analyse the salience of the issue of enlargement towards the WB6, the expansion of actors engaging with it, and the ways in which MEPs frame the topic in their parliamentary questions. The first two dimensions are derived from the well-established framework of De Wilde et al. (2016) for

² At the start of the 9th legislature, the EP was composed of 705 Members distributed among seven political groups and non-attached members as follows: European People’s Party (EPP) – 24.23%, Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats (S&D) – 20.51%, Renew Europe (RE) – 14.38%, Greens/European Free Alliance (Greens/EFA) – 9.85%, Identity and Democracy (ID) – 9.72%, European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) – 8.26%, The Left (GUE/NGL) – 5.46%, and Non-Inscrits (NI) – 7.59%

empirically assessing politicisation, and the third draws on structural framing analysis to examine whether there has been a discursive change towards a more geopolitical rationale used to justify or oppose EU widening in the aftermath of the Russian invasion. Polarisation, while an important aspect of politicisation, falls beyond the scope of this paper for conceptual and methodological reasons.

As we set out in the following sections, existing theoretical and empirical perspectives have provided ample reason to expect that the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine has contributed to the geopoliticisation of EU enlargement towards the Western Balkans in the European Parliament. Yet, our findings surprisingly provide only limited support for this premise across the dimensions of geopoliticisation we examine. While the invasion did not mark a decisive turning point in the salience of, or the actors engaging with the issue, it seems that Members have responded to the deteriorating security situation less through explicit geopolitical rhetoric and more by doubling down on calls for compliance with EU accession criteria. In other words, the exogenous shock appears to have reinforced the EU's conditionality logic as the main vehicle for advancing the Western Balkans' accession trajectory.

In what follows, we first discuss how political agency during critical junctures can open windows of opportunity for policy change and introduce the concept of 'actor-centred geopoliticisation', linking it with the literature on MEP behaviour and written parliamentary questions, along with the accompanying hypotheses. We then detail the research design and methodology of the study, before presenting our empirical results. The final section presents the conclusions and identifies avenues for future research on a policy area that is expected to remain a central issue on the EU's agenda over the next decade.

2. Background and theory³

2.1 Critical junctures and political agency

Geopolitics, understood as an increased emphasis on EU *interests*, *systemic rivals* and *strategic autonomy* along with the prioritisation of certain policy areas for the sake of a geopolitically stronger union, has always been inherent to the EU enlargement process (Anghel and Džankić 2023, 490). However, while the start of the Russo-Ukrainian conflict dates back to 2014, the scale and unprovoked nature of the 2022 full-scale Russian invasion, along with unprecedented speed of the decision-making process (*ibid.*, 487), has led many scholars to consider it as a "turning point" in the rise of geopolitics in the area of EU enlargement (Schimmelfennig 2024; Koval and Vachudova 2024; Denti 2023; Panagiotou 2023). Indeed, the return of a conventional war between two states on the European

³ This paper is part of a larger PhD thesis that aims to empirically test the theoretical framework developed by the first author. Other papers drawing on this framework include Jansen, L., Van Hecke, S., & D'Haeninck, E. (2025). Evident but implicit? Europarties' role in geo-politicising EU enlargement and the 2022 Russian invasion in Ukraine. *European Politics and Society*, 1–17. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23745118.2025.2595162>

continent provided the EU with a “geopolitical incentive to reboot the enlargement process” (Karjalainen 2023, 638).

Building on this logic, this paper considers the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine as a potential critical juncture in the way EU enlargement politics is handled within the European Parliament. Drawing on a combination of historical and discursive institutionalism, critical junctures are understood as external shocks that create windows of opportunity for policy change (Hogan 2019). Whether such shocks actually open pathways for change depends on the interests, ideas and agency of political actors operating within these institutional settings, with variation resulting from their choices and discourses (*ibid.*, 8). Interestingly, Hogan’s revised notion of critical junctures draws attention to potential intra- and inter-institutional dynamics and places particular emphasis on political agency. Within this framework, individual MEP behaviour is crucial: Members (might not) respond strategically to bottom-up pressures, such as societal cleavages, political representation or shifts in public opinion (see also Toshkov et al. 2014). Such responses may (de)politicise decision-making, behaviour, and outcomes at the supranational level (Bressanelli et al. 2020, 331), depending on whether MEPs interpret this geopolitical external shock as an opportunity for or constraint to the advancement of their own goals. Building on this premise, we draw upon the concept of actor-centred geopoliticisation put forward by Andriano-Moylan et al. (2025). Rather than focusing on the *structural* dimension of the rise and fall of geopolitics over time, which emphasises “a broader range of phenomena, from structural shifts in the global economy (i.e. between Western and non-Western economies) to sudden fractures in the international liberal order” (*ibid.*, 3), this concept foregrounds the agency of political actors in *making* an issue geopolitical. It captures whether and how political actors are affected by, respond to, and potentially leverage the recent surge in geopolitics within the context of EU enlargement to the Western Balkan countries (*Ibid.*, 4). In this way, the concept aligns with our theoretical framework on how EU actors, in this case MEPs, may act as drivers of geopoliticisation rather than passive responders to processes beyond their control (*ibid.*, 2). At the same time, it is important not to pre-empt the nature of the responses within the EU, “which may run counter to geopolitical logics and rather revert to the liberal, multilateral, leadership-by-example playbook of the Union” (*ibid.*, 4). While geopoliticisation processes might ultimately impact enlargement *policies* and even the EU’s *inter-institutional setup*, this study concentrates on the short-term, i.e. on enlargement *politics*, where we anticipate the initial changes to take place (*ibid.*, 6-7).

2.2 MEP behaviour in the wake of the Russian invasion

If the 2022 Russian invasion indeed represents a critical juncture, its effects should thus be traceable in how MEPs engage with the enlargement issue. Therefore, we argue that the invasion, as a geopolitical shock, provided incentives for Members of the European Parliament to politicise the issue of EU enlargement to the Western Balkans. Góra (2021, 453) for example, demonstrates that security-related events and the perceived threats resulting from them are “the key mechanisms responsible for moving

an issue on the politicisation scale in EU's foreign policy". Besides, the European Parliament is not subject to the same legitimacy pressures as the European Commission and is even "more likely to benefit from the kind of legitimisation-through-geopoliticisation that the EU as a whole may be seeking" (Andrione-Moylan et al. 2025, 7). Furthermore, enlargement is considered as a constitutive issue (Hutter et al. 2016, 154), with the potential to reshape the very structure of the EU (Sjursen, 2012), making it "subject to much stronger contestation and polarisation than traditional forms of foreign policy" (Góra et al. 2019, 21). As a result, Wunsch and Bélanger (2024, 1227) demonstrate that enlargement debates often serve as a proxy for deeper ideological divisions regarding the EU's internal governance and its relationship with its immediate neighbourhood, thereby "forcing political actors to take a clear stance on the pursuit or, in contrast, limitation of the integration process".

To test this expectation empirically, we trace how MEPs used written parliamentary questions during the 9th legislature (2019-2024) to engage with the issue of EU enlargement in the wake of the Russian invasion. In line with previous research (Sorace 2018, 299; Proksch and Slapin 2010, 54; Chiru and Dimulescu 2011; Brack and Costa 2019, 227), these questions are treated as a useful indicator of the priorities and interests of individual MEPs. We base our understanding of 'politicisation' on a slightly adapted version of the three-dimensional framework put forward by De Wilde et al. (2016). For an issue to become politicised, it must show signs of (a) increasing salience, (b) a polarisation of positions, and (c) involvement of a wider range of actors engaged with the matter. While polarisation is an integral component of politicisation, capturing it systematically in this context presents certain methodological and conceptual limitations. Positional analysis can only be meaningfully applied to a subset of questions (those that include explicit pre-question statements)⁴ and, as our preliminary analysis suggests, its reliance on overt sentiment risks skewing results by overrepresenting opponents of enlargement, who tend to express themselves in more explicit terms. Including this dimension could therefore bias the dataset and oversimplify more nuanced or implicit forms of support or opposition. Accordingly, the empirical assessment of capturing politicisation used in this paper rests primarily on salience and actor expansion. Emanating from agenda-setting theories, salience is defined as "the frequency and visibility of a given issue" (Góra 2021, 445). Actor expansion, then, captures changes in the composition of Members engaging with EU widening, as new groups enter the enlargement debate after the invasion. As such, the analysis is further complemented by a structural framing analysis designed to capture discursive changes in how MEPs justify or contest EU enlargement in response to the geopolitical

⁴ See section data collection and operationalisation.

shock⁵. We expect the Russian invasion to have triggered changes in MEP behaviour along these three dimensions of actor-centred geopoliticisation. Accordingly, we formulate the following hypotheses:

H1a: *The salience of the Western Balkan enlargement issue increases following the Russian invasion.*

H1b: *The range of actors engaging with the issue expands following the Russian invasion.*

H1c: *The use of geopolitical framing in MEPs' engagement with the issue increases following the Russian invasion.*

Having established these general expectations, the next step is to examine *who* drives these changes. In our framework, the 2022 Russian invasion represented a geopolitical shock that opened space for the geopoliticisation of EU enlargement, but whether and how this process unfolded depends on MEP agency. Drawing on existing literature, we expect variation in attention and discourses to be shaped by three key individual characteristics: ideology, specialisation and nationality, which we outline in the following subsections.

2.3 Determinants of variation in MEP behaviour

The first characteristic, ideology, is widely recognised as a “key differentiator in MEPs’ positioning on EU policies in general and enlargement in particular” (Hunter et al. 2025, 6). Parliamentary questions offer a key institutional window for party competition and issue politicisation (Ertürk 2025, 2), making them a useful indicator for assessing how ideological preferences translate into engagement with EU enlargement and external shocks. Defining ideology as the political group to which an MEP belongs, research shows that Members from Eurosceptic political groups and non-attached Members tend to table more questions overall (Martin 2011, 261; Senninger 2017, 298). This is because they possess fewer other tools as they are often excluded from the decision-making process (Sorace 2018, 308) and, although this has become less pronounced in recent years, are more likely to be in opposition in their home country (Proksch and Slapin, 2010). This traditionally increases the need for these actors to take the detour of interrogating the EU executive on European or national policy issues (Behm and Brack 2019, 1076). Additionally, Eurosceptic groups are inclined to use their questions to gather information they can leverage for their anti-EU campaigns in their home countries (Brack and Costa 2019, 239). While the literature generally points to the existence of “varieties of Euroscepticism” in EU politics (Brack 2020, 2-6), Wunsch and Bélanger (2024) provide evidence of the gradual emergence of a united U-shaped Eurosceptic front opposing the pro-European majority on EU enlargement policy during the

⁵ In our view, linking the politicisation framework with a framing approach provides a more comprehensive understanding of how geopolitical developments shape the ways in which EU actors engage with enlargement. The increased prioritisation of the enlargement topic for the sake of a ‘geopolitical Union’ may already serve as an indication of geopoliticisation. In other words, the ‘geo’ in geopoliticisation is not confined to the use of geopolitical framing but can also manifest itself through an increased salience of enlargement and the mobilisation of a wider range of political actors engaging with it. The framing analysis additionally captures how these geopolitical developments are articulated and justified discursively.

7th and 8th legislature. This consolidation was primarily driven by the radicalisation of soft-Eurosceptic groups, emboldened by the increased representation of Eurosceptic voices in the EP (*ibid.*, 1245). Additionally, Góra (2021, 452) found that, despite the fundamental differences in the nature of their criticism, right-wing and far-left parties express similar levels of opposition to EU enlargement.

Based on these findings and in parallel with the categorisation of Hunter et al. (2025), we distinguish between mainstream pro-European political groups (EPP, S&D, Renew and Greens/EFA) and the more Eurosceptic non-mainstream groups (ECR, ID, The Left and Non-Inscrits). In the wake of the Russian invasion, we expect mainstream political groups to intensify their focus and adopt a more geopolitical framing, as the uptick in public support strengthens the position of already supportive factions within these groups (*ibid.*), allowing them to leverage the argument of geostrategic necessity to make a more compelling case for EU enlargement. Additionally, the same authors point to the mechanism of “rhetorical entrapment” (Schimmelfennig 2001, 72-76), arguing that because mainstream groups see themselves as guardians of the EU’s values and norms, it becomes difficult for them to support Ukraine’s accession without extending the same position to other candidates, including those of the Western Balkans countries (Hunter et al. 2025, 3).

While we expect Eurosceptic groups to have tabled a disproportionately high number of questions over the entire term, we anticipate them to have downplayed the issue of EU enlargement to the Western Balkans after the Russian invasion, in order to manage the growing tension between their unchanged stances and the - at least temporary - increase in public support for enlargement (Buras and Morina, 2023,7). Indeed, rather than changing their own sceptical positions, we expect them to rely on a “strategy of avoidance” (De Vries and Hobolt, 2020) to mitigate this “incongruity with the public mood” (Hunter et al. 2025, 3). Additionally, if they engaged with the topic at all, we expect them to rely on geopolitical framing that emphasises the security risks associated with enlarging the Union to the Southeastern European candidates. This framing often centres on the idea that conflicts involving this region could become EU conflicts once these countries accede (Scicluna 2025, 8). Therefore, we formulate two hypotheses with regards to ideology:

H2a: Following the Russian invasion, mainstream pro-European MEPs increase their engagement and rely more heavily on geopolitical framing emphasising the strategic necessity of EU enlargement to the Western Balkans.

H2b: Following the Russian invasion, Eurosceptic non-mainstream MEPs reduce their engagement but, when they do engage, rely more heavily on geopolitical framing that emphasises the potential security risks associated with EU enlargement to the Western Balkans.

The second and third characteristics - specialisation and nationality - are closely linked, as the level of engagement with the topic of EU enlargement has traditionally been shaped by (a combination of) both

factors. Indeed, previous work points to the importance of nationality for determining how MEPs engage with enlargement (Braghiroli 2012, 18; Hunter 2025, 8). The geographical proximity of a member state enhances the strategic importance of EU enlargement, both economically and politically, along with closer cultural and historic ties (see for example Furby and Tsaknis 2023, 51; Czina et al. 2023, 55). For politicians and their constituents from neighbouring countries - Greece, Bulgaria, Romania, Hungary, Croatia and Slovenia (due to its shared Yugoslav history; Bučar and Udovič 2023, 103), enlargement with the Western Balkans therefore carries particular strategic, economic and cultural significance, likely creating stronger bottom-up pressures to engage with the issue. Similarly, topic expertise is a well-established determinant of a Members' legislative behaviour (Diener 2025, 6). To manage the complexity and technicality of EU policymaking, political parties often rely on a division of labour with legislators becoming experts in certain policy fields for their party [group]. These specialised Members usually play a decisive role in shaping how their party engages with the issue. As with speeches and press releases (*ibid.*, 7), parliamentary questions also tend to mirror a Member's specialisation in a particular policy area (Proksch and Slapin 2010, 61; Chiru and Dimulescu 2011). In the case of enlargement, Members of the Committee on Foreign Affairs (AFET) and those serving in one of the five Delegations dealing with the Western Balkans constitute such a specialised subgroup, largely formed through a process of self-selection (Bailer and Schneider 2000, 33-35), and often set the tone for their political group's engagement with the issue.

The 2022 full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine, however, may have disrupted this established pattern of engagement. The sudden geopolitical shock raised the stakes of EU enlargement, recasting it as a broader strategic concern tied to questions of security and stability and now resonating with citizens over the entire EU (Buras and Morina 2023, 7). This likely created new bottom-up pressures on MEPs who had previously paid limited attention to enlargement: 'generalists' with little specialisation in foreign affairs or enlargement and those from member states not bordering the Western Balkans, leading them to engage more actively in light of growing public concerns over the EU's security and geopolitical stability. Accordingly, the invasion is expected to have expanded and diffused engagement with EU enlargement beyond the traditional set of specialised and geographically close MEPs. Our final two hypotheses are therefore:

H3: Engagement with EU enlargement becomes less concentrated among specialised MEPs, as attention diffuses to more generalist Members following the Russian invasion.

H4: Engagement with EU enlargement becomes less concentrated among MEPs from neighbouring countries, as Members from outside the immediate neighbourhood engage more actively with the issue following the Russian invasion.

On a final note, it is worth pointing out that the Russian invasion might also have motivated MEPs to depoliticise the issue of WB6 enlargement since it could play into securitisation logics. This would suggest that that under such circumstances, political actors may feel compelled to prioritise a message of unity over political contestation, framing EU accession as a vital mechanism for addressing existential threats and thus for strengthening the EU's security and stability. In turn, this would underscore the role of individual MEP agency: Members interpret external shocks strategically, weighing political opportunities and constraints when deciding on how to engage (or not) with the issue, which is then reflected in their legislative behaviour.

3. Data and methods

3.1 A focus on written parliamentary questions

As touched upon earlier, this study investigates how the 2022 full-scale Russian invasion has affected MEPs' engagement with the EU enlargement process to the Western Balkan region. To this end, the empirical analysis draws on written parliamentary questions submitted during the 9th legislative term (2019- 2024). A Member can table up to twenty written questions over a rolling period of three months, designating one question per month as 'priority', which must be answered within three weeks instead of the usual six weeks. Potential addressees of the question include the President of the European Council, to the Council, to the Commission or to the Vice-President of the Commission/High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy (HR/VP). Unlike other types of legislative activities - and even other forms of questioning - written questions create a level playing field among all MEPs, as they are neither tightly controlled by party leadership nor constrained by strict institutional or procedural limits (Michon and Weill 2023, 723; Otjes and Lauwerse 2017, 498). This legislative instrument is also further removed from the public stage and, therefore, less salient for the party (group) image (Bevan et al. 2024, 186). As such, they offer "greater room to manoeuvre" (Narvarro and Brouard 2014, 96). Although not the most powerful legislative tool available to MEPs, written questions entail lower costs than those associated with legislative proposals, reports, or various amendments (Chiru and Dimulescu 2011, 3). The combination of these facilitating elements has resulted in the near-complete dominance of written questions over the two other types of questions (*ibid.*, 51). Sorace (2018, 301) further argues that written parliamentary questions are "the only supplementary legislative activity whose authorship patterns are unaffected by the election year", thus making them well-suited for capturing MEP behaviour across the entire hemicycle.

Alongside their broader informational and oversight functions, written questions also fulfil several closely connected micro-level purposes (Martin 2011, 259–260). Aimed at audiences beyond the hemicycle, this tool allows MEPs to gain personal publicity, build expertise in specific areas, earn 'good marks' from the media in reports on legislative activity, and promote constituency interests to strengthen their re-election prospects (Dandoy 2011, 315; Sierens and Brack 2021, 3; Michon and Weill

2023, 723). Within Parliament, it may also serve to demonstrate loyalty and commitment to the EP group leadership (Bailer 2011, 305).

3.2 Data collection, operationalisation and analysis

To construct our dataset, we first systematically retrieve all written parliamentary questions dealing with EU enlargement to the Western Balkan countries during the 9th legislative term from the EP's online database (N=214).⁶ For each WPQ, we then compile information about the question (date and referenced Western Balkan country) as well as on the author (political group, country, committee and delegation membership at the time when the question was submitted).⁷ We operationalise the three dimensions of our analysis as follows. First, salience is measured as the ratio of WB6 enlargement-related questions to the total number submitted by each MEP in both periods⁸. The inclusion of the precise date of submission allows us not only to trace changes in the attention devoted to enlargement before and after the invasion but also to account for potential delayed effects of the Russian invasion, as changes in salience might not materialise immediately. Second, to assess actor expansion (H1b; H2-4), we examine whether the magnitude of change varies significantly across the different subgroups of MEPs, taking into account political group affiliation, nationality and committee and/or delegation membership. Third, to analyse potential changes in the framing of the issue (H1c; H2), we rely on a structured framing approach in line with Aydemir and Vliegenthart (2022, 12), as it not only enables us to detect salient aspects in the perceived reality of MEPs, but also to investigate how these questions are used “to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation or moral evaluation” with regards to the WB6 enlargement process (Entman, 1993). Unpacking the underlying “patterns of argumentation” through which political actors link the issues raised in their questions to the EU enlargement process (Wunsch and Olszewska 2022, 923; Bélanger and Schimmelfennig 2021), sheds light on the extent to which geopolitics has permeated everyday political practices in the EP. From a discourse structure perspective, written parliamentary questions in the EP are designed as the combination of a pre-question statement and the actual question. These accompanying statements “provide the contextual basis for the interpretation of the questions, setting out ‘facts’ on which the questions are based” (Sarfo-Kantankah 2022, 72-73) as “they often contain assumptions that either accuse, criticise or praise [the European Council/Council/HR-VP], make propositions, give

⁶ According to our operationalisation, questions about enlargement of the WB6 countries meet the criteria if they contain the words ‘Enlargement’, ‘Accession’, ‘Accession negotiations’, ‘Accession talks’, ‘Candidate countries’, ‘EU membership’, ‘Aspiring to join the EU’, ‘European integration’, ‘Negotiating countries’, ‘European path’, ‘Applicant state’, ‘Pre-Accession Instrument/Funding’, ‘Pre-accession countries’, ‘European perspective’, ‘Joining the EU’, ‘SAA’, ‘Rapprochement with the EU’ or ‘Progress Report’.

⁷ Some parliamentary questions are submitted by groups of MEPs. In line with previous research (Porksich & Slapkin, 2011), we used unique questions to calculate the total number of questions and the questions per candidate country. For the analysis of authorship patterns, however, each MEP is considered separately, and the same question is counted for each MEP in the group of authors.

⁸ Calculating the relative differences at the MEP level allows us not only to measure the overall salience (by aggregation; H1) but also to control for each MEP's individual variation in activity levels (H2-4), the difference in the number of days between the two periods and potential effects of the Covid-19 pandemic.

information, imputations, insinuations and suggest their own answers or convey particular points of view” (*Ibid.*). Additionally, the question itself can be (explicitly) rhetorical, with scholars pointing to the relevance of the context or neighbouring utterances to reveal their rhetorical nature (Bélanger et al. 2020, 23; Bhattasali et al. 2015, 743). Following the approach of Gora and De Wilde (2019, 30), we distinguish between explicit justifications (i.e. direct linkage of a reason to a political actors’ position) and implicit justifications⁹ (i.e. not linguistically connected to the claim but understood contextually) used by political actors to rationalise and/or legitimise their positions on EU enlargement. For this purpose, we first identify questions that (1) contained an explicit enlargement statement in the pre-question section, and/or (2) were explicitly rhetorical. In the second step, we incorporate questions with more implicit justifications to capture nuances and political communication strategies that might otherwise have been overlooked. Questions solely aimed at seeking information are excluded for this part of the analysis (see Annex Table 10 for illustrative examples of the question classifications). Five macro-frames are constructed by drawing on a careful synthesis of existing scholarly work (Economides 2023; Olszewska 2022; Bélanger and Vergioglou 2019), while the subframes emerge from a combined deductive and inductive process, allowing for a more fine-grained analysis. We identify four macro-frames – identity, institutional, economic and security – along with an additional category to capture justifications that did not fit into these classifications. Identity-based arguments address questions of inclusion or exclusion from the symbolic boundaries of what it means to be European. Institutional justifications focus on issues of governance, particularly the rules and conditions for EU membership, while economic arguments relate to economic prosperity, labour mobility and social security. Finally, the last category encompasses realist-inspired justifications, which centre on EU security, its role as a regional power and broader geopolitical issues (see Annex Table 9 for the detailed codebook).

We analyse the data using a multi-method content analysis. For the salience dimension, we first examine the descriptive statistics aggregated for the overall level (H1a) and for variation across individual characteristics (H2-H4). To determine whether individual submission rates differ significantly between the pre- and post-invasion periods, we apply a Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test. This nonparametric test is appropriate given the paired and non-normally distributed nature of the data (see Annex Table 1). For actor expansion, we first calculate a difference score for each Member, reflecting the shift in their share of WB6 enlargement-related questions submitted before and after the Russian invasion. These scores are then compared across subgroups using a Mann-Whitney U Test, given that our data does not meet normality assumptions (see Annex Table 3) and the presence of independent, unequally sized subgroups. For framing, we employ a qualitative content analysis. Building on the preexisting codebook and a pilot study, frame classifications are manually coded by two authors to ensure satisfactory intercoder reliability (ICR after the initial round of individual coding = 85.6%), which results in

⁹ The keyword search technique (as detailed in footnote 2) already limits the questions to those that explicitly mention keywords related to EU enlargement towards the Western Balkans.

additional finetuning and consolidation of the sub-frame scheme based on a joint decision taken after deliberation between the two coders. Following the approach of Dolezal et al. (2012, 43), we allow for multiple frames per question, recognising that political actors often use various justifications to support their position.

4. Empirical findings

4.1 Saliency

To test the first dimension of actor-centred geopoliticisation, saliency, we examine whether the Russian invasion increased the attention MEPs devote to WB6 enlargement (H1a). We start by comparing the Western Balkans with other candidate countries to see how the region fits within the broader enlargement debate. Overall, our descriptive analysis shows that, somewhat surprisingly, the total number of enlargement-related questions has declined since the full-scale Russian invasion (see Annex Figure 1 for results per year). Furthermore, Table 1 illustrates a clear shift away from Türkiye (-25.94 pp) towards Ukraine (+15 pp), Moldova (+6.74 pp) and, to a lesser extent, Georgia (+3.98 pp). Meanwhile, the interest in the Western Balkans remained relatively stable, with only a slight decrease of 1.37 percentage points. This finding is further supported by our statistical analysis (see Annex table 2), which shows no significant change in the proportion of questions addressing enlargement to the Western Balkan countries when measured at the individual level (i.e. relative share per MEP) ($z = 0.723$, $p = 0.470$, $r = 0.068$).

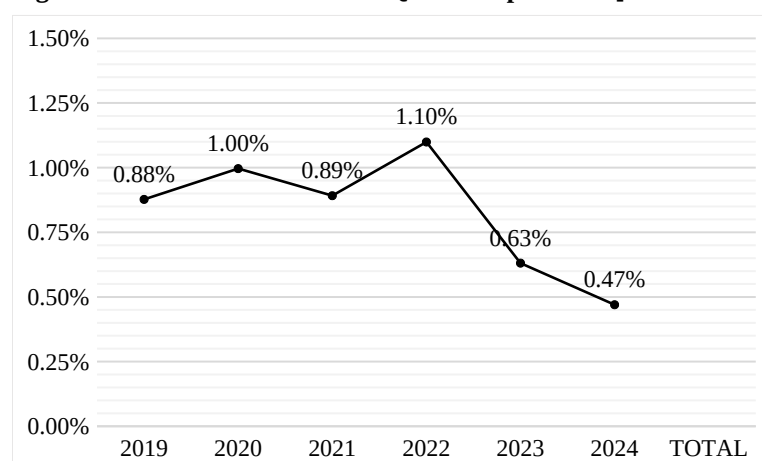
Table 1. Total Share of Written Questions per (potential) Candidate Country

Targeted (candidate) country	Total Share WPQ	Share WPQ Before Invasion	Share WPQ After Invasion	Share WPQ Before-After Invasion*
WB6	7.84%	9.76%	3.31%	- 6.45 pp
Mixed	11.27%	12.20%	9.09%	- 3.10 pp
Albania	11.52%	11.85%	10.74%	- 1.10 pp
North Macedonia	8.09%	5.23%	14.88%	+ 9.65 pp
Bosnia and Herzegovina	4.41%	3.83%	5.79%	+ 1.95 pp
Serbia	4.90%	4.53%	5.79%	+ 1.26 pp
Montenegro	2.70%	3.83%	0.00%	- 3.83 pp
Kosovo	1.47%	1.39%	1.65%	+ 0.26 pp
Türkiye	37.25%	44.95%	19.01%	- 25.94 pp
Ukraine	5.15%	0.70%	15.70%	+ 15.01 pp
Moldova	2.70%	0.70%	7.44%	+ 6.74 pp
Georgia	1.72%	0.70%	4.13%	+ 3.44 pp
Ukraine + Moldova	0.49%	0.35%	0.83%	+ 0.48 pp
Ukraine + Moldova + Georgia	0.49%	0.00%	1.65%	+ 1.65 pp
Absolute Total	408 (100.00%)	287 (100.00%)	121 (100.00%)	
Relative Total (Share of total questions)	1.71%	1.83%	1.48%	- 0.35 pp

* pp refers to percentage points.

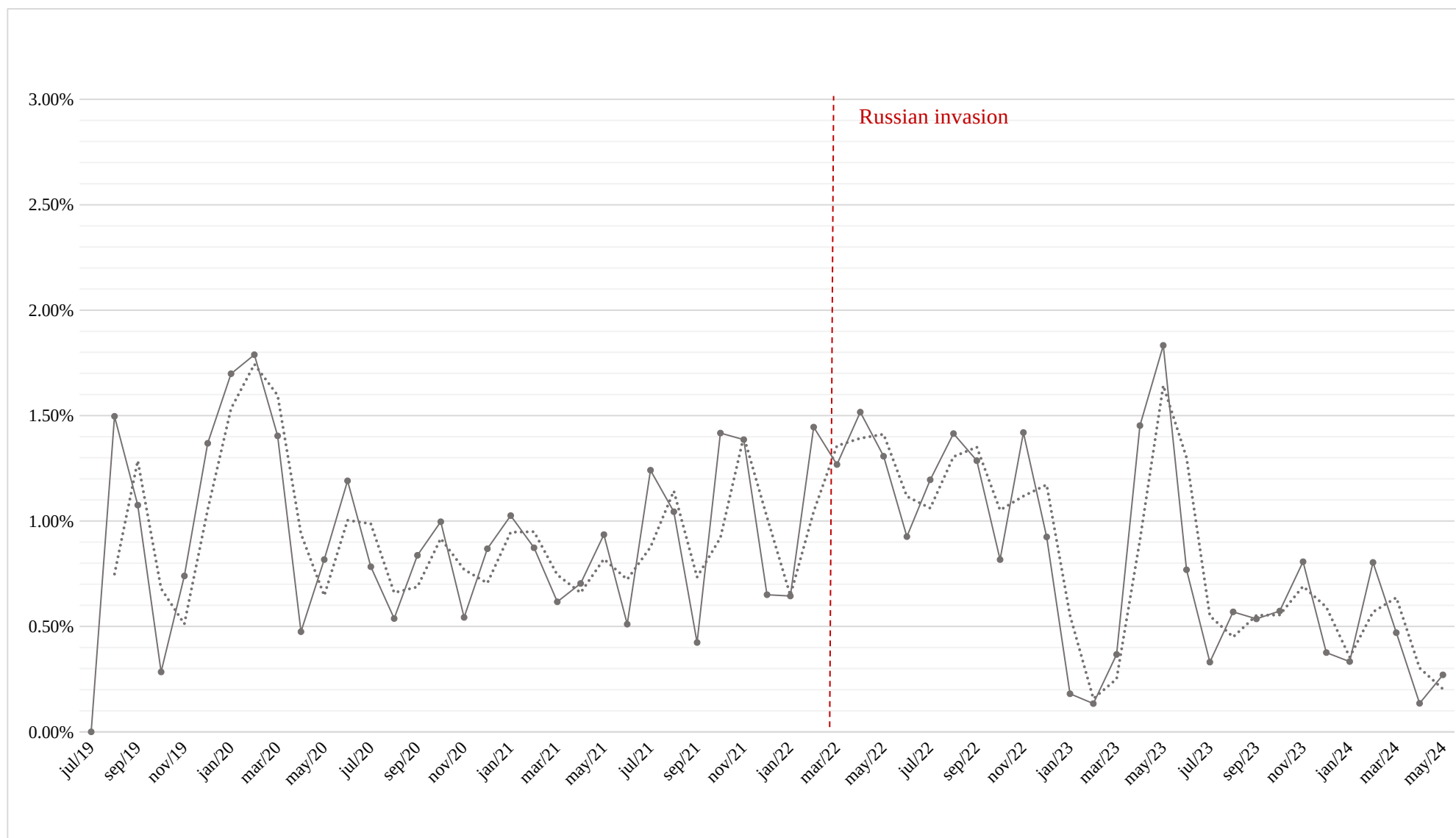
For more in-depth results and to account for potential delayed effects of the invasion, we also plotted the tabled questions over the five-year legislative term and on a monthly basis. From 2019 to 2022, questions targeting accession to the Western Balkan countries consistently accounted for around 1% of all written parliamentary questions, with a slight peak in 2022, reaching 1.10%, mirroring the overall upwards trend in enlargement-related submissions that year. However, the numbers declined sharply in 2023 and even halved by 2024 (0.47%) (see Figure 1). Additionally, rolling averages of the monthly distribution highlight three periods of increased attention (see Figure 2). The first occurred during the transition from 2019 to 2020, coinciding with the blocking of opening accession negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia by France, Denmark and the Netherlands at the European Council summit in October 2019 and the subsequent anticipation on the revised enlargement methodology published by the Commission in February 2020. A second spike, but not higher than the first one, takes place shortly after the Russian invasion (most notably in April 2022). Finally, another increase is visible in the spring of 2023, partially due to the flare-up in Greek-Albanian tensions following the arrest of ethnic Greek politician Fredi Beleri in Albania. Overall, the results provide no evidence that the Russian invasion increased attention to Western Balkan enlargement, thus offering no support for H1a.

Figure 1. Total Share of Written Questions per Year [Western Balkan Countries]¹⁰



¹⁰ In terms of addressees, just under 95% of the questions were directed to the Council, while a smaller proportion were addressed to the HR/VP (4.21%) and a negligible number to the Commission (0.93%).

Figure 2. Total share of written parliamentary questions per month [rolling averages]



Note: Values on the Y-axis indicate the monthly share of enlargement-related questions.

4.2 Actor expansion

The second dimension of actor-centred geopoliticisation concerns the expansion of actors engaging with enlargement (H1b). We expect this widening to be driven by stronger engagement from MEPs with specific characteristics: mainstream (H2a) and generalist (H3) MEPs, as well as Members from countries outside the immediate neighbourhood (H4).

Before turning to each characteristic in detail, we first assess these expectations collectively using a Mann-Whitney U Test to examine whether the magnitude of change differed significantly between subgroups of MEPs based on their ideological affiliation, nationality, and level of specialisation. Given the overall low sample size (N=113) and particularly the small sizes of certain subgroups, particularly among generalist, neighbouring and non-mainstream MEPs, we consider $p < 0.1$ as significant. After controlling for outliers, the nationality variable emerges as significant, providing empirical support for H4. No significant effects were found for ideological affiliation (H2) or specialisation (H3) (see Annex Tables 4-6 for full results). However, the direction of change, as indicated by the effect sizes, aligns with expectations: MEPs from non-neighbouring countries, non-specialised MEPs, and those affiliated with mainstream groups tended to show greater engagement in the WB6 enlargement discussions following the 2022 full-scale Russian invasion. These patterns warrant closer examination of the descriptive statistics in the following section.

Table 2. Results of Mann-Whitney U Tests for binary predictors

MEP characteristic	U	r
Mainstream political group (1) ¹¹	1521	0.059
Specialisation (1)	1325	-0.092
Neighbouring country (1)	857*	-0.182

Note: Significant U-value indicates that observations coded as 1 for the variable has significantly higher/lower relative submissions than observations coded as 0. r indicates effect size and directions. * $p < 0.1$, ** $p < 0.05$ *** $p < 0.01$

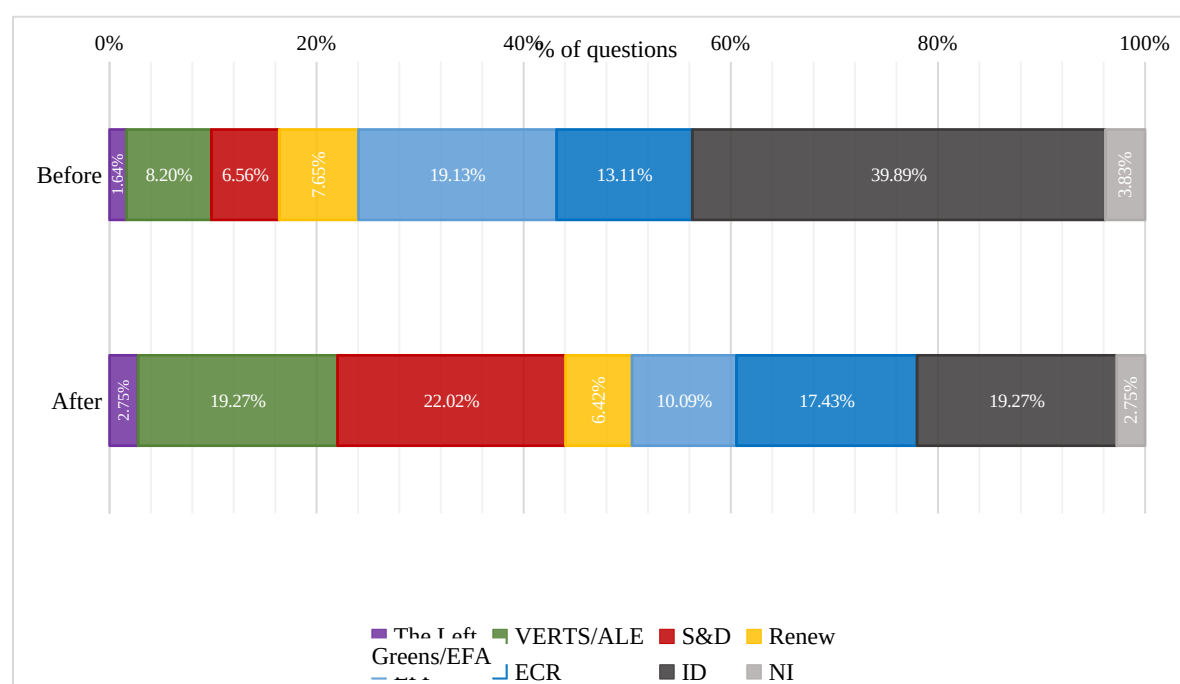
4.2.1 Ideology

With regards to ideology, Figure 3 illustrates a clear departure from the dominance of far-right Identity and Democracy MEPs towards a more balanced representation across all political groups. Consistent with our expectations (H2b) and the findings of Hunter et al. (2025), they responded with a “strategy of avoidance” (see De Vries and Hobolt 2020) to the growing public support for enlargement. Interestingly, however, the salience of other non-mainstream challenger groups (ECR and The Left) actually increased after the 2022 Russian invasion. While Members from the far-left became slightly more active (+1.11 pp), the interest of right-wing ECR group MEPs grew by approximately five points, which again mirrors the findings of Hunter et al. in this regard (2025, 16).

¹¹ We also conducted separate tests for each political group using the Kruskal–Wallis H test, which also did not yield statistically significant results.

In contrast to the sharp decline of submissions by far-right MEPs, the rising involvement of (centre-) left-wing MEPs in the aftermath of 24 February 2022 is particularly striking. The Greens, for instance, boosted their involvement by 11.07 percentage points, while the S&D MEPs increased their share even more (+15.56 pp), both pushing above their political weight (in EP seats). While the share of questions authored by MEPs from Renew and Non-Inscrits dropped only marginally in the aftermath of the Russian invasion, the proportion of questions tabled by centre-right EPP MEPs faced a significant decline, falling by nearly ten percentage points, especially when accounting for the group size (see Annex figures 2-3 for group size-adjusted results).

Figure 3. Distribution of WB6 Written Questions per Political Group



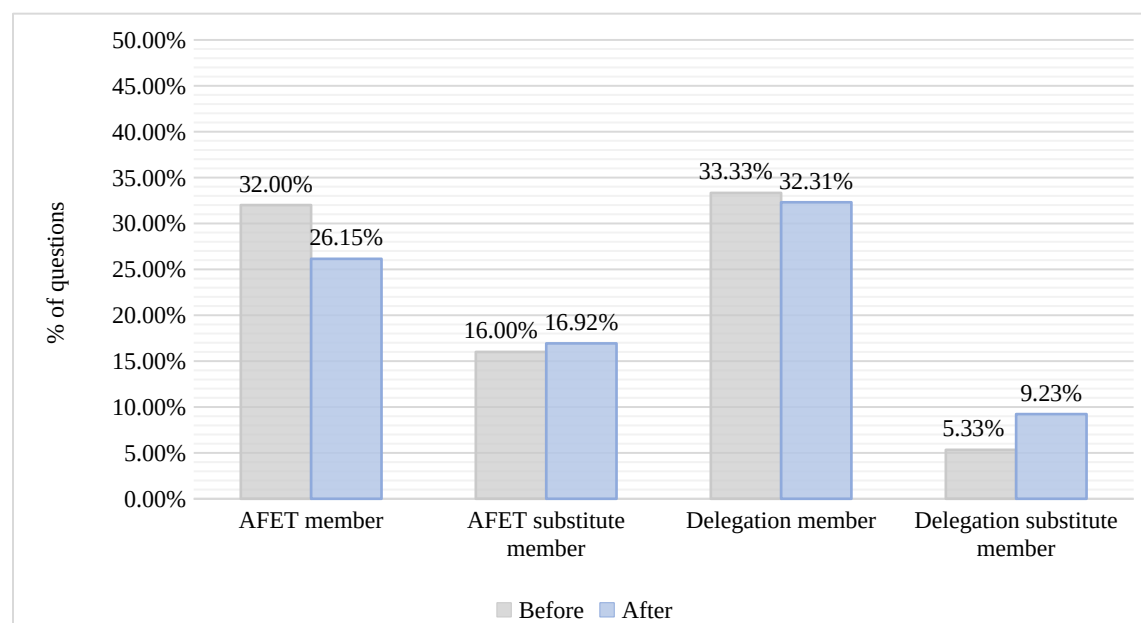
Note: 'Before' refers to the period prior to the Russian invasion (01/07/2019-23/02/2022) and 'after' refers to the period following the invasion (24/02/2022-15/07/2024)

4.2.2 Specialisation

Overall, the proportion of written questions authored by specialised MEPs decreased by approximately two percentage points in the aftermath of the 2022 Russian invasion, showing that non-specialised MEPs became slightly more involved in the discussions on EU enlargement to the Western Balkan countries. Nevertheless, it is important to emphasize that specialised members continue to table the vast majority of these questions, accounting for almost 85% of the submissions. When breaking down the share of specialised MEPs by *type of specialisation*, we observe that before the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine, 48% of MEPs authoring written questions were (substitute) members of the Foreign Affairs Committee. After the invasion, this share decreased by nearly five percentage points. In contrast, the proportion of MEPs who hold a (substitute) membership of delegations increased with almost three points to 41.54%. However, when the data is broken down by *level of specialisation* (i.e.

full versus substitute membership), it becomes clear that the share of the most specialised MEPs (i.e. full members) decreases, while the proportion of substitute members increases. In addition to the slight decrease in specialised profiles, the total number of written questions became more evenly distributed among the MEPs who tabled at least one question, with the average share per MEP dropping from 2.24% to 1.54%. Although we do not find statistical support for H3, the descriptive results thus point to a limited diffusion of engagement beyond the most specialised Members.

Figure 4. Distribution of WB6 Written Questions per Type and Level of Specialisation



Note: Proportions are counted for each period separately. The analysis considers MEPs as full member of AFET or one of the five delegations to the Western Balkan countries when at least one of their submitted written questions occurred during their tenure as full member of that Committee or Delegation. 'Before' refers to the period prior to the Russian invasion (01/07/2019-23/02/2022) and 'after' refers to the period following the invasion (24/02/2022-15/07/2024).

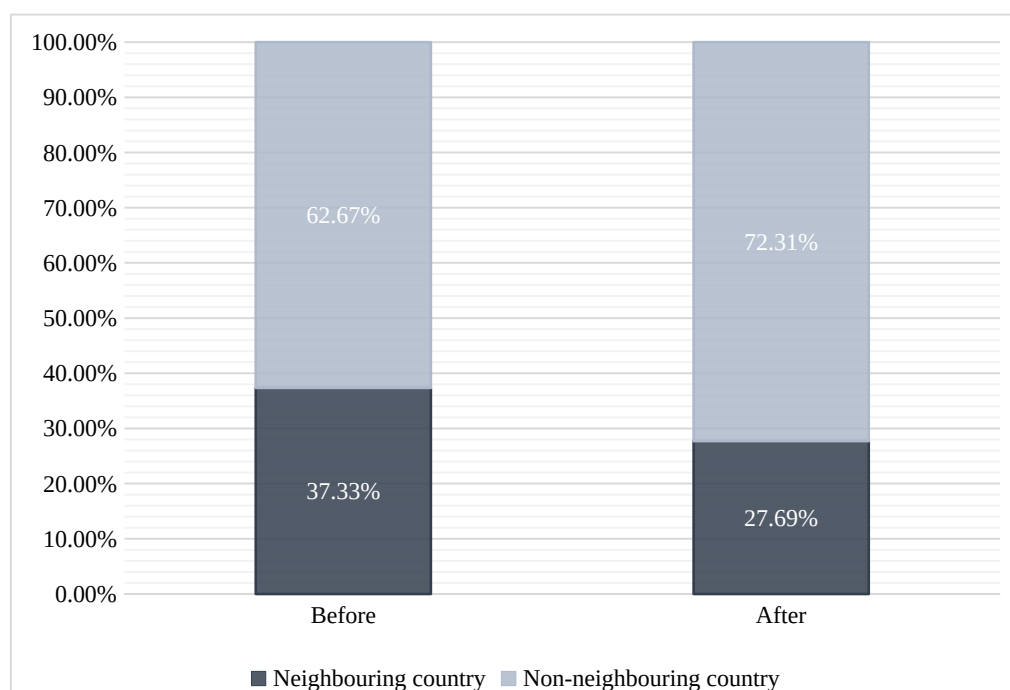
4.2.3 Nationality

Figure 5 shows that Members from neighbouring countries are still punching above their weight. Although representing only 11.45% of the EU's citizens (Eurostat, 2023), these MEPs accounted for 37.33% and 27.69% of the questions tabled before and after the invasion, respectively. In line with our expectations (H4), the results indicate a nearly 10-percentage-point decline in the proportion of written questions submitted by MEPs from member states bordering the six Western Balkan countries (plus Slovenia). This shift illustrates an increased involvement from MEPs representing countries outside the immediate neighbourhood. Prior to the Russian invasion, the neighbouring countries with the highest share of submitted questions were Greece (10.67%), Romania (6.67%) and Croatia (6.67%) (see Annex table 7). Greece remained the most active country after February 2022 (9.23%), with the second and third spot shifting to Bulgaria (6.15%) and Slovenia (4.62%). While Greece's continued prominence was expected, given that it is the second most populous EU member state bordering the Western Balkan region, the absence of Romania - the largest member state in the region - during the period following

the invasion initially seems surprising. However, a key factor behind Romanian MEPs' weakened interest in submitting written parliamentary questions on Western Balkan enlargement appears to be its clear shift in focus towards its eastern borders with Ukraine and Moldova. Indeed, the proportion of Romanian MEPs submitting questions concerning candidate countries other than the six Western Balkan states increased sharply, rising from 1.32% (tenth place) to 13.08% (second place), just behind Greece (see Annex table 8). A substantial portion of these questions focused specifically on Moldova, comprising half of all questions submitted by Romanian MEPs, followed by Ukraine, which accounts for 25%.

With regards to the participation of non-neighbouring countries, MEPs from the three largest member states (Germany, France and Italy) consistently accounted for the largest share of submitted parliamentary questions in both periods. While the relative shares of Germany and France remained stable at approximately 13%, Italy experienced a significant rise of over 12 percentage points in the aftermath of the Russian invasion. Frontini and Denti (2017) point to regional (and domestic) security concerns alongside economic interests as key factors underpinning Italy's engagement with the Western Balkans. Additionally, MEPs from Lega (ID) and the Partito Democratico (S&D) have clearly dominated the numbers in both periods, suggesting that the explanation for this sharp increase specifically lies within the activities of these two parties and/or the political rivalry between them.

Figure 5. Distribution of WB6 Written Questions per Geographical Proximity



Note: Neighbouring countries including Slovenia. 'Before' refers to the period prior to the Russian invasion (01/07/2019-23/02/2022) and 'after' refers to the period following the invasion (24/02/2022-15/07/2024)

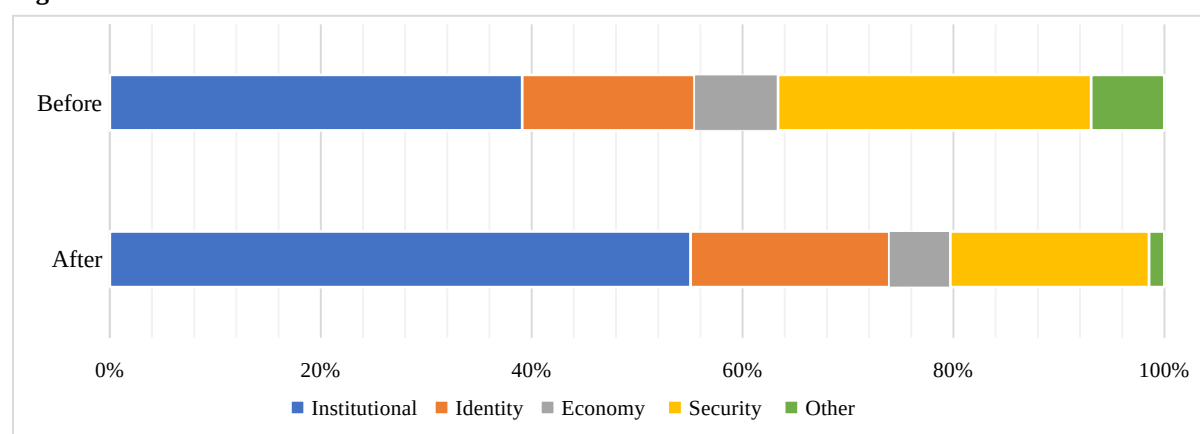
4.3 Framing

The third and final dimension of actor-centred geopoliticisation examined in this article concerns the framing of the enlargement issue. The analysis focuses not only on the frequency of particular frames

but also to how they function within MEPs' discourse. Alongside an overall rise in geopolitical arguments (H1c), we expect the content of these arguments to vary according to Members' ideological orientation (H2a-b).

Contrary to expectations, the share of security-related arguments, including geopolitical justifications, fell by nearly ten percentage points in the post-invasion period, offering no support for H1c. Instead, institutional arguments increased significantly (by almost 16 percentage points), along with a small rise in identity justifications (2.5 pp), while economic arguments remained clearly subordinate throughout the entire 9th parliamentary term (see Figure 6). Although these findings are consistent with earlier studies emphasising the dominance of normative justifications over rational interest calculations in the case of EU enlargement discussions (*Ibid.*, 85; Bélanger & Vergioglou 2019, 14), from a rationalist perspective, it remains striking that a systemic shock of this magnitude did not translate into more explicit security and geopolitical justifications.

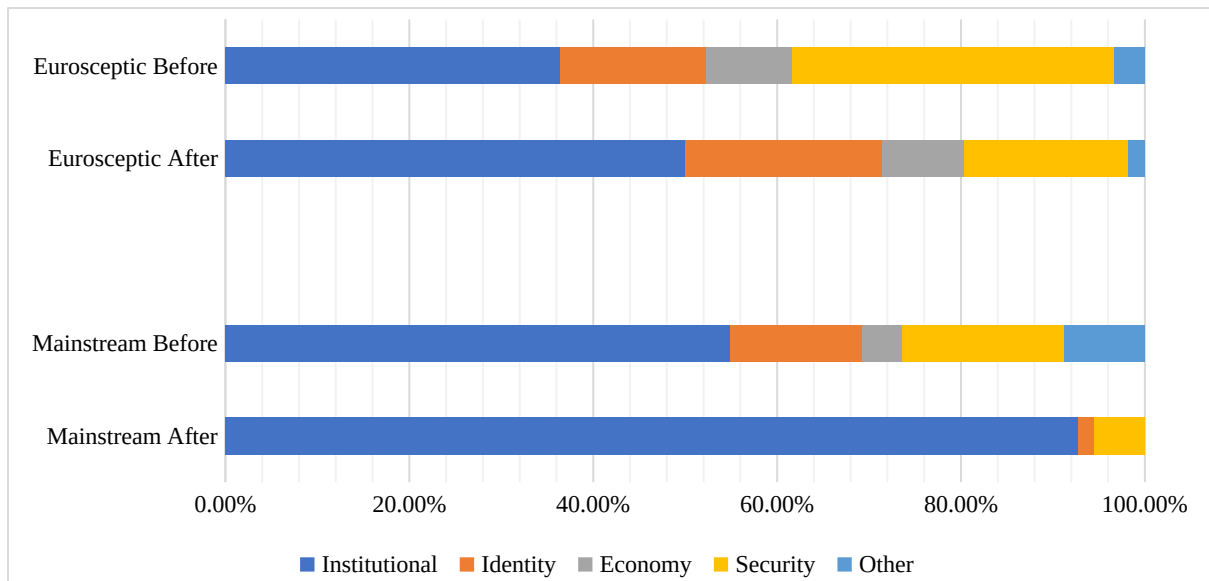
Figure 6. Distribution of Macro Frames Pre-and Post Invasion



Note: 'Before' refers to the period prior to the Russian invasion (01/07/2019-23/02/2022) and 'after' refers to the period following the invasion (24/02/2022-15/07/2024)

This rather unexpected outcome in the distribution of frames warrants closer scrutiny. The following section therefore examines the content of the arguments and their variation across ideological lines (H2a-b). As shown in Figure 7, mainstream MEPs did not rely more heavily on arguments framing the accession of the Western Balkan region as a means to advance the EU's geopolitical interests or promote regional stability in the post-invasion period, contrary to our expectation in H2a. Conversely, while Eurosceptic non-mainstream MEPs continued to rely on geopolitical arguments, their use of such frames declined after the full-scale Russian invasion, providing support for our expectations in H2b.

Figure 7. Distribution of Macro Frames Pre-and Post Invasion by Ideology



Note: 'Before' refers to the period prior to the Russian invasion (01/07/2019-23/02/2022) and 'after' refers to the period following the invasion (24/02/2022-15/07/2024)

The qualitative analysis confirms the dual function of geopolitical discourse. On the one hand mainstream MEPs generally framed enlargement as a means of strengthening the EU's geopolitical position at large, and as a response to the growing geopolitical influence of external actors in the region. Even prior to the 2022 invasion, Russia was the most frequently discussed third country, particularly regarding its leverage over Serbia and its foreign policies. Türkiye, China, and, to a lesser extent, countries from the Arabian Peninsula and the US were also named as (potential) influential external actors. As one EPP Member asked, *"How can we avoid these countries becoming disillusioned with the unkept promises made on EU membership and stop them [...] looking for support elsewhere in the vicinity?"*¹². On the other hand, ECR and ID MEPs employed geopolitical arguments primarily to contest enlargement, while Members from The Left almost entirely refrained from engaging in such discourses¹³, irrespective of the Russian invasion. Both ECR and ID Members made the most frequent use of geopolitical arguments to justify their positions on EU enlargement to the Western Balkans, in absolute terms and relative to their group size. However, the substance of their arguments differed significantly. ID MEPs primarily focused on what they characterised as 'US decisionism' and the influence of certain Muslim-majority countries, often linking these concerns to broader security narratives around Islamisation, migration and terrorism. In contrast, ECR MEPs were especially active in warning against Serbia's close ties with Russia, portraying its accession as a potential security liability for the EU. Two ECR Members, for instance, argued that *"It is all the more worrying that Serbia is actively and directly involving Russia in the [Belgrade-Pristina] negotiations. It is quite evident that Serbia views Russia as an ally, despite the EUR 93.4 million that the EU has granted Serbia*

¹² 2020-01-22, Băsescu, E-000324/2020

¹³ In fact, the Left submitted only one question that is associated with the security frame (specifically under the regional stability subframe) calling on the Commission to address the resurgence of nationalism and maintain political stability in North Macedonia (2019-10-31, Kouloglou, E-003576/2019).

to cope with the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic” followed by the question whether “the Commission believes that Serbia belongs in the EU”¹⁴. Additionally, only 3.31% of the total post-invasion questions explicitly referred to the 2022 invasion, with nearly all of them raised in relation to Serbia’s (non-)alignment with the EU’s Common Foreign and Security Policy towards Russia and exclusively authored by ECR and ID MEPs. While Members from both groups used this context to call for a reassessment of IPA funding to the candidate country, ID MEPs invoked the notion of unequal treatment, both in defence of Serbia and as a way to criticise Türkiye. They pointed to what they perceived as a double standard: Serbia was publicly criticised for its non-alignment with the EU’s sanctions policy whereas Turkey was not subjected to the same level of pressure; “*The EU has urged Serbia, a candidate for accession, to participate in the current sanctions against Russia, but has not said anything to Turkey, even though it is in the same position*”¹⁵. This narrative of asymmetry had already been employed by the ID group in earlier instances to redirect attention towards other candidate countries such as Albania¹⁶.

The strong rise in institutional arguments, particularly those centred on conditionality, also deserves further attention. Indeed, the analysis of the subframes (Figure 8) reveals that MEPs mainly highlighted the need for compliance with EU accession criteria and, to a lesser extent, the potential implications for the EU’s institutional framework. Justifying EU enlargement as a tool for the external projection of EU values, however, failed to gain significant prominence in both periods. Although the overall share of questions from neighbouring Members declined after the Russian invasion, interestingly, this group of MEPs increasingly emphasised the implementation of minority rights. The proportion of such questions more than doubled, accounting for nearly half of the questions within the institutional compliance subframe in the post-invasion period, consistent with Korpalo and Rabinovych’s (2025, 10) findings for plenary debates in the aftermath of the Russian invasion. This is especially evident among center-right and independent Greek MEPs, who focus on the Greek minority in Albania, as well as Bulgarian MEPs, particularly those from the ECR, who concentrate on the Bulgarian minority in North Macedonia. This constituency-driven emphasis on minority rights has been widely documented as a strategic tool to advance defined national interests rather than promoting human rights and democratic standards in a more normative sense (*Ibid.*, 77; Fox and Vermeersch 2010, 338).

Taken together, the overall decrease in security and geopolitical justifications thus seems to be driven by both the manifestation of strategic avoidance of Eurosceptic Members as well as the increased reliance on compliance with the accession criteria among mainstream MEPs.¹⁷

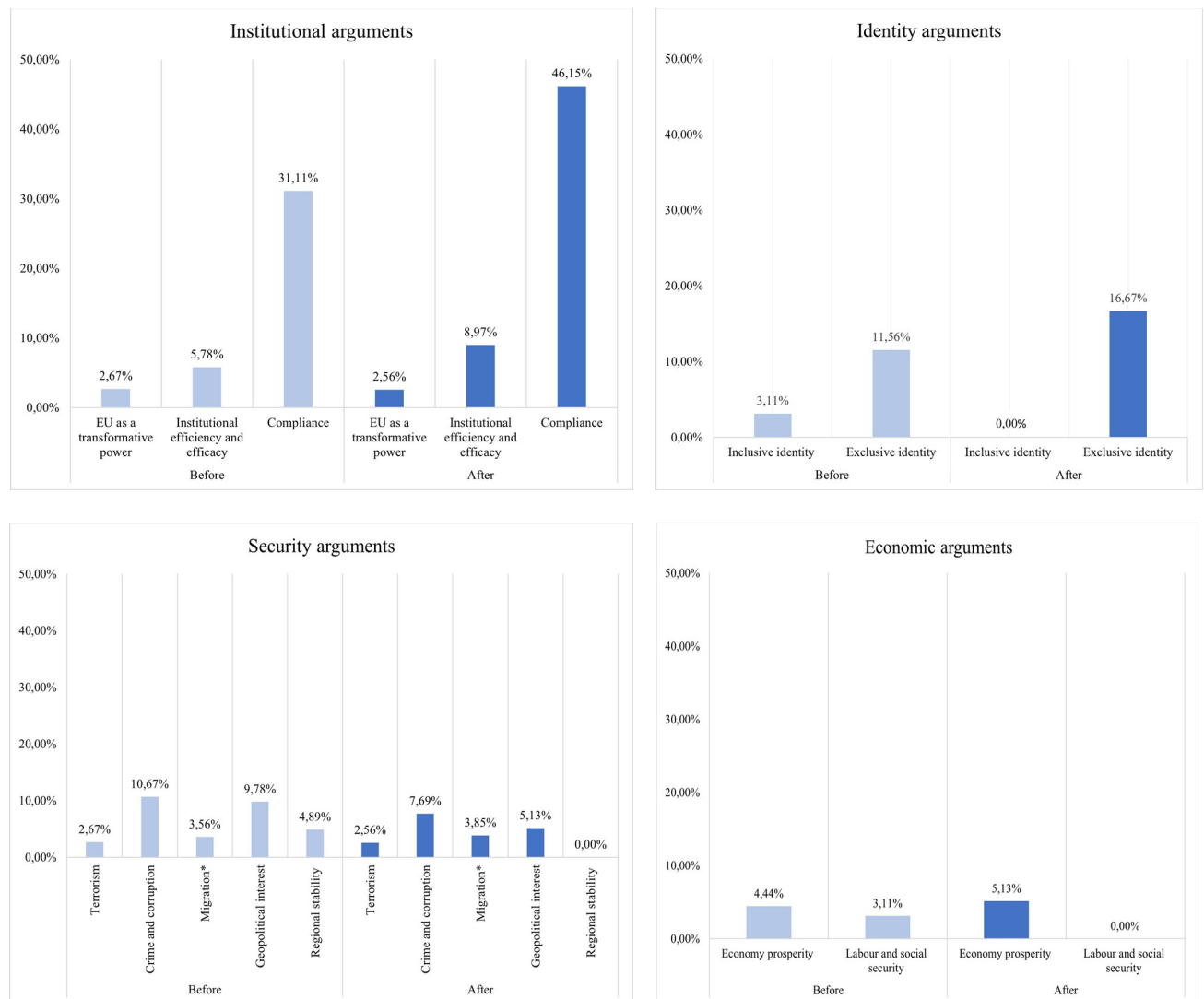
¹⁴ 2020-06-22, Dzhambazki and Slabakov, E-003697/2020

¹⁵ 2022-04-04, Garraud, E-001339/2022

¹⁶ See for example question E-002530/2021 (2021-05-11, Mariani)

¹⁷ At the same time, no consistent patterns were observed with regard to nationality or MEPs’ level of specialisation.

Figures 8 A-D. Aggregated distribution of Subframes within each Masterframe, Pre-and Post Invasion¹⁸



Note: ‘Before’ (light blue) refers to the period prior to the Russian invasion (01/07/2019-23/02/2022) and ‘after’ (dark blue) refers to the period following the invasion (24/02/2022-15/07/2024).

5. Discussion and conclusion

Drawing on the concept of ‘actor-centred geopoliticisation’ and the premise that written parliamentary questions offer a heuristic tool for tracing EU lawmakers’ priorities and how they frame political issues, this article explores whether the Russian invasion served as a catalyst for the geopoliticisation of EU

¹⁸ The subframes of the ‘other’ category can be found in the Annex figure 10.

enlargement politics during the 2019-2024 parliamentary term. Specifically, we examined whether and how MEPs were affected by and potentially leveraged this international exogenous shock to advance their political goals in the EU enlargement process towards the Western Balkan countries. This question is particularly relevant as “geopolitics and more precisely actor-driven geopoliticisation can be seen as fundamentally at odds with the idea of European integration” (Andrione-Moylan et al. 2025, 5). Therefore it has the potential to fundamentally change the way in which political actors approach the EU foreign policy space in general and the enlargement process in particular. Moreover, the full-scale invasion coincided with a parliamentary term marked by a record-high presence of (hard) Eurosceptic forces, making it a particularly intriguing testing ground for examining how an external security crisis interacts with (potential) realignments within the European Parliament. In doing so, this article also contributes to the understudied impact of the Russian invasion on parliamentary engagement with enlargement, as well as to the literature on written parliamentary questions, an instrument often overlooked in legislative behaviour literature more broadly.

In an effort to disentangle the concept of actor-centred geopoliticisation, we first employed the three-dimensional framework of politicisation i.e. salience, actor expansion and polarisation (De Wilde et al. 2016). Given the limitations of written parliamentary questions in capturing polarisation, our analysis concentrates on the first two dimensions. While the full-scale Russian invasion clearly intensified the focus on candidates within Russia’s immediate orbit (Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia), it had little effect on how much attention was given to the Western Balkan region in written parliamentary questions. Secondly, although statistical significance was only reached for the nationality variable, the descriptive findings point to increased engagement by mainstream, non-neighbouring and less specialised MEPs in the aftermath of this major geopolitical event. Interestingly, the “strategy of avoidance” appears to be specific to the ID MEPs, with The Left and ECR MEPs steering clear of this approach. This finding might point to a reconfiguration of the ideological divide on EU enlargement, one that now runs between the far-right and the rest of the EP, rather than the anticipated consolidation of hard and soft Eurosceptic non-mainstream groups observed in earlier periods (Wunsch & Bélanger 2024).

Not only can political actors influence the prominence of the enlargement issue, but also how it is perceived by the audience. Accordingly, the second part of the analysis focused on the extent to which enlargement-related statements were framed in geopolitical terms. While a continued emphasis on the fulfilment of EU conditionality was expected (see for example Olszewska 2022), we did not anticipate a further increase in institutional argumentation, particularly when coupled with a decline in geopolitical justifications. Moreover, MEPs rarely seemed to directly leverage the invasion in their discourse, with explicit references to the event remaining relatively scarce. A combination of two explanations seems plausible. First, the decline may reflect the aforementioned strategy of avoidance among the most critical Members from the ID group who traditionally rely on security narratives to contest enlargement but reduced their overall engagement after 2022. Second, it may signal that mainstream MEPs, even

under external threat, remain bound to the conditionality logic, thereby reinforcing the message that accession will not advance without reforms, regardless of geopolitical urgency. In this sense, the invasion may be reflected not in discourse about geopolitics itself, but in a renewed focus on conditionality as a vehicle for advancing the Western Balkans' accession trajectory. In other words, the exogenous shock makes the EU's conditionality approach stronger and more urgent.

Overall, the full-scale Russian invasion does not appear to have marked a decisive turning point in the salience of, or the actors engaging with, EU enlargement to the Western Balkans, nor in the way the issue was framed in written parliamentary questions. Whether it has affected the polarisation dimension of politicisation, however, falls beyond the scope of our study. One possible explanation that helps explain this limited change is the tendency for the inter-institutional balance of power to shift from the EP towards the (European) Council during crises or situations requiring immediate responses, as was the case during the management of the Eurozone crisis, Russia's annexation of Crimea or Brexit (see for example Müller Gómez et al. 2019, 72). In enlargement policy, this dynamic reinforces the already central role of the Commission and the member states and further limits the Parliament's ability to directly influence the course of the accession process. The (threat of) vetoes invoked at the member-state level have often been decisive in shaping the pace and direction of EU enlargement, and the easing of several long-standing constraints in the (European) Council in 2022 points to a phase in which political momentum was generated primarily outside the parliamentary arena. This may therefore form part of the explanation for why these developments did not translate into a more pronounced increase in parliamentary engagement with enlargement. Additionally, the nature of written parliamentary questions themselves might also contribute to this outcome, with MEPs possibly favouring more outward-facing instruments when addressing this topic, particularly when it comes to the deployment of geopolitical argumentations. Nonetheless, these findings align with previous research about European political party manifestos as they also lacked increased security or geopolitical justifications (Jansen et al., 2025). Similarly, Hunter et al. (2025, 12-14) found no significant change in the nature of discourse in plenary speeches before and after the invasion with regards to Western Balkan candidates and observed only an increased attention towards Serbia and Kosovo.

Together they give rise to several questions for future research. For one, might the effects of the invasion unfold more gradually, only becoming visible in the 10th parliamentary term? Alternatively, is geopoliticisation taking place in a more implicit form, embedded in the language of compliance rather than in explicit security narratives, resulting in a so-called "strategic layering" of enlargement politics (Schimmelfennig 2024, 88)? And is this limited to the accession of the WB6? In any case, as the EU increasingly needs to navigate between its long-standing emphasis on conditionality and its growing geopolitical ambitions, addressing these issues will be essential to understand the MEPs individual behaviour with regard to the Western Balkan countries as well as the future role of geopolitics in EU enlargement.

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Sources

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Annex

A. Salience

Table 1: Test of Normality Individual Submission Rate

	Kolmogorov-Smirnov ^a			Shapiro-Wilk		
	Statistic	df	Sig.	Statistic	df	Sig.
Percentage WB6 T0	0.279	113	<0.001	0.603	113	<0.001
Percentage WB6 T1	0.345	113	<0.001	0.401	113	<0.001

^a Lilliefors Significance Correction

Table 2. Results from the Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test

Hypothesis Test Summary				
	Null Hypothesis	Test	Sig. ^c	Decision
1	The median of relative differences between T0 ^a and T1 ^b equals 0.	Related-Samples Wilcoxon Signed Rank Test	.470	Retain the null hypothesis.

Related-Samples Wilcoxon Signed Rank Test Summary	
Total N	113
Test Statistic	3235.500
Standard Error	329.216
Standardized Test Statistic	.723
Asymptotic Sig. (2-sided test)	.470

a. T0 runs from 02/07/2019-23/02/2022

b. T1 runs from 24/02/2022-15/07/2024

c. The significance level is .050

Figure 1. Total Share of Written Questions per Year [All Candidate Countries]



Table 3: Test of Normality Difference Score

	Kolmogorov-Smirnov ^a			Shapiro-Wilk		
	Statistic	df	Sig.	Statistic	df	Sig.
Difference score	0.294	113	<0.001	0.519	113	<0.001

^a Lilliefors Significance Correction

B. Actor expansion

Table 4-6. Results from Mann-Whitney U Tests¹⁹

Table 4. Neighbouring vs. Non-Neighbouring Country

Hypothesis Test Summary				
	Null Hypothesis	Test	Sig. ^c	Decision
1	The distribution of Relative difference is the same across categories of NeighbouringCountry.	Independent-Samples Mann-Whitney U Test	.055	Retain the null hypothesis.

Independent-Samples Mann-Whitney U Test Summary	
Total N	111
Mann-Whitney U	857
Wilcoxon W	1235
Test Statistic	857
Standardized Test Statistic	-1.918
Asymptotic Sig. (2-sided test)	.055

¹⁹ Outliers were identified using the standard Z-score method, with cases exceeding ± 3 standard deviations from the mean considered extreme and excluded from the analysis to ensure robustness of results.

c. The significance level is .050

Table 5. Specialisation vs. Non-Specialisation

Hypothesis Test Summary				
	Null Hypothesis	Test	Sig. ^c	Decision
1	The distribution of Relative difference is the same across categories of DummySpecialization.	Independent-Samples Mann-Whitney U Test	.333	Retain the null hypothesis.

Independent-Samples Mann-Whitney U Test Summary	
Total N	111
Mann-Whitney U	1325
Wilcoxon W	3536
Test Statistic	1325
Standardized Test Statistic	-.968
Asymptotic Sig. (2-sided test)	.333

c. The significance level is .050

Table 6. Mainstream vs. Non-Mainstream Political Groups

Hypothesis Test Summary				
	Null Hypothesis	Test	Sig. ^c	Decision
1	The distribution of Relative difference is the same across categories of DummySpecialization.	Independent-Samples Mann-Whitney U Test	.333	Retain the null hypothesis.

Independent-Samples Mann-Whitney U Test Summary	
Total N	111
Mann-Whitney U	1325
Wilcoxon W	3536
Test Statistic	1325
Standardized Test Statistic	-.968
Asymptotic Sig. (2-sided test)	.333

c. The significance level is .050

Figure 2. Distribution of pre-invasion WB6 written questions per political group taking into account EP's group size (constitutive session)

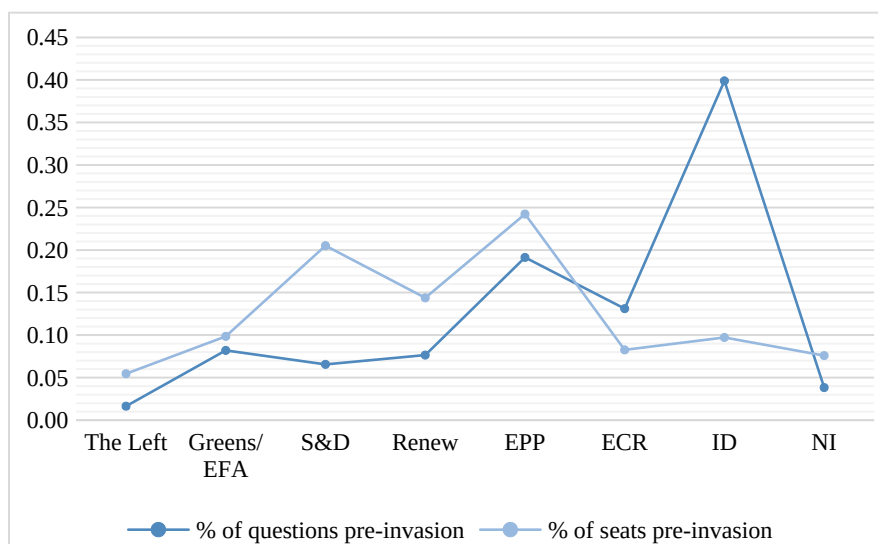


Figure 3. Distribution of post-invasion WB6 written questions per political group taking into account EP's group size (outgoing session)

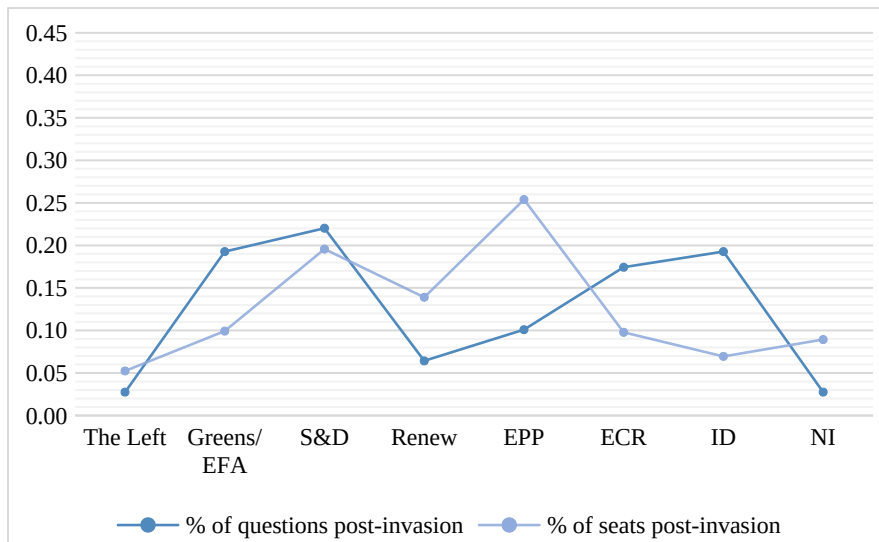


Table 7. Submitted Questions Pre-Post Invasion by Nationality MEPs [Western Balkan EU enlargement]

Country T0	Number of MEPs	
	Absolute N	Relative N
France	10	13,33%
Germany	10	13,33%
Greece	8	10,67%
Italy	7	9,33%
The Netherlands	6	8,00%
Romania	5	6,67%
Croatia	5	6,67%
Slovenia	4	5,33%
Austria	4	5,33%
Portugal	3	4,00%
Sweden	3	4,00%
Bulgaria	3	4,00%
Belgium	2	2,67%
Hungary	2	2,67%
Czech Republic	1	1,33%
United Kingdom	1	1,33%
Spain	1	1,33%
Total	75	100%

Country T1	Number of MEPs	
	Absolute N	Relative N
Italy	14	21,54%
Germany	9	13,85%
France	8	12,31%
Austria	6	9,23%
Greece	6	9,23%
Belgium	4	6,15%
Bulgaria	4	6,15%
Slovenia	3	4,62%
The Netherlands	3	4,62%
Croatia	2	3,08%
Ireland	2	3,08%
Romania	2	3,08%
Denmark	1	1,54%
Portugal	1	1,54%
Total	65	100%

Table 8. Submitted Questions Pre-Post Invasion by Nationality MEPs [Total EU enlargement]

Country T0	Number of MEPs	
	Absolute N	Relative N
Italy	56	24,56%
Greece	56	24,56%
Cyprus	24	10,53%
France	21	9,21%
Austria	14	6,14%
Spain	11	4,82%
Germany	11	4,82%
Belgium	7	3,07%
The Netherlands	6	2,63%
Romania	3	1,32%
Slovakia	3	1,32%
Denmark	3	1,32%
Sweden	3	1,32%
Finland	2	0,88%
Lithuania	2	0,88%
Czech Republic	2	0,88%
Estonia	1	0,44%
Hungary	1	0,44%
Slovenia	1	0,44%
Bulgaria	1	0,44%
Total	228	100,00%

Country T1	Number of MEPs	
	Absolute N	Relative N
Greece	18	16,82%
Romania	14	13,08%
France	14	13,08%
Cyprus	9	8,41%
Poland	6	5,61%
Germany	6	5,61%
Austria	5	4,67%
The Netherlands	5	4,67%
Belgium	4	3,74%
Italy	4	3,74%
Portugal	3	2,80%
Czech Republic	3	2,80%
Sweden	2	1,87%
Slovakia	2	1,87%
Spain	2	1,87%
Luxemburg	2	1,87%
Hungary	2	1,87%
Ireland	2	1,87%
Denmark	1	0,94%
Croatia	1	0,94%
Slovenia	1	0,94%
Lithuania	1	0,94%
Total	107	100,00%

C. Structural framing analysis

Table 9. Codebook structural framing analysis²⁰

Frame	Subframe	Explanation ²¹
Identity	Inclusive identity	<p>International solidarity and support; Part of a national or European-level value community; European values; Will of the people; Remove cultural barriers/promote cultural openness</p> <p>Ex: <i>"I was shocked to learn that on multiple occasions throughout this winter season Sarajevo was the most polluted major city on earth, with several other cities in the region not far behind. In the spirit of solidarity with our pre-accession neighbours would like to ask whether the Commission can confirm that any projects and activities that are supported or planned by the EU are systematically reviewed for consistency with [...] the move towards a circular economy? I ask this in order to show solidarity with the citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina on an issue that fundamentally affects their quality of life [...]"</i> (2020-03-17, Von Cramon-Taubadel, E-001654/2020)</p>
	Exclusive identity	<p>Threat to 'Christian heritage'; Fears of 'Islamisation'; Mass migration threatening collective national or European 'us'; Xenophobic attitudes; Cultural otherness/Emphasis on 'different' values; Threat to European culture; Threat to national culture (including threat to national culture other Western Balkan countries); Threat to national sovereignty (including will of the people/government)</p> <p>Ex: <i>"All of these membership procedures demonstrate that the EU institutions are keen to forever enlarge this European 'empire', even when it means expanding the process to include countries like Kosovo [...] which has little in common with the millennia-old civilisation that has made Europe strong [...] Will the European Council put limits on EU enlargement?"</i> (2023-09-06, Garraud, E-002580/2023)</p>
Institutional	EU as a transformative power	<p>Tool for external projection EU values; (In)capability of EU as a transformative power</p> <p>Ex: <i>"The enlargement process has proven that EU enlargement helps countries with socio-economic reforms and democratisation, resulting in a win-win situation for both the EU and the candidate country. The possibility of enlargement would keep the Western Balkans on the path of reform and progress. [...] How does the Commission plan to reform the enlargement process to make it more efficient and transformative for the region and ensure concrete results?"</i> (2021-01-15, Joveva, E-000214/2020)</p>
	Institutional efficiency and efficacy	<p>Administrative capacity member state; Administrative capacity EU (including references to institutional absorption capacity); Administrative capacity candidate country (including functioning of the political system and state capacity)</p> <p>Ex: <i>"With the spread of the coronavirus posing a serious threat to unity among Europe's nation states, it would be</i></p>

²⁰ The frame and subframes are based on a combination of existing literature (Economides 2023; Olszewska 2022; Bélanger and Vergioglou 2019) and the author's own inductive elaboration.

²¹ Categories in this section are not mutually exclusive.

		<i>irresponsible to be talking about issues likely to create tension for the continent's inhabitants. For example, continuous expressions of support for EU enlargement [...] would introduce a note of chaos into institutions which are widely suspected of inadequate planning for the management of crises. [...] What is going on?"</i> (2020-03-31, Mariani, E-001961/2020)
	Compliance	<p>Prior commitments from EU; Accession criteria; EU legislation/acquis; Procedural requirements; Democratic quality (implementation of human rights, participation, minority rights, civil society, freedom); Alignment with international standards (other than EU)</p> <p>Ex: <i>"Respect for minority rights in an EU candidate country is an issue that also requires European attention. It is vital that the EU responds to such an unacceptable political initiative, which is aimed at dividing a national minority in Serbia and is accompanied by threats and intimidation against the minority community. How will the Commission ensure the protection of the rights of national minorities in Serbia against the backdrop of the apparent absence of substantial progress towards meeting the requirements of negotiations on Chapter 23, which includes the protection of minority rights?"</i> (2021-03-12, Ressler, P-001405/2021)</p>
Security	Terrorism	<p>Terrorist threat; Foreign terrorist fighters</p> <p>Ex: <i>"According to the study 'Combating Terrorism' by Adrian Shtuni, the Western Balkans is the European region with 'the highest concentration of returned foreign fighters' from Syria and Iraq. One of the terrorists in the Vienna attack on 2 November 2020 was an Albanian from North Macedonia who had attempted to travel to Syria. [...] In view of this security situation, does the Commission plan to support the opening of accession negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia?"</i> (2020-12-11, Bilde, E-006806/2020)</p>
	Crime and corruption	<p>Organised crime; Money laundering; Drugs cultivation and trafficking; White collar crime; Human trafficking</p> <p>Ex: <i>"[Albania] is often described as a veritable narco-state [...] plagued by corruption and mafia rule. A note from the French Ministry of Justice in 2018 warned of the presence in France of Albanian speaking mafia networks, for whom Albania's accession to the EU would be a godsend for the development of their activities in Western Europe. In the Commission's view, in what ways is it of interest for the nations and peoples of Europe to see Albania join the Union one day?"</i> (2022-08-30, Bardella, E-002881/2022)</p>
	Migration*	<p>Including border control</p> <p>Ex: <i>"The migrant crisis is highlighting the unsuitability of the Balkan countries to join an area in which people enjoy freedom of movement, given the worryingly lax approach they take to border control. [...] Should the EU not suspend all accession procedures indefinitely and simply rule out accession for countries which have no place in the EU?"</i> (2019-11-16, Bardella, E-003660/2019)</p>
	Geopolitical interest	<p>Geographical proximity EU; Common Foreign and Security Policy; Undifferentiated mention of 'strategic benefits for the EU'; Changing geopolitical context; Contribution to EU's defense capabilities; Influence other geopolitical players/global powers</p> <p>Ex: <i>"How can we avoid these countries becoming disillusioned with the unkept promises made on EU membership and</i></p>

		<i>[...] stop them from looking for support elsewhere in the vicinity?” (2020-01-22, Băsescu, E-000324)</i>
	Regional stability	<p>Bilateral conflicts between member state and candidate country; Bilateral conflicts between candidate countries</p> <p>Ex: <i>“Following the failure of the European Council to start accession negotiations with North Macedonia and Albania, there has been a resurgence of nationalism in the former. [...] At the Strasbourg plenary last week, a large majority of MEPs backed an immediate start of accession talks with North Macedonia and Albania. Is [The Commission] considering taking urgent measures - and, if so, which measures - to tackle the resurgence of nationalism and maintain political stability in North Macedonia?” (2019-10-31, Kouloglou, E-003576/2019)</i></p>
Economy	Economic prosperity	<p>Economic growth; Economic situation candidate country; Investment (opportunities); Common EU market; Trade; Reforms/transformation; Financial costs of EU enlargement (including references to new net beneficiaries)</p> <p>Ex: <i>“[The EC’s new enlargement methodology] seeks to enhance the process so that it is ‘better equipped to deal with structural weaknesses in the countries’. Structural weaknesses there are, indeed: an economic and social situation that falls far short of the average for the EU Member States [...]. Therefore, the only reasonable alternative to the current policy is simply to suspend the procedures initiated. This being so, when will the Commission abandon its megalomania and renounce the idea of any further enlargement?” (2020-07-02, Rivière, E-000775/2020)</i></p>
	Labour and social security	<p>Weakening of the welfare state; Unemployment; Competitive job market; Reforms/transformation; Brain drain</p> <p>Ex: <i>“Albania and North Macedonia are suffering from an exodus of highly-qualified professionals. A global survey conducted by Gallup in 2019 shows that 60% of the adult population in Albania want to leave the country. This puts Albania at the top of the brain-drain index.[...]. Does the Commission agree that the accession of Albania and North Macedonia to the EU would further encourage the brain drain, which in turn would harm the two countries’ economic and social development?” (2020-07-10, Reil, E-004104/2020)</i></p>
Other	General interest-based	Undifferentiated mention of (non-)EU interest; Undifferentiated mention of implausibility; Incompatibility with EU objectives; Undifferentiated mention of interest, opportunity
	General normative-based	Undifferentiated mention of commitment; Undifferentiated mention of implausibility*; Unequal treatment towards other countries/double standards
	Environment	Environmental protection candidate countries; Environmental protection member states

*depending on the context

D. Classification types of questions

Table 10. Codebook classification questions²²

Category	Definition	Example
Explicit justification	The question includes a clear and linguistically explicit connection between a reason and a position on enlargement. Such questions contain an explicit enlargement statement in the pre-question section and/or are formulated in an explicitly rhetorical manner	<p>[in pre-question statement]: “...<i>We will not allow a country in which people are attacked for being Bulgarian – be this on account of their documentation or their conscience – to join the EU.</i>” (2021-11-08, Dzhambazki, E-005016/2021)</p> <p>[explicit rhetorical question]: “<i>Will the Commission take account of the message from the peoples of Europe during the last EU elections and learn a lesson from Brexit and reject outright all EU expansion, which is increasingly from countries with different cultural values and poses serious crime and illegal immigration risks?</i>” (2019-10-30, Bardella, E-003540/2019)</p>
Implicit justification	The question expresses a position on enlargement that is contextually understood rather than linguistically explicit. The justification must be inferred from tone, framing, or surrounding context rather than directly stated. ²³	“ <i>Unacceptable and unbelievable scenes were played out outside the court that was hearing the application by the elected Mayor of Himara, Fredi Beleri, for permission to take the oath of office as mayor and to be released from prison under restrictive conditions after eight months of unjust and contrived pre-trial detention. On arrival at the court, Vangjel Dule, opposition MP and the only MP from the Greek national minority, found himself being targeted by a group of Albanian nationalists. He was subjected to unacceptable abuse and verbal attacks, and his physical integrity was put at serious risk, with the aim of undermining his support for the Mayor of Himara, Fredi Beleri. In statements that he made, he charged the Albanian Government with being the moral instigator of the attack against him. What steps does it propose to take regarding the unacceptable attack on an elected Member of the Parliament of Albania, which is a country in the process of accession to the European Union?</i> ” (2024-01-30, Kefalogiannis, E-000283/2024)
Purely informational question	The question seeks factual or procedural information without expressing a position or evaluative stance on enlargement.	“ <i>What is the total amount of Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance (IPA) I and IPA II funding that has been awarded to the Office of the High Representative in Bosnia and Herzegovina?</i> ” (2022-02-07, Zovko, E-000534/2022)

²² The complete dataset is available from the corresponding author on request.

²³ The keyword search technique (as detailed in footnote 2) already limits the questions to those that explicitly mention keywords related to EU enlargement towards the Western Balkans.

Figure 4. Subframes 'other' category

