



THE LIMITS OF EU ENLARGEMENT LINKED TO CITIZENS' PERCEPTIONS OF PAST AND FUTURE ENLARGEMENTS

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Abstract

While the Eastern enlargement of the EU was met with favorable public attitudes in member states at the time, today, the potential membership of countries in the Western Balkans, and even more so Turkey, meets strong public opposition. The review of public attitudes provides inconclusive explanations for the shift to negative public opinion trends since 2004/2007, motivating us to seek understanding through a discursive approach studying citizens' views. This paper summarizes the results of six bottom-up, Q method discourse studies in Germany, the Netherlands, Poland, Bulgaria, Serbia, and Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (fYROM). The comparison of 21 discourses from these six countries reveals the existence of groups of narratives that support enlargement, but also groups that oppose it. Analyzing the arguments within and across narratives, the paper outlines the limitations and opportunities for EU enlargement, stemming from the way European citizens/voters have perceived the process so far and how they envision it in the future. The identified discourses are more optimistic about future enlargements than mass surveys suggest. Nevertheless, the results clearly point to the lack of deliberation and communication on enlargement as a major problem of previous and current enlargement rounds. The real danger for future enlargement does not stem from negative opinions per se. Rather, enlargement process nowadays is at risk due to the absence of a bridging discourse that echoes across societies and elites and is rooted in common European values and ideals. The paper's policy recommendations emphasize that deliberation, consultation, and communication leading to a balanced public and political domestic debate are required at early stages of the process.

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1. Introduction: Changing tides in political and mass attitudes towards European integration¹

Nowadays, enlargement of the European Union (EU) as a policy and process happens in a much different political, socio-economic, and geopolitical environment than the integration of the Central and East European (CEE) post-communist countries that applied for EU membership in the early 1990s. Most notably, the current enlargement proceeds in a much more hostile public mood that at the same time has a greater impact on the EU's and member states' enlargement strategy than during the EU's accession negotiations with CEE candidates (Dimitrova/Kortenska 2016).

The 2004 and 2007 accession of the ten candidates from the ex-'Eastern Bloc'² was celebrated as a major success for both the EU and the candidate countries at the time. The official accession to the 'European club' symbolized the end of burdening post-communist transition process and the recognition of these countries as democracies with functioning market economies. The broad political and social consensus within candidate countries stemmed from the historical significance of the 'big bang' enlargement. This sense of historical duty emerged in the well-accepted and shared notion of a 'reunification of Europe' (Herranz-Surrallés 2012).

The idea of 'returning to Europe' created a setting of historical urgency among EU and national policy-makers to bring the integration of CEE countries to success.³ To candidate countries' elites (at the time) and even more so to their citizens, EU accession signified their recognition as European citizens – part of the European family of states and societies that share common principles, values, and standards (Tanasoiu/Colonescu 2008). The positive 'Return to Europe' rhetoric seems to have bound the commitment of political elites within the EU and of CEE entrants to bring enlargement to success by progressing along all institutional steps to this end. The overdetermined rhetoric of unifying the unjustly divided European continent related to elements of common European identity, values, and ideals.

While CEE countries celebrated their renewed status as 'Europeans', citizens of the incumbent EU-15 member states had not heard much about the 'big bang' enlargement until it became reality (Dimitrova 2015). During EU's negotiations with CEE countries, these candidates' accession to the EU was deliberately kept outside the domestic political and public debate in incumbent members. This strategy prevented politicization and thus eventual blockage of the process until it happened in 2004 (de Vreese/Boomgaarden 2005; Toshkov/Kortenska 2015).

1 I would like to thank Biljana Stoyanoska (Balkan Civil Society Development Network, BCSDN) for her contribution to the section on public opinion in the Western Balkans, Dimiter Toshkov, Antoaneta Dimitrova, Uli Sedelmeier, Emre Hatipoğlu, Julia Langbein, and Gheorghii Penkov for their comments and feedback as well as everyone who participated in the fieldwork and data collection within the research on citizens' perceptions.

2 Including Cyprus and Malta, a total of 12 countries acquired EU membership in 2004 and 2007. This is known and commonly referred to as the Eastern enlargement rounds (fifth enlargement), or the 'big bang' enlargement of the EU.

3 Interview with a European Commission Official, January 2015.

Now bordering the Western Balkans, Turkey, and Ukraine, EU member states governments, the European Commission, and other EU institutions find themselves in a much different internal and external context of EU enlargement policy when compared to the CEE membership applications. Since the successful completion of the Eastern Enlargement, the now much wider Union faces and continues to deal with massive transformations on the European continent in political and socio-economic as well as geographical and even symbolic terms. On the one hand, CEE candidates underwent wide-ranging and high-cost reforms in order to meet EU membership criteria. On the other hand, the accession of 12 new members to the Union enhanced reforms of the EU's competence, institutions, and policies such as enlargement itself. In 2009, the Lisbon Treaty brought the EU policies and their effects much closer to citizens and their everyday life. Meanwhile, the financial and economic crises that swept Europe resulted in serious socio-economic hardships among European citizens in both member and non-member countries of the EU. At the same time, the 2004/2007 enlargement defined new boundaries and a new geopolitical context on the continent which redefined also the EU as an entity by 2016 (Dimitrova/Kortenska 2016).

The EU's internal and external security, stability, and peace have been threatened at alarming rates since 2010 onwards. The EU's enlargement and the effects of the fifth round in particular have brought the EU-28 geographically closer to the regions either currently torn by armed conflicts or in the process of recovering from such. The violent breakdown of Yugoslavia and its consequences are but one example. Today ex-Yugoslav countries continue progressing forward in European integration process (European Commission 2015), while EU member states and the EU institutions face a multitude of crises – reaching to all levels of societies within the EU member states, current candidates in line for accession, and neighboring countries. Leaders on both sides of the negotiations table are dealing with waves of refugees and asylum seekers at the EU's and its neighbors' borders. The massive refugee influx has further intensified concern among European publics regarding the EU's stability, security, and freedom of movement and raised fears of terrorism, extremism, and insecurity.

Against this background, citizens seem to no longer perceive the European project to be a guarantor of prosperity, stability, security, and peace. In the context of discussing Brexit, Grexit, Banking and Energy Union, the internal and external capacity of the EU to integrate yet more new members appears to have reached its limits. This policy paper aims to find out if indeed this has been the case when citizens' role is considered, and if so, what that means for the capacity of the EU to integrate yet more new members in the future.

While the institutional design of EU enlargement policy does not allow direct interference by citizens, the importance of public attitudes for the successful outcome of enlargement is increasingly recognized in the scholarly and policy debate (Dimitrova et al. 2015; Hurrelmann et al. 2013; Leconte 2015). In parallel with the developments following the Eastern enlargement rounds, mass opinion surveys signal a significant drop in the levels of public support for widening and integration as a whole among EU member states constituencies on both sides of the former Iron curtain (Dimitrov et al. 2015; Toshkov et al. 2014).

Academics and policy-makers point to the French and Dutch rejection of the European Constitution in national referenda in 2005 as an illustration of the end of 'the permissive consensus' that legitimized European integration silently up until the mid-2000s (Brack/Startin 2015; Hooghe/Marks 2009; Hurrelmann et al. 2013; Leconte 2015; de Vreese/Boomgaarden 2005). By 2013, headlines like EurActive's 'Appetite for EU enlargement hits all time low', reporting the very same public opinion trends, are of an increasing concern for policy-makers, academics, but also domestic political actors, media, and the broader public (Brack/Startin 2015; Hurrelmann et al. 2013; Leconte 2015).

Scholars observe mainstreaming of Euroscepticism in theory and practice not only in public opinion survey trends, but also in the rising levels of electoral support for anti-EU, anti-immigration, extreme left and right parties at national and EU elections over the last decade (Brack/Startin 2015; Hooghe/Marks 2009). The 2014 European Parliament elections in particular marked serious success for "radical right parties, who in the context of the Eurozone crises, have increasingly utilized a 'hard' Eurosceptic and at times anti-globalization discourse to bolster their traditional anti-immigrant discourse" (Brack/Startin 2015: 242). Biased, largely negative domestic media discourses (Dursun-Ozkanca 2011; Herranz-Surrallés 2012) and intensified Eurosceptic rhetoric of some traditionally pro-EU mainstream parties (Brack/Startin 2015) provide yet more evidence for these mainstreaming trends.

Public attitudes towards the European project are at the heart of academic debate on the 'democratic deficit' of the EU and the lack of legitimacy of EU policy-making. Brack and Startin's (2015) statement about the spread of Eurosceptic attitudes among elites, media, and the general public captures the essence of the problem at hand: "EU-related referendums [...] have served to underline the power of EU citizens to put the brakes on, and potentially derail, the European integration process" (Brack/Startin 2015: 240). The results of the nation-wide referendum in UK in June 2016, when the majority of British citizens voted to leave the EU, illustrate the repercussions of diminishing public support towards European integration. The negative results of the Dutch referendum in April 2016 asking citizens to approve an association treaty with Ukraine reaffirmed scholars and analysts in the importance of investigating in greater depth the understandings among citizens about the process of EU enlargement and what motivates their acceptance, support, rejection, and/or criticism.

Many scholars are interested in analyzing mass survey results, while revealing a number of factors explaining either support or opposition to enlargement (Azrout et al. 2013; Dimitrov et al. 2015; Hatipoğlu et al. 2014; Hooghe/Marks 2009; Jones/van Ejik 2004; Karp/Bowler 2006; Lecheler/de Vreese 2010; McLaren 2003, 2007). Others explore the existing public and political discourses among national and EU elites as major challenges to further EU enlargement (Diez Medrano 2003; Friis 1998; Herranz-Surrallés 2012; Hurrelmann et al. 2013; Karakasis 2013; Schmidt 2006; Steunenberg et al. 2011). These distinct yet interconnected branches of literature provide much needed insight on what drives public attitudes and the possible challenge they might present for European integration.

However, there exists a gap in the quickly advancing studies on both public attitudes towards EU enlargement, on the one hand, and the role of political discourses in the European integration process

so far, on the other. It remains unclear, first, what the actual perceptions of citizens towards widening integration are and second, how these perceptions feed into the specific favorable or oppositional attitudes. This niche leaves the following question open for debate: What are the limits of EU enlargement according to the perceptions of citizens towards the process as it proceeded so far and their view about it in the future? While public opinion survey results speak loud and clear of the skeptical public mood, this policy paper aims at shedding light on this puzzle by analyzing the discourses among citizens on the topic of enlargement in different national contexts.

The current contribution rests upon the results of a bottom-up, in-depth scientific investigation of political discourses among citizens in six different countries: two founding member states (Germany and the Netherlands), two 2004 and 2007 entrants (Poland and Bulgaria, respectively) and two candidate countries (Serbia and former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia - FYROM⁴). The nature and structure of all identified discourses within each of the six countries are discussed at length in Dimitrova and Kortenska (2015), while Dimitrova, Kortenska and Steunenberg (2015) put the results from each country in a comparative perspective to identify major arguments and cleavages across countries and contexts. The following analyses synthesize these, while positioning the discourses among citizens in the broader context of European integration studies.

John Dryzek's (1993, 2002) normative and theoretical approach to political discourse among citizens, investigated by means of rather innovative Q method, lays the basis of the current analyses (for more details see Dimitrova et al. 2015; Dimitrova/Kortenska 2015; Dimitrova/Kortenska 2016). In this contribution, I adopt the same conceptualization and interpretation of the discourses among citizens as "shared means of making sense of the world, embedded in language [...] [and] grounded in the assumptions, judgments, contentions, dispositions and capabilities" of citizens (Dryzek 2000: 18 as cited in Dimitrova et al. 2015: 1)⁵. In this sense, discourses allow constituencies to organize and understand information about a certain domain along common storylines or narratives (Dryzek 2000: 18).⁶

Dryzek's work inspires the normative character of the comparative study of political discourses on EU enlargement among citizens. As Dryzek and Holmes (2002) argue, in new democracies, discourses can serve as the 'software' to the institutional 'hardware' provided by the constitutions and laws adopted in the initial stages of transitions to democracy (Dimitrova et al. 2015: 2). In line with Dryzek's claim, this paper argues that to develop democracy further, scholars and politicians need to place a stronger emphasis on deliberation and communication. These processes allow establishing ideas of the core elements of political life from the perspective of the European constituencies and introduce them to the policy-making process (Dryzek 2000; Dryzek/Berejikian 1993).

4 Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia is the name used by the EU, UN, and other institutions due to the unsettled debate regarding the name Macedonia. The latter continues to burden the country's progress in EU integration.

5 See for a similar use of the concept of discourse, Dryzek/Berejikian 1993; Dryzek/Braithwaite 2000; Dryzek/Holmes 2002; and Dryzek/Niemeyer 2008 (also cited in Dimitrova et al. 2015: 1f)

6 Due to this definition, in the paper I use the terms narratives, stories, and viewpoints as equivalents to political discourses.

The analyses rely on insights from a currently maturing field of European integration studies that adopt discursive and communicative theories when investigating the nature, characteristics, and impact of political elites', policy-makers', and media discourses and the European integration process (Diez Medrano 2003; Friis 1998; Hurrelmann et al. 2013; Schimmelfennig 2001; Schmidt 2006, 2010). Schmidt's (2010) historical institutionalism approach allows us to position the findings presented here in the broader context of political discursive approaches in the literature. A discursive institutionalist approach is suitable for understanding how engagement of citizens and the shared narratives among them could play a role in the active building of the European integration project via deliberation, consultation, and communications (Schmidt 2006: 248). Already, a number of scholars of European integration have illustrated the role of political elites' discourses in EU policy and decision-making processes (Friis 1998; Karakasis 2013; Schimmelfennig 2001; Schmidt 2010).

The current contribution is organized as follows. The next section 2 offers an overview of the existing empirical data and analyses of public opinion surveys' results (Dimitrov et al. 2015; Hatipoğlu et al. 2014; Toshkov et al. 2014) as well as a review of the theoretical and methodological foundations of the study of political discourses among citizens and the specific application of the Q method to identify them (Dimitrova/Kortenska 2015). Section 3 is dedicated to the empirical findings of the six Q studies based on the work of Dimitrova and Kortenska (2015) and synthesizes the comparative analyses found in Dimitrova, Kortenska and Steunenbergh (2015). The conclusions are guided also by the results of a group of prominent European scholars, who are currently investigating the effects of the 2004/2007 Eastern enlargement on various aspects of the process as of today in order to predict the direction of the European project in the future (Dimitrova 2015; Fagan et al. 2015; Fagan/Sircar 2015)⁷.

Finally, the paper concludes by outlining the limitations of EU enlargement (both abstract and physical) when it comes to the way European citizens/voters have perceived the process so far and how they envision it in the future. In contrast to mass survey results, the findings from the six Q studies and their comparative analyses present a much brighter picture for the future of enlargement in shared stories about it across contexts. At the same time, the findings suggest that enlargement process nowadays is endangered by the absence of a bridging pro-European discourse, such as the 'return to Europe', that is rooted in common values, ideals, and identity and echoes across societies, elites, and policy-makers. The discourses reveal such shared meanings and understandings, which could enhance the construction of a strong overarching rhetoric today that would give the much needed impetus for the successful accession of the Western Balkan candidates and Turkey in the years ahead.

7 MAXCAP partners' scholars are currently finalizing their research under the broad theoretical and methodological framework of the international research project. This paper considers the work of all colleagues involved in the project and their publications produced under the auspices of the MAXCAP project.

2. Public opinion, political elites, media discourses and EU enlargement

Scholars and policy-makers have relied predominantly on Eurobarometer data and other mass opinion surveys available when analyzing public support and opposition to European integration. For this reason, a review of this data and the proposed theoretical explanations of the various trends in public opinion are a stepping-stone for the in-depth investigation of the discourses among citizens.

2.1 *Public opinion data and analyses – review*

In agreement with most analyses, Toshkov et al. (2014), Hatipoğlu et al. (2014) and Dimitrov et al. (2015) demonstrate that public opinion polls are far from being optimistic indeed. The hostility towards EU enlargement to candidate countries now in line to join the EU significantly increased across Europe from 2002 up until 2016. Toshkov et al. (2014: 8-10) illustrate that even though a majority of the EU-28 public is positive towards EU enlargement, these average supportive levels are only marginal and consist of sharp variances across member states. It appears that the average is balanced out by the largely positive attitudes among CEE member states' publics. By contrast, the percentage of people opposing future enlargement within the EU-15 sufficiently outweighs the positive attitudes, which is the case in the Netherlands and Germany, as Figures 1 and 2 illustrate. Nevertheless, drops are observed also among citizens in CEE countries, now members of the EU, as well as citizens in the Western Balkans, for example Serbia and Macedonia.

To reemphasize these trends, Figure 1 presents a snapshot of the levels of support for future enlargement in the four EU member states of interest here between 2002 and 2012. In contrast, Figure 2 summarizes the percentages of negative responses. The figures were prepared for the purposes of the current contribution using the data from Toshkov et al.'s (2014: 7-16) analyses and review.⁸

Figures 1 and 2 clearly visualize the steady decline in appetite for future enlargement as well as the significant variance that the EU's averages contain across member states. As of 2002, only two of the EU-15 member states – Germany and Austria – reported levels of opposition higher than levels of support. By 2008, this picture changed dramatically, with most of the founding and long-term EU member states' publics opposing further enlargement. In 2012, the public mood towards EU enlargement and integration altogether changed sufficiently since the official accession of CEE countries in the EU. The Netherlands, a traditionally pro-European country, is but one example of a member state that exhibits a severe drop in public support for integration. As of 2014 and 2015, the negative responses to enlargement continued to prevail, with EU-28 averages below 50 percent (European Commission 2015: 172).

⁸ The exact wording of the survey questions as well as more detailed overview of the data for all countries can be found in Toshkov et al. (2014: 8, 10, 13) and Dimitrov et al. (2015).

Figure 1: Public support for enlargement (2002-2012)

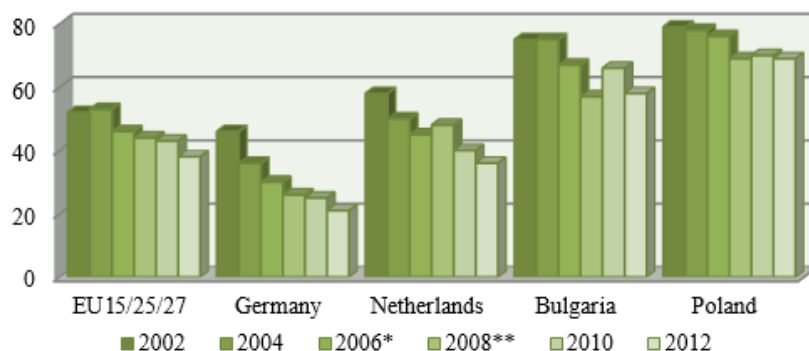
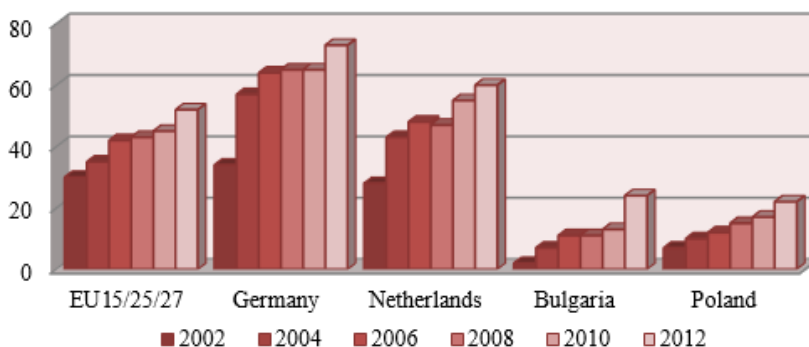


Figure 2: Public opposition to enlargement (2002-2012)



Source: Standard Eurobarometer 2002-2012 (author’s summary).

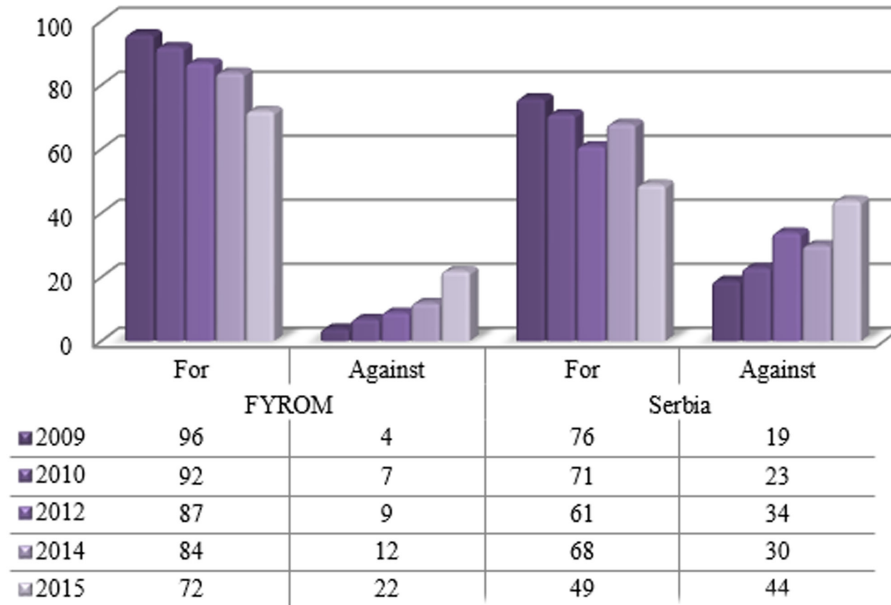
Next, Figure 3 summarizes the results of public opinion surveys within current candidates based on data from the International Republican Institute’s Center for Insights of Survey research (IRA 2015a, 2015b)⁹. The trend of decreasing positive attitudes towards EU membership among current applicant publics matches trends within the Union. Figure 3 provides a summary of the shares (percent) of ‘for’ and ‘against’ camps in Serbia and Macedonia from 2009 to 2015 (IRI 2015a; IRI 2015b). While both candidate countries are among the front runners in their progress towards accession (Dimitrova/Kortenska 2016), the public opposition to EU membership (meaning EU enlargement in their contexts) boomed at the expense of positive responses. Whereas in 2009, the majority in Serbia approved the country’s EU membership, today the ‘for’ and ‘against’ camps are almost equal and below 50 percent (Figure 3; IRI 2015b).

The October 2015 survey shows that the majority of Macedonians consider the name issue (45 percent) to be the main reason for the slowdown in Macedonia’s integration process, and only then the ‘lack of

9 The data and question wording of the survey in Serbia is available here: http://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/wysiwyg/serbia_november_2015_poll_public_release.pdf (accessed 7 July 2016), while results from FYROM can be found here: http://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/wysiwyg/2015-11-19_survey_of_citizens_of_macedonia_september_29-october_5_2015.pdf (accessed 7 July 2016).

domestic reforms' (28 percent) (IRI 2015a: 76). While the name issue is a clear obstacle to the progress of Macedonia towards EU membership, Serbia's road is challenged by the relations with Kosovo, which seem to turn Serbians' minds around.

Figure 3: Public attitudes towards EU membership in candidate countries (2009-2015)



Source: IRI 2015a, 2015b (author's summary).

The survey in Serbia provides evidence that an increasing majority of people believe Serbia 'will be forced to recognize Kosovo' to enter the EU (76 percent) and an increasing majority of citizens believe Serbia should not recognize Kosovo even if it remains outside the EU (IRI 2015b: 6, 12f). As part 3 of this paper illustrates, these results align well with the identified discourses among citizens in the two countries and the limits they may impose on the process of enlargement nowadays.

It is important to note that: a) since 2004, 2006 and 2008 the EU's average public support includes CEE entrants and b) the group of countries which the Eurobarometer general time-series question captures has changed to consist of Western Balkan countries and Turkey. Both of these facts represent a major challenge for time-series analyses of these questions. Toshkov et al. (2014: 14-16), but also Hatipoğlu et al. (2015) and other studies of public opinion towards specific candidates demonstrate that some applicants generate more opposition than others, for example Turkey and Albania. This complicates further the cross-country trend analyses of public attitudes towards enlargement (Azrout et al. 2012; Dixon 2010).

Results from Eurobarometer and mass surveys questionnaires, however, can be misleading due to their structure, design, and aims (Dryzek 2000; Hurrelmann et al. 2013). Survey results vary significantly with regards to the specific country considered for accession by the citizens and/or context (Dixon 2010, Toshkov et al. 2014; Hatipoğlu et al. 2014; Azrout et al. 2012, 2013; De Vries/Edwards 2009). At the same time, Eurobarometer results are sensitive to the wording of the questions and limit the possible answers due

to pre-defined theoretical notions (Hurrelmann et al. 2013: 46f). These limitations call for caution when analyzing and interpreting the results from mass opinion survey data, and especially when considering public opinion in the policy-making process on domestic and/or EU levels. Nevertheless, the academic debate up until now sheds much light on the effects of the interplay of various factors in shaping mass and individuals' attitudes towards European integration: contextual and individual, objective and subjective, rational assessment and emotional identity and values.

Two broad theoretical approaches explaining European integration – rational choice and constructivist – have inspired also the literature on public attitudes towards the EU (see Toshkov et al. 2014). Following these approaches, the corpus of studies has expanded greatly since the 1990s, and especially so with the observed shifts in public attitudes from being largely *uninformed* and *supportive* to being increasingly *sensitive*, *critical*, and *negative* towards the European project and enlargement as an aspect of it.

Along the logic of *rational choice/utilitarian* theoretical approaches, citizens' support for EU membership stems from their subjective evaluation of the costs and benefits of integration for their country and/or their communities and/or themselves personally (Gabel 1998; Karp/Bowler 2006; Jones/van Ewijk 2004; Hooghe/Marks 2005, 2009; Boomgaarden et al. 2011). Scholars have not come to a conclusion whether individual subjective factors or contextual community and national-level factors have more weight on shaping an individual's opinions. Political scientists have found empirical evidence supporting both sets of utilitarian explanations at multiple levels of analyses in different country contexts (Dimitrov et al. 2015; Garry/Tilley 2009; Toshkov/Kortenska 2015).

Alternatively, *constructivist* theories of public support to EU integration add to the debate by revealing factors related to individual values and identities deeply embedded in history and culture (Inglehart 1970; McLaren 2003, 2007; Diez Medrano 2003; Risse 2010). Feelings of a common European identity, common European values and ideals contribute to harboring a more positive stance towards integration. The opposite holds for individuals identifying exclusively with the nation-state, feeling cultural, identity, and ethnic threat (Inglehart 1977; McLaren 2003, 2007; Boomgaarden et al. 2011; Azrout et al. 2013; Risse 2010). Objective and subjective individual or contextual factors have also been found to interact in their effect on public attitudes. At the same time, anti-immigration attitudes and cultural and national identity threats have been found to influence attitudes towards EU enlargement systematically and unambiguously, in particular post-2004 (Boomgaarden et al. 2011; Azrout et al. 2013; Toshkov/Kortenska 2015; Lubbers 2008; de Vreese/Boomgaarden 2005).

In sum, when EU enlargement is in question, studies provide contradicting evidence on the explanations of changes in levels of negative attitudes towards the EU among EU-15, but also among EU-28. The multifaceted, multilayered, and multifunctional nature of the EU-28 as such makes the matter yet more complicated (Boomgaarden et al. 2011; Dimitrov et al. 2015). The transformation from EU-15 to EU-28 redefined the whole EU as an entity and simultaneously its impact on the everyday life of European citizens.

The findings on the political discourses among citizens shed additional light on the way positive and negative attitudes are shaped according to the national, regional, and local contexts in which citizens have experienced EU enlargement and its effects. We find a systematic difference between the way citizens in the Netherlands, as one example, experienced and perceived EU enlargement, and the way Bulgarians and Poles did (Dimitrova/Kortenska 2015; Dimitrova et al. 2015). In particular, the difference stems from the diverging experience with the process of enlargement by citizens in candidate countries compared to citizens in incumbent member states, whose elites did not have to justify any far-reaching domestic reforms with high social costs to their constituencies (Dimitrova 2015). These experiences relate to the country-specific characteristics and context such as media environment, political system and actors, as well as membership status.

2.2 Political elite discourses and media – priming, framing, and cueing

Many scholars and commentators raised a concern that European integration and EU enlargement so far had happened by stealth for the constituencies of incumbent EU-15 member states up until the Eastern enlargements (Eichenberg/Dalton 2007; Hooghe/Marks 2005, 2009; Herranz-Surrales 2012; Dimitrova/Kortenska 2016). The lack of accurate or sufficient knowledge about the EU, its institutions, functioning, and policies is well documented among citizens in founding and long-term members (Brack/Startin 2015; Eichenberg/Dalton 2007; Hooghe/Marks 2005, 2009; Lecheler/de Vreese 2010).

Absence of political debate and discussion, or limited discussion of EU-related issues prior to 2004, contributes to the use of ‘proxies’ by citizens when formulating their stance on it. Such proxies may stem from deeply ingrained intersubjective personal values and identities embedded in history, culture, and socio-economic status. Alternatively, faced with limited information, citizens may resort to the position, judgments, evaluations, and overall information provided to them by domestic political actors (Franklin et al. 1994; Ray 2003; Steenbergen 2007; Maier/Rittberger 2008; Maier et al. 2012).

The level of domestic political contestation of EU-related matters and the salience of the issue for the domestic political and public debate can affect public attitudes towards European integration (Leconte 2015). At the same time, the lack of engagement of citizens in the process of enlargement has further alienated them, leaving EU-related matters to be debated by the increasingly successful domestic extreme left and right parties (Brack/Startin 2015; Leconte 2015). While the direction of the relationship between political cues and individuals’ evaluations of European integration remains contested, empirical findings systematically evidence that the positions of domestic political actors, the media environment, and the information available to the general public in domestic debates play significant roles in shaping popular attitudes towards EU enlargement (Hooghe/Marks 2005; Steenbergen et al. 2007).

A number of studies provide evidence that media coverage, the political discourses among domestic elites, and the public debate condition the positive and/or negative attitudes towards European integration through mechanisms of *priming* and *framing* (Lecheler/de Vreese 2010). Similarly, some studies demonstrate these effects when examining public sentiments in the founding member states sentiments

towards the Eastern enlargement and CEE immigrants after it (Dursun-Ozkanca 2011; Hawkins 2012). While untangling the relationship between public opinion, media, and political discourses is beyond the scope of this paper, these all contribute to the debate on the legitimacy of EU institutions, decisions, and policies and the 'democratic deficit' inherent in the EU policy-making process (Gabel 1998; Schmidt 2006, 2010). Furthermore, media and the information environment are important factors contributing to the politicization of European integration matters in the domestic political arena.

Since 2004, Euroskepticism in the domestic political and public spheres has emerged in the spotlight of European integration studies and the debate about politicization of European integration issues in domestic politics (Eichenberg/Dalton 2007; Leconte 2015; Brack/Startin 2015; Hurrelmann et al. 2013; Boomgaarden/de Vreese 2005). Leconte (2015) argues that this broadening of Euroskepticism and its increasing visibility across levels of discursive arenas signal the normalization of EU-related topics within the domestic political debates and may not necessarily threaten the legitimacy of EU institutions. On the contrary, in Leconte's (2015) view this increased mainstream contestation of European integration among domestic political actors may signal the Europeanization of domestic politics (Schmidt 2006; Hurrelmann et al. 2013; Herranz-Surralez 2012; Brack/Startin 2015; Leconte 2015).

More recently, Hurrelman et al. (2013) have argued that politicization of European integration is best approached as a discursive phenomenon, which requires 'an issue [to] become salient in political communication that seeks to influence – or responds to – collective decision making' (2013: 45). Hurrelman et al. (2013) identify three arenas of political discourse – *institutional*, *intermediate*, and *citizenry*. Most importantly, the *citizenry discursive arena* is populated by ordinary citizens, or the laypeople, and the way they communicate politics. With respect to the first two discursive arenas, there are a number of studies investigating party and elite Euroskepticism and the role of these discourses in the construction and reconstruction of the EU as a whole and enlargement in particular (see Laconte 2015).

The Q studies' findings reveal that among citizens Euroskepticism does not necessarily equate to full opposition, but rather sharp criticism towards certain aspects of the process and/or its perceived and experienced effects. In contrast to party and elite positions, the criticism found among citizens should not be interpreted as opposition. On the contrary, it may stem from much deeper-rooted support for the European project as such, while demanding improvements in the functioning, institutions, or the current state of affairs.

The increasing levels of negative attitudes towards the EU and simultaneously increasing politicization of EU-related issues have led many to believe that EU enlargement has reached its limits. However, an overview and comparison of the discourses among citizens as investigated by means of Q methodology seem to present a more optimistic, but also nuanced, picture. While the negative public attitudes within the EU indeed damage the credibility of the EU membership perspective in the view of political elites and citizens in candidate countries (Dimitrova/Kortenska 2016), the identified discourses show that citizens across countries are more willing to support the process than survey questions allow them to express. The discourses below reveal the way citizens themselves construct the EU as of 2014, after all the

transformations the EU underwent in the post-2004/2007 era, together with their position towards the future enlargement as a result of these constructions.

2.3 *An innovative approach to the political discourses among the European citizens*

The political discursive approaches to European integration have predominantly focused on elite and media discourses, leaving citizens' constructions of the European project themselves aside (Schmidt 2006, 2010; Schimmelfennig 2001; Herranz-Surallés 2012; Friis 1998; Leconte 2015; Hurrelmann et al. 2013). The Q method used here does not investigate the attitudes and opinions of citizens towards enlargement or specific candidates for accession in the manner of Eurobarometer or other mass surveys. It does not pre-define the parameters of the political domain at hand. In contrast, Q method is a bottom-up, reconstructive approach, starting with the way citizens communicate and talk about enlargement and their own intersubjective understandings embedded in verbal interactions amongst them (Dryzek/Berejikian 1993). Q method allows for these understandings to appear in the natural conversation from *citizen to citizen* on the topic.

Each of the six Q studies combines a collection of data from focus groups and individual interviews with a statistical analytical approach (McKeown/Thomas 2013; Watts/Stenner 2012).¹⁰ Interpretation of the results is restricted, as opposed to other reconstructive methods, by the statistical Q factor analyses performed on each set of data (Dryzek 2000). The six studies followed identical Q design, and were conducted within the same time-periods in order to ensure their comparability.¹¹

The application of the Q method, starting with group discussions and the statements they generate, also determines that the identified discourses are grounded in the communication of *citizens to citizens*. This allows us to investigate the existing discourses within the citizenry discursive arenas of six countries, separately and in comparative perspective. Q method is utilized to model, aggregate and to interpret people's shared subjective views about a domain, more specifically enlargement. We have assembled country Q sets consisting of statements as expressions of citizens' understandings, formulated in their own language. In contrast to other discursive studies (Dryzek/Berejikian 1993; Steunenberget al. 2011; Diez Medrano 2003), there are no statements from media and/or political elites' statements and party

10 Each Q study begins with the identification of a broad and diverse totality of statements on the topic of enlargement, expressed in verbal communication between citizens themselves and in their native language. From this broad range of opinions, claims, and emotional responses, a smaller set of items is selected. These theoretically selected statements are then used in individual interviews, in which the respondents are asked to rank order them according to their own agreement or disagreement with each statement. The result from each individual interview, the so-called Q sort, is a completed order of statements and represents the individual's subjective holistic (gestalt) viewpoint on the topic. The collected Q sorts per country are then correlated with one another, and the correlation matrix is factor analyzed. Then a Varimax rotation is performed to crystalize the factor solutions, which are subsequently interpreted in the context of each country.

11 This theoretically-structured selection strategy allowed us to compile a subsample of 64 statements, named Q set, for each country. The first stage of the fieldwork – group discussions to collect statements in each country – continued from February to June 2014. The individual face-to-face interviews for administering Q sorts continued from August to December 2014. We have selected a broad and varied group of respondents for both fieldwork stages of the country studies (see Dimitrova/Kortenska 2015).

positions in the Q sets. Therefore, the country discourses, found with Q method and discussed in this paper are expressions of namely citizens' holistic (gestalt) views and understandings. This feature sets these discourses apart from the ones found in studies of political elites, media, and public debates, as well as from public opinion polls mentioned above. In addition, Q method reveals viewpoints and dispositions which have not been captured by *Eurobarometer* and other mass surveys, or are captured in terms of the relatively high levels of 'do not know' responses. In the following paragraphs, I present an overview of the discourses within each of the countries of interest and move on to their comparison.

3. Political discourses among citizens – the empirical evidence

In order to understand how political discourses among citizens could influence the integration capacity of the EU – internal and external - in relation to public attitudes, the following analysis relies on the identified discourses and the groups of discourses across countries presented at length in previous contributions (see Dimitrova/Kortenska 2015; Dimitrova et al. 2015).¹² Such an interpretative strategy crystalizes those shared ideas and bridging arguments that drive either opposition or support towards previous and future enlargements among individual citizens in various contexts and varying experiences with EU enlargement.

3.1 Overview of the shared narratives within countries

As argued previously, the Q findings in all countries point to orientations towards EU enlargement, which hardly fit a clear pro/con dichotomy in the positions on this issue. Instead, the discourses reveal a spectrum of perceptions, arguments, attitudes, and emotional responses ranging from unequivocal approval and advocacy of enlargement (Bulgaria, 'The More the Merrier') to absolute rejection (The Netherlands, 'Utilitarian Rejection'). Q method crystalizes these extreme positions of support and rejection, but also distinguishes the nuanced narratives and arguments which lie in between them. It is in the latter that policy-makers and elites could find impetus for the communicating, justifying, and building of a public debate about EU enlargement in the future. Schmidt (2006: 242) recommended this already in her seminal work on discursive institutionalism almost ten years ago.

Looking at the results within each country in Figure 4, the discourses among citizens do confirm some concerns that negative popular attitudes could impede the process of EU enlargement by hampering both the internal and external capacities of the Union. In Germany and the Netherlands, we find strong national discourses that express opposition to EU enlargement and integration as a whole. These are labeled 'Questioning Integration' and 'Utilitarian Rejection' in Figure 4. Strong negative responses to the prospects of EU enlargement exist also in Poland and Serbia. However, the reasons for opposition differ from one context to another.

¹² The groups of discourses are based on the arguments and positions the narratives express and allow the researcher to highlight shared viewpoints and understandings within and across the six countries we study.

Figure 4: List of discourses by country

	Country*	Label**
EU-15 founding MS	Germany	A. <i>Questioning Integration</i> B. <i>Enlargement for the People</i> C. <i>Rule-driven, More Gradual Enlargement</i> D. <i>Realizing Europe's Global Potential</i>
	The Netherlands	A. <i>Ideals-driven Acceptance</i> B. <i>Utilitarian Rejection</i> C. <i>Deepening before Widening</i>
2004/2007 entrants	Poland	A. <i>Celebrating EU Values & Ideals</i> B. <i>Rejecting a Bureaucratic Monster</i> C. <i>Pragmatic Evaluation</i>
	Bulgaria	A. <i>The More the Merrier</i> B. <i>Striving for a Union of Rules and Values</i> C. <i>The Forgotten Village</i>
Current candidates	Serbia	A. <i>Cautiously Positive Expectations</i> B. <i>Mistrust & Hostility</i> C. <i>The Devil's in the Conditions</i> D. <i>Moving towards EU Rules & Institutions</i>
	Macedonia	A. <i>European Rules & Standards</i> B. <i>EU for Business</i> C. <i>Not Ready Yet</i> D. <i>Accession & Preparation</i>

Note: * Countries are coupled according to membership status.** The label of each discourse has emerged from the systematic interpretation of each factor identified by statistical Q factor analyses of each country dataset. The order of the discourses from A to C and D (where applicable) reflects the statistical results.

Source: Author's summary based on Dimitrova/Kortenska (2015:11).

In the Netherlands, for example, the negative responses are driven by perceptions of economic threat presented by CEE immigration, negative effects of newcomers on the domestic and local economy and society, and the costs for the Dutch stemming from EU membership and further enlargement. These rational and emotional responses are supplemented with a sense of enlargement being an 'elite project' and citizens having been 'kept in the dark' up until accession of the CEE countries. Similarly, citizens in Germany sharing the 'Questioning integration discourse' complain about the lack of information, communication, and deliberation during the previous enlargements on behalf of both their own governments and the EU institutions. The Polish rejection discourse is quite similar to the Dutch in its utter refusal to accept European integration and in the view of the EU as a costly 'bureaucratic monster' and 'regulatory octopus'. In the Serbian 'Mistrust and Hostility', rejection stems from doubt regarding the benefits of accession for Serbia, the high costs for the country, and the loss of national sovereignty, as well as fostering economic and political reforms. These results in Serbia are in line with the results of public opinion surveys mentioned earlier (IRI 2015a, 2015b).

Even though these discourses provide evidence for the realistic threat that public opinion may incur in the process of enlargement as of 2016, these are only four out of the 21 distinguishing narratives in Figure 4. First, there is no discourse of such firm rejection in Bulgaria and Macedonia. There, we find other unique discourses, such as the Bulgarian 'Forgotten Village'. These discourses capture such shared understandings of EU enlargement that the Eurobarometer survey design can hardly detect, or detects via high percentages of 'do not know' responses. Second, the remaining discourses in Germany, the Netherlands, Poland, and Serbia all allow the possibility for future enlargement, based on rather diverging arguments, justifications, emotions, dispositions, and evaluations, and under various conditions and expectations (Dimitrova et al. 2015).

For example, next to the opposition, in Poland and the Netherlands there are also extremely supportive and positive discourses ('Celebrating EU Values and Ideals' and 'Ideal-driven Acceptance' respectively), or the German 'Enhancing EU's Global Role' and Bulgarian 'The More the Merrier'. These seem to be the lasting voice of the 'Return to Europe' discourse that bridged candidates and members during the historic 'big bang' enlargement rounds.

In both Serbia and Macedonia, there are discourses that are sensitive to the respective country-specific bilateral issues the two candidates face on the road towards EU membership. While Serbia's candidacy is overshadowed by the country's relations with Kosovo as Copenhagen Plus criteria (Dimitrova/Kortenska 2016), Macedonia's candidacy and progress towards EU membership has been stalled by a bilateral name-dispute with Greece. Similar to scholars and policy-makers, citizens in these countries recognize this as a major setback towards EU accession both in the discursive analyses and in public opinion surveys. While some blame it on the EU, others point to the lack of political will domestically. Next to the public opinion trends regarding EU membership in Serbia and Macedonia since 2009, this combination of internal and external factors may impose additional limitations on future enlargement that relate to the perceptions of citizens.

The content and structure of the national political discourses, which express support to a varying extent in all six countries, are evidence of two things. First, they show that European integration may not have reached its limits yet and reveal the conditions under which these limits may or may not emerge to influence the process (Serbia 'Devil's in the Conditions' as illustration). Second, the discourses contain clues, cues, and ideas, which could give new impetus to the political and public debate on EU enlargement and room for maneuver for different actors involved in the process – governments, parties, the European Commission, the Council, civil society, and media – to mobilize the public. Next, I review the groups of shared discourses among citizens in the six countries. Finding bridging discourses may be vital for the future of the EU enlargement process and its successful outcome – the accession of any of the current candidates.

3.2 *Comparison: arguments and cleavages found across countries*

The bridging discourses among citizens could provide ideas for possible policy strategies, on the one hand, and a communicative line of reasoning that would resonate across EU member states and current candidates' citizens, on the other. Thus, they may facilitate a broad political and societal consensus, needed for a successful outcome (Dimitrova et al. 2015). The latter was obvious during the accession negotiations and the integration of post-communist CEE countries. Scholars, commentators, and practitioners agree

that the strong European identity and value-based rhetoric of the ‘Return to Europe’ was the key that brought Eastern enlargement to a success – against all odds. The findings here show that such a positive discursive environment that characterized the accession of CEE countries to the EU no longer matches reality in 2014, internally within the EU and externally within candidate countries. The following section demonstrates this deficiency of the current process, but also outlines a number of bridging arguments and justifications existing among citizens in the different countries. Tables 1 and 2 present the seven groups of discourses identified and interpreted in previous contributions (see Dimitrova et al. 2015).¹³

Table 1: Groups of discourses by country

1. EU as a rule-based community	
Germany	<i>Rule-driven, More Gradual Enlargement</i>
The Netherlands	<i>Deepening before Widening</i>
Bulgaria	<i>Striving for a Union of Rules & Values</i>
Serbia	<i>Cautiously Positive Expectations</i>
Macedonia	<i>European Rules & Standards</i>
2. EU as a source of better governance	
Germany	<i>Enlargement for the People</i>
Bulgaria	<i>Striving for a Union of Rules & Values</i>
Serbia	<i>Moving towards EU Rules & Institutions</i>
Macedonia	<i>Not Ready Yet</i> <i>Accession & Preparation</i>
3. European ideals and values	
The Netherlands	<i>Ideals-driven Acceptance</i>
Poland	<i>Celebrating EU Values & Ideals</i>
4. The utilitarian look of EU enlargement	
The Netherlands	<i>Utilitarian Rejection</i>
Poland	<i>Pragmatic Acceptance</i>
Bulgaria	<i>The More the Merrier</i>
Serbia	<i>Cautiously Positive Expectations</i>
Macedonia	<i>Devil's in the Conditions</i> <i>EU for Business</i>
5. Enhancing the EU's global role	
Germany	<i>Realizing Europe's Global Potential</i>
Bulgaria	<i>The More the Merrier</i>
Serbia	<i>Moving towards EU Rules & Institutions</i>

The good news stems from the first three groups in Table 1, followed by the fifth and sixth groups. Namely, in the first group, in five countries there is a political discourse that shares the broader view of the EU as

¹³ Note that the complex, multifaceted, and multidimensional character of the narratives results in some discourse being placed in more than one group.

a rule-based community and expects it to be one. This view emphasizes the EU as a community of rules to be the same or similar for all countries and citizens. Only in Poland, such discourse was not identified. Some citizens of Germany, Bulgaria, Serbia, and Macedonia share an overarching idea and notion of the EU as a source of better governance (second group), and emphasis is placed on the importance of domestic governing institutions, rule of law, and domestic reforms to meet the EU's membership criteria. In both groups, these overarching ideas contain a rather cautious but supportive stance towards enlargement. In the first group 'EU as a rule-based community', the German and Dutch discourses stand out, voicing criticism towards the way CEE countries acceded the EU without the consent, engagement, or proper information to the citizens, and the lack of communication, consultation, and deliberation in the process. Germans and Dutch citizens, who adhere to the discourses in this group, express further criticisms towards the formulation, objectivity, and transparency of EU membership criteria. An illustrative statement, distinguishing the Dutch discourse here is:

“What I think should happen to the EU is to clarify to people what they are required to do. And in what direction we are headed. We haven't heard a thing in four years and suddenly we find ourselves moving forward with new people around.” (The Netherlands, 'Deepening before widening', Statement No.38, Rank +5 as in Dimitrova et al. 2015).

In contrast, the shared discourses among Bulgarians, Serbians, and Macedonians in this group contain expectations that EU common rules would trigger economic convergence, referred to as 'common standards'. In resonance with the Dutch and Germans, citizens in these three countries insist on much more clarity and deliberation in the process of EU integration on behalf of both the EU and domestic political elites and reformers. From these first two groups of discourses it becomes clear that a major limitation of enlargement is indeed the lack of institutional mechanisms for communication, deliberation, and engagement of European constituencies in the EU and national policy-making on enlargement matters. A demand for stricter, more objective and clear criteria, institutional procedures and increased transparency also stems from the discourses in these first two groups. This requires policy-makers to take on board public opinion, not in terms of survey responses, but rather in the actual policy-making process of EU enlargement policy in the future. This would mean creating such institutional mechanisms embedded in the design of enlargement policy that would focus on two-way communication of policy objectives and effects between policy-makers and European citizens on the ground.

A significant evidence of the fading away of the strong pro-European values and identity-based rhetoric of 'Reunification of Europe' emerges from the third group of discourses. We find strong pro-European discourses that resonate with elements of common European identity, ideals, and values in only two countries – the Netherlands and Poland. The elements of these discourses seem to align precisely with the broad and widely accepted rhetoric of 'Return to Europe', the same one which 'entrapped' leaders of the EU in the decision to enlarge to the East back in the mid-1990s and 2000s (Schimmelfennig 2001; Herranz-Surrallés 2012). Common European identity, to which many in the East aspired before and even more after accession, and the European values and ideals associated with it, appear to have lost discursive representation as opposed to utilitarian, skeptical, and oppositional rhetoric, or one of criticism and

conditional support. Even though seemingly disappearing, the fact that we find the remnants of this rhetoric to still bridge citizens in founding countries and former candidates from CEE, which are now member states, shows the much deeper and stable roots that narratives based on values, identity, and emotional responses have.

The two value-driven discourses lead to nothing else but unequivocal support, but are limited to only two countries almost isolated from the rest. In contrast, group 4 provides evidence that utilitarian considerations – personal and community cost/benefit rationales – have a much broader spread across domestic and regional contexts. However, cost/benefit-driven discourses do not uniformly result in supportive dispositions. On the contrary, they mark a critical difference between founding (incumbent EU-15) member states, on the one hand and 2004/2007 entrants as well as candidate countries, on the other. In Bulgaria, geopolitical and national economic and personal gains (freedom of movement) drive strong and open support towards all possible candidates, even some highly unrealistic ones (such as Russia). In comparison, in the Netherlands, utilitarian calculations result in highly negative opinions towards previous and future enlargements alike, not to mention towards EU membership altogether.

Group 5 shares some similarities with the value-driven discourses in terms of the strongly positive and supporting positions and the fact that it refers to security and stability aspects of EU enlargement as a successful foreign policy tool. However, the discourses here share arguments about enlargement being beneficial in terms of ensuring security, stability, and peace, but also regarding the global markets position. Furthermore, citizens adhering to the discourses in this group do not see peace and security as values, but rather as foreign relations and trade opportunities.

Special attention should be paid to the sixth group of discourses among citizens, due to the highly critical shared arguments and evaluations of EU enlargement, EU governance at present as well as the effects of enlargement on candidates and EU member states. This group of discourses could easily be mistaken to equate Euroskepticism in the sense of full opposition presented by surveys.

Table 2: Groups of discourses by country (continued)

6. Questioning enlargement: skepticism and disappointment	
Germany	<i>Enlargement for the People</i>
Bulgaria	<i>Forgotten Village</i>
Serbia	<i>Devil's in the Conditions</i>
Macedonia	<i>Acceptance & Preparation</i>
7. Firm rejection and vocal opposition to the EU	
Germany	<i>Questioning Integration</i>
The Netherlands	<i>Utilitarian Rejection</i>
Poland	<i>Rejecting a Bureaucratic Monster</i>
Serbia	<i>Mistrust and Hostility</i>

Here, our findings contribute to understanding the nature of a discursive phenomenon that is rather different from Euroskeptic rhetoric. The term *Eurocriticism* better summarizes the major meaning of these discourses and is tailored here to capture their critical but supportive stance towards European integration. It is this supportive stance that appears to trigger the critical evaluations of the current state of affairs within the EU-28 and the effects of its policies. However, the limitations of survey design can easily push an individual aspiring to a discourse of this 'critical group' to give a negative response to questions regarding EU enlargement. This would be the case even if they support the process in general, but demand improvement and better outcomes. Thus, negative public attitudes trends may not necessarily capture opposition, but may hide significant disappointment and criticism towards EU enlargement policy, process, and effects that are harbored by genuine support for the European project.

In the body of literature on Euroskepticism, political and/or public, the phenomena is predominantly defined and studied to reflect a complete rejection of integration. This cannot be attached to the constructions in the sixth group. A better fit for this conceptualization of Euroskepticism are the discourses placed in the seventh final group. The arguments and justifications put forward in this group of discourses express refusal to accept and legitimize EU as an entity. These findings call on researchers to reexamine the way they measure and analyze Euroskepticism among the publics based on mass survey data.

The bad news for EU enlargement policy ahead is precisely in this seventh group of discourses that contain strong rejection of European integration. This group contains evidence that for some citizens in the EU and in candidate countries, enlargement has indeed reached and even overstretched its limits. These discourses, however, are limited compared to the supportive and critically supportive groups of narratives. In contrast to this Euroskeptic group, the discourses in the sixth group reveal that some citizens would be susceptible to persuasion, communication, and deliberation of EU enlargement process to both support it and/or reject it fully. EU member states governments, as well as the European Commission could persuade European voters to accept and legitimize future EU expansion by responding to citizens' most pressing concerns about enlargement in an open, visible manner.

Overall, two major aspects distinguish the CEE accession process from the enlargement context in which Western Balkan countries find themselves: 1) the broad political and societal consensus among political elites and the general publics in the candidate countries to pursue EU membership and necessary reforms and 2) the threat of exclusion from the EU at a time when it was 'the only game in town'. These issues are also recognized by citizens in Serbia and Macedonia, who see domestic elites as unwilling to achieve actual reforms and transformations (Dimitrova/Kortenska 2015).

4. Conclusions and recommendations

Despite diminishing levels of public support towards EU enlargement according to surveys and the overall context of increasingly critical and strong negative narratives, the process of widening has proceeded forward for many of the Western Balkan countries in the post-2004/2007 era. Serbia's, Montenegro's,

and Kosovo's relations with the EU have continued to progress within the framework of the EU's enlargement policy (European Commission 2015). The institutional design of enlargement policy as a closed intergovernmental process does not envision any direct involvement or role of the constituencies either within the EU member states or candidate countries, until ratification of accession treaties (Dimitrova 2015).

Nation-wide referenda within the EU member states (EU's internal capacity) or candidate countries (EU's external capacity) may prevent the successful outcome of enlargement at its very last stage, namely ratification of the treaties. As of 2016, such a scenario appears highly plausible against the background of Brexit's and Grexit's salience over the last few years. The role of the public opinion and the underlying political discourses at this final stage of the process seems obvious. In the current popular mood towards the EU as a whole, such referenda are doomed to face the same fate as the Dutch and the French Constitutional Treaty referenda in 2005. The repercussions of an eventual failed referendum for EU enlargement policy are immense, as Dimitrova argued at the beginning of 2016 (Dimitrova 2016). In June, 2016 at a referendum in the UK on EU membership, British citizens voted to leave the Union, which is an unprecedented event in the history of European integration. Even though the referenda are politically driven instruments, they have immense consequences for the European project and its future. Thus, in democratic societies it is ultimately the European voters that can decide to influence the process and the direction of European integration.

The lack of a strong pro-European rhetoric, in the context of increasingly visible and increasingly negative anti-European sentiments and criticism amongst domestic political elites and the media, appears to be a major limit of any future enlargement. The previous absence of an open and fact-based political and public debate on the Eastern enlargement among EU-15 publics has taken its toll in fueling anti-immigrant sentiments, anti-European, nationalistic, hostile and negative political and public attitudes and raising criticism towards wider Europe as of today. The lack of deliberation and consultation about the process seems to be one of the major concerns of citizens in the founding member states, but does not stop there. The same is evident in Poland and Bulgaria, when their own integration is in question, but also in Serbia, where a new EU enlargement strategy, accession negotiation, financial assistance, monitoring tools and conditionality are applied (Fagan/Sircar 2015). These tendencies remind of Schmidt's (2006) call for updating the discursive construction of Europe within domestic politics:

“The only solution is for member-states to come up with new national ideas and discourse that come to terms with these EU-related changes to the traditional workings of their national democracies. To do so, however, we must first understand how institutions affect European democracy at the EU and national levels” (Schmidt 2006: 5).

The low levels of public support can affect the process of negotiations itself, by undermining the EU's membership perspective credibility on the one hand, and increasing the domestic political electoral costs of complying with EU conditionality for elites in candidates, on the other (Müftüler Baç/Kibris 2015). Thus, the discourses among citizens constitute an important element of the integration capacity of the EU and could play a crucial role, not only at the end, but also during the integration of current candidates.

All else equal, the current enlargement process suffers from a lack of a strong bridging pro-European discourse, based on common European values and identity that resonates across levels of governance and society. Utilitarian justifications and rhetoric on EU enlargement result only in short-lived acceptance and only when the actual benefits are tangible. The lack of visible community and personal benefits quickly diminishes the support based on such reasoning. At the same time, it is the limited and unbalanced public debate rather than the low levels of public support towards the EU that imposes the real limits on European integration. The absence of political and public debate on the topic is among the most challenging limitations of future enlargement, linked to the perceptions and attitudes among European publics within the EU. Similarly, leaving politicization of EU enlargement and integration in the hands of radical, extreme parties within member states undermines both the general public opinion and the credibility of the EU in fostering democratic and economic reforms in candidate countries. As a result, the EU membership perspective and conditionality lose ground from within the EU. This leads not only to slowing down reforms in the Western Balkans and Turkey, but even to backsliding in democratic governance, as literature on the topic has shown (Fagan/Sircar 2014).

While the EU has developed strong instruments for economic integration of new and candidate countries, and has achieved some success in economic governance reforms and developments, strengthening of common European identity, values, and ideals have remained in the background. These are seriously endangered, considering the rise of exclusionary national identity and sovereignty claims from across EU member states – in the East and West. The anti-EU, anti-immigration rhetoric among leaders like Hungary's Orban, UKIP's Farage, and PVV's Wilders seems to have replaced the 'Return to Europe' discourse of the past. At the same time, elites in candidate countries are not as committed to the EU's demands for economic, political, and administrative reforms. Based on the above analyses and synthesis of findings, a few recommendations emerge:

1) EU member states governments' discourses at the EU and national levels do not match. The domestic discourses underline different arguments when compared to the EU discourses (Herranz-Surralsés 2012). At the same time, the EU policy-makers rely on member states governments and political elites to communicate EU-level decisions and events (Hurrelmann et al. 2013). The EU member states governments, European Commission, and the Council should seek such an overarching bridging rhetoric that would speak to citizens beyond economic and personal benefits and gains, since those are uncertain and change rapidly (as the economic crises show). Rather, emphasis in rhetoric should be placed on the shared and common European values, ideals, principles, norms, and rules when communicating and debating future steps towards widening.

2) The European Commission, EU member states, and candidate countries' governments should approach and engage citizens and grass-roots movements directly and at the early stages of enlargement process. The institutional design of EU enlargement policy must envision closer cooperation between EU and candidate countries' civil society and domestic media channels in order to provide balanced, clear, and accurate information about the process and the way each country moves forward. The EU could support civil society organizations and grass-root movements engaged in various fields, from rule of law to culture,

education, and regional cooperation at the local level, to cooperate more intensively and systematically with citizens themselves and to promote EU rules and norms as common values and ideals among societies in Europe.

3) Member state governments should not leave the politicization of EU enlargement to populist and extreme right and left parties, but rather engage their constituencies in an open and fact-based dialogue on the topic – both regarding the actual effects of the ‘big bang’ enlargement and the predicted results of future enlargement to candidates in the Western Balkans. For example, invalid and simply inaccurate information about the process and its effects must be countered by domestic elites and opinion leaders. Deliberation, communication, and a balanced public and political debate are required rather early in the process.

5) Furthermore, helping countries to achieve actual political, economic, and social reforms and to implement those in order to fulfill the Copenhagen criteria and the ‘new EU conditionality’ approach would inevitably brighten moods within candidates and may soften critical views within some citizens in the EU member states.

6) Tangible improvements in the stability, security, and prosperity of the EU itself that are visible to citizens would also battle some of the more critical and skeptical views among citizens and may elevate supportive stances at the grass-root levels.

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