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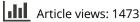
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Rhetorical action in a liberal international order in crisis: theorising EU and NATO enlargements post-2022

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ABSTRACT
The Russian invasion of Ukraine has thrust the issue of European Union and NATO enlargement back into the political spotlight. However, it remains uncertain whether established theoretical frameworks are still applicable in today's rapidly changing world. In response to this uncertainty, this debate section brings together five short reflection pieces, with a response from Frank Schimmelfennig, to assess the relevance of the theory of 'rhetorical action' in light of recent developments in European and international politics. How effectively does rhetorical action explain current EU and NATO enlargement processes, as well as broader forms of international cooperation? The authors find strong overall support for the theory's continued validity. However, they caution that the increasing politicisation of issues, the rising competition from populist, non-liberal forces, and the broader crisis of the Liberal International Order require more careful reflection and specification of the scope conditions that define the theory's limits.

Introduction

Dirk Leuffen, University of Konstanz

In the early 2000s, the study of enlargement emerged as a significant subfield of European integration studies, complementing the discipline's traditional

emphasis on the deepening of the European Union (EU). Interest in enlargement as a form of 'horizontal integration' was largely sparked by the significant political challenges posed by Eastern enlargement (Grabbe & Hughes, 1998). The 'big bang' of Eastern enlargement also raised a number of fascinating theoretical questions (Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2005b; Schneider, 2009; Sedelmeier, 2005; Sjursen, 2006; Vachudova, 2005). However, after Romania and Bulgaria joined the EU in 2007, academic interest in enlargement waned, accompanying a growing enlargement fatigue amongst EU citizens, the Croatian accession to the EU in 2013 notwithstanding. Despite constituting an instance of horizontal disintegration, Brexit was rarely analysed within the horizontal integration framework.

Today, however, the issue of EU enlargement has resurfaced as a key item on the political agenda (Anghel & Džankić, 2023; Panchuk, 2024). In June 2022, Ukraine and Moldova were granted candidate status for EU membership, and in December 2023, the EU heads of state and government agreed to open accession negotiations with these two countries. In addition, in December 2023, Georgia was granted candidate status, and in March 2024, the European Council decided to open accession negotiations with Bosnia and Herzegovina. Similarly, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) has experienced recent expansions, with Finland joining in April 2023 and Sweden, following extensive intra-organisational negotiations, in March 2024. Furthermore, Ukraine is actively pursuing NATO membership in order to secure the protection it desperately needs in the face of persistent Russian aggression.

Although there is little doubt that the intensification of these processes can be causally attributed to Russia's unprovoked, horrid and cynical invasion of Ukraine, ordered by President Putin in February 2022, numerous questions still arise. Most importantly, it remains uncertain which of these candidates will actually become full members of the EU and NATO and what will be the reasons for their potential membership or lack thereof. In a theoretical perspective, we can ask how today's decision-makers navigate the trade-offs between security considerations, normative obligations, and public opinion in the context of a new European security landscape? After all, there are other challengers and challenges to the European and global order, extending beyond the case of Russia.

Against this backdrop, this debate section revisits an academic cornerstone of the enlargement debate of the 2000s, namely Frank Schimmelfennig's (2003) 'The EU, NATO and the Integration of Europe: Rules and Rhetoric' (hereafter referred to as RaR). The contributing authors were asked to assess, in the form of short reflection pieces, whether the core theoretical tenets articulated in RaR remain applicable in today's context. Drawing on insights from sociology and social psychology (Goffman, 1969), RaR applied the theory of rhetorical action (Schimmelfennig, 1997, 2001, 2003)

to the cases of EU and NATO Eastern enlargement. Against the backdrop of contemporary challenges – such as heightened security threats, the politicisation of integration, and an erosion of democratic norms – the debate section aims to critically assess the enduring relevance of RaR's theoretical claims. In other words, does rhetorical action remain effective in contested liberal international orders (Börzel & Zürn, 2021)?

The debate section's participants were selected on the basis of their valuable contributions to the academic debates related to, but not limited to, the enlargement of liberal regional and international organisations. This collection of diverse perspectives is designed to stimulate a revitalised research agenda and ideally catalyse new research directions in the study of horizontal integration in the EU, NATO, and beyond. This introductory overview sets the stage for the debate section by first revisiting RaR's central claims and then posing a number of questions to initiate the subsequent debate.

Rhetorical action

RaR's enduring impact lies in its meticulous exposition and rigorous application of the theory of rhetorical action to the cases of post-Cold War NATO and EU enlargements. Rhetorical action blends insights from rationalist and sociological institutionalism into a coherent explanatory model, solidly anchored in social theory; in Weberian terminology, rhetorical action is related to a form of 'value-instrumentally rational' behaviour (Schimmelfennig, 1997, p. 227). Through sequential synthesising, rhetorical action successfully addresses the limitations of previous attempts – grounded in either meta-theoretical camp – by explaining both the inputs and the outcomes of enlargement negotiations. Materialist rationalist theories adeptly predict state preferences on both the demand and the supply sides of accession processes. Yet they struggle to explain why Central and Eastern European States ultimately achieved NATO and EU membership. Purely rationalist perspectives would suggest outcomes such as the Partnership of Peace instead of NATO membership or association agreements for the case of the EU; however, it is worth noting that Schneider (2009), Vachudova (2005), and others disagree with Schimmelfennig (2003) in this respect.

In contrast, explanations rooted in constructivist or sociological institutionalist traditions more effectively explain the outcomes of enlargement negotiations. However, they struggle to accurately predict the input side and, therefore, fall short of fully capturing the underlying mechanisms. This is where rhetorical action comes in. According to this theory, rational state actors are deeply influenced by their domestic political contexts, where they both gain recognition and face accountability. Simultaneously, these actors are embedded in a broader European or Euro-Atlantic community environment. And it is the liberal, human-rights, rule-based democracy and open market economy Community rules and norms which are used

strategically by the supporters of enlargement. These norms are wielded by proponents within candidate states, alongside supportive insiders and international bodies like the European Commission, to shame opponents of enlargement for allegedly failing to uphold the Community's identity and for reneging on prior commitments. According to RaR, within a Community environment that values discursive rationality, inconsistency incurs reputational costs. Thus, opponents of enlargement, despite maintaining their critical stance vis-à-vis the candidates, are rhetorically entrapped and subtly pressured to acquiesce to enlargement.

Rhetorical action, as conceptualised in RaR, operates on two assumptions. First, it involves a specific process or technique: Within a legitimate Community environment, actors can strategically use norm-based arguments and references to Community rules to overcome gridlock. Second, rhetorical action pertains to specific content and ethos, particularly emphasising liberal norms such as democracy, the rule of law, multilateralism, and a commitment to consistency, which is in line with discursive rationality.

Revisiting rhetorical action: questions post-2022

The profound shifts in contemporary domestic and international politics prompt critical questions about the ongoing relevance of rhetorical action. Firstly, given the altered security landscape and the resurgence of geopolitics in Europe and beyond, should security perspectives, as for instance highlighted by neoclassical realism, be more prominently integrated into the framework of enlargement theory (cf. also Hyde-Price, 2018)? Historically, security-oriented arguments have played a more peripheral role in the established theoretical canon, notable exceptions notwithstanding (e.g., Hyde-Price, 2000; Moravcsik & Vachudova, 2003; Skalnes, 2005; Vachudova, 2014). Initial indications suggest that with Russia posing a palpable and increasingly visible security threat, normative considerations may be marginalised in enlargement discussions. For instance, the Tirana Declaration, issued during the Western Balkan summit on 6 December 2022, highlighted Russia's aggressive actions against Ukraine as a threat to European and global peace and emphasised the strategic partnership between the EU and the Western Balkans. Moreover, according to pundits, the General Affairs Council's decision to grant candidate status to Bosnia–Herzegovina on 13 December 2022, despite its evident deficiencies, reflects geopolitical calculations (e.g., Gutschker, 2022). Empirically, it is crucial to establish whether norms continue to play a central role in balancing the demand and supply sides of enlargement.

Secondly, turning to the domestic level of EU politics, can rhetorical action effectively operate amidst a landscape of increasingly politicised European integration? RaR posits that 'the more public the decision-making process, the stronger the community effect on its outcomes' (Schimmelfennig, 2003,

p. 286). However, in light of postfunctionalist perspectives (Hooghe & Marks, 2009), which suggest heightened visibility and salience of integration decisions leading to resurgent nationalism and enlargement fatigue, can the rationality and community orientation necessary for effective rhetorical action be sustained? Moreover, what implications arise when not all member state governments share a consensus on the liberal democratic foundations of the EU and NATO? Examples such as Hungary and Türkiye's initial opposition to Sweden's NATO membership bid highlight these complexities.

Thirdly, what insights can the current political context yield with respect to delimiting the scope conditions of rhetorical action? Schimmelfennig (2003) posits that community effects vary depending on the policy area:

> [T]he more *constitutive* a policy issue is, or the more it involves fundamental questions of community purpose, the easier it is for interested actors to bring in questions of legitimacy, to frame it as an issue of community identity that cannot be left to the interplay of self-interest and bargaining power, and to shame other actors into compliance. (p. 7)

Given the constitutive nature of membership – after all, enlargement decisions determine who may join the Community – enlargement constitutes a most likely case for rhetorical action to work. However, if human rights are constitutive elements of liberal democracy and community identity, shouldn't the theory also apply to the treatment of non-European refugees?

Fourth, while liberal ideology may have been the only game in town after the end of the Cold War (Fukuyama, 1989), today, the liberal script faces increasing challenges both domestically and in the international order. Given this context, it is pertinent to explore whether rhetorical action relies on the recognition of liberal values and rationality. In other words, can it also operate effectively in non-Western and non-democratic contexts?

Overview of this debate section

In the first contribution, Antoaneta L. Dimitrova explores the initiation of EU accession negotiations with Ukraine during the war year of 2022, with a particular focus on the mechanisms of rhetorical action. Dimitrova provides substantial evidence that proponents of Ukraine's EU membership, both within the EU and in Ukraine, employ strong rhetoric to highlight Ukraine's alignment with EU norms. Additionally, they frame a normative obligation for Ukraine's membership by emphasising Ukraine's courageous defence of fundamental EU values.

Ulrich Sedelmeier opens up a new comparative testing ground: in particular, the author asks how well the theory of rhetorical action predicts vetoes against accession candidates in the EU and NATO. Using a newly compiled dataset, the author finds that while some vetoes appear illegitimate, only a

subset conflicts with the theory's expectations. The theory's predictive power hinges on the extent to which group members feel normatively bound by community norms. Overall, rhetorical action performs well when it comes to understanding vetoes against accession.

Sandra Lavenex offers a critical perspective, examining the case of Ukraine and, beyond traditional state-centric views, the treatment of non-European refugees. This contribution unpacks the delicate dialectic of integration and exclusion in today's EU. According to Lavenex, geopolitical enlargement and organised hypocrisy – where normative rhetoric is decoupled from strategic action in refugee policies – significantly undermine the normative foundation of the Western international community.

Thomas Risse questions whether the normative and epistemological preconditions of rhetorical action – specifically, a commitment to the Liberal International Order (LIO) and a liberal truth regime – still hold today. The contribution identifies the rise of authoritarianism and populism, which disregard these commitments, as a significant threat to the LIO. However, Risse advises against abandoning the liberal truth regime prematurely, noting that even autocrats and populists must justify their policies to domestic and international audiences. Their rhetoric can eventually be exposed as attempts to conceal blatant, cruel, and illegitimate lies. Therefore, shaming and blaming may still be effective tools for defending the LIO.

To conclude this debate section, Frank Schimmelfennig responds to the critiques raised in the other contributions and provides his perspective on current enlargement processes and the role of rhetorical action therein.

Using rhetorical action to open the door for enlargement: explaining the EU's agreement to start accession negotiations with Ukraine

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Introduction: an unlikely candidacy

Ukraine's application for EU membership, submitted by President Zelenskyy only five days after Russia's invasion started in February 2022, appeared to be a lost cause. Not only had a country at war never applied to join the Union, but the EU had previously excluded the possibility of Ukraine becoming a candidate for EU membership. The EU's European Neighbourhood Policy (from 2004-) and the Eastern Partnership (from 2009-) had been created as vehicles for engaging with partners that would not become accession candidates (Sasse, 2010, p. 181). Ukraine's Association agreement with the EU was signed in 2014, after dramatic events triggered by former President Yanukovych's last-minute refusal to sign, followed by mass protests in support of Ukraine's European choice that became known as the *Euromaidan*

or the Revolution of Dignity. The agreement suffered another setback when a consultative referendum on its ratification in the Netherlands returned a negative result just above the minimal validity threshold of 30 per cent turnout. The negative referendum result prevented the Dutch government from presenting the agreement to Parliament for ratification. Thus, the Netherlands could only ratify after an addendum was negotiated with all member states, explicitly stating that the agreement did not provide Ukraine with a perspective to join the EU (Dimitrova & Dragneva, 2022).

Enlargement policy itself has been in a deadlock despite multiple efforts to revitalise the process with Western Balkan candidates. Recognised candidates from the Western Balkans have been slow and reluctant to embark on the governance reforms that would bring them closer to membership. At the same time, the EU has been wary of negative public opinion on enlargement and feared the consequences of further politicisation of enlargement (Börzel et al., 2017; Dimitrova, 2023; Mirel, 2022). Even when candidate countries such as North Macedonia embarked on far-reaching reforms, bilateral vetoes intervenedo to prevent their progress towards negotiations, affecting the credibility of the EU. The EU made little of the enlargement promise given at the Thessaloniki European Council in 2003.

Nevertheless, within less than a year, the European Council voted to give candidate status to Ukraine, Moldova (both in June 2022), and Western Balkan applicant Bosnia and Herzegovina (in December 2022) and to start negotiations with Ukraine and Moldova (December 2023).

This remarkable policy shift in enlargement policy is a puzzle, given that the preferences of member states were not favourable to enlargement in general and Ukraine's accession in particular. Similarly to the decision to open the door for the post-communist states from Central and Eastern Europe in the late 1990s, a potential Ukrainian accession would put a strain on existing EU institutions, decision-making, budget, and policies. A rationalist analysis would lead to the expectation that unevenly distributed costs would create veto players, similar to the conclusion of the analyses of the potential effects of Central and Eastern European (CEE) accession in the late 1990s (Schimmelfennig, 2003). The costs of Ukrainian accession would likely be even higher, given the need for post-war reconstruction, the economic losses from the war, the large share of agricultural land, and potential tensions under the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP).

Rhetorical action: appealing to community values

This contribution argues that an important part of the explanation for the EU's shift lies in the use of rhetorical action in a community environment, a theoretical framework developed by Schimmelfennig (2003) to explain the puzzle of Eastern enlargement.

The essence of rhetorical action is the strategic use of argumentation to mobilise ideas shared in the environment of the proponents to persuade the audience and the opponents to accept the proponents' claims and act accordingly (Schimmelfennig, 2003, p. 199). Proponents appeal to local values, identities, and experiences of certain communities and seek to take advantage of emotions like pity or indignation (Schimmelfennig, 2003, p. 205). Furthermore, political actors referring to a community's standard of legitimacy through rhetoric can force others to cooperate even though these other political actors may not be convinced by the arguments or possess superior material or institutional power (Schimmelfennig, 2003, p. 208).

Schimmelfennig has argued that the EU and NATO are part of the Western international community, which he defines as interstate, liberal and post-national. His definition of 'liberal' includes both communities of liberal states and liberal communities of states. Human rights are at the centre of the liberal community, as are principles such as the rule of law, democratic participation and representation, market economy, and private property (Schimmelfennig, 2003, pp. 77–78). Evidence of these features can be found in the community's formal rules: the relevant treaties as well as official discourses and membership criteria.

Today, the formal rules of the EU – Article 2 of the Treaty on European Union (TEU), the Charter of Fundamental Rights, the Copenhagen criteria for accession, among others, reaffirm the centrality of values and principles that are part of this liberal identity and are constitutive for the community. While these formal rules have not changed much since the EU's Eastern enlargement, Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's discourse of 'illiberal' democracy and systematic erosion of democratic principles such as the rule of law, create normative contestation that potentially limits the effect of rhetorical action.

Rhetorical action used by Ukraine

In the unprecedentedly large number of speeches by President Zelenskyy delivered since the start of the war, we can identify a pattern of rhetorical action. Supporting his country's brave resistance to the invasion through incredibly powerful rhetoric, Zelenskyy engaged in a campaign to convince European leaders and the Western allies that Ukraine fights to defend commonly shared values and democratic norms. He referred to fighting for freedom and liberal values, the same values that represent the foundation of the EU, as captured by Article 2 of the TEU. Fitting the definition of rhetorical action, Zelenskyy used arguments based on collective identity, values, and the norms of the EU as a liberal community.

His arguments have persistently linked EU values and identity with the decisions to support Ukraine militarily but also to support Ukraine's

candidacy and, sooner rather than later, EU membership. For example, during an official visit to the European Parliament in Brussels in June 2023, the Ukrainian President stressed that Ukraine was defending the European way of life in fighting Russia and emphasised that Europe and Ukraine shared fundamental values and a common future (Zelenskyy, 2023b).

Zelenskyy's speeches appeal to the values and history of particular communities rather than making universal arguments, which is typical for rhetorical action arguments (Schimmelfennig, 2003, p. 204). His arguments target specific communities, in this case the EU. By contrast, addressing the United Kingdom's (UK) parliament – a day prior to his speech to the European Parliament, President Zelenskyy highlighted, 'the spirit of these great islands' and the 'strong British character', reminding the audience of Ukrainians and the British defeating the fear of war (Zelenskyy, 2023a).

Ultimately, what lends the force of such arguments is not only Zelenskyy's supreme rhetorical skills but the heroic resistance of Ukrainians on the battle-front and in the cities and villages attacked and bombarded by Russia. Furthermore, it is not only President Zelenskyy that has engaged in an unprecedented information campaign. Countless non-governmental organisations (NGOs) have held meetings with counterparts in the EU, organised advocacy visits to Ukraine and monitored the government's compliance with reform commitments. In addition, Ukrainian local authorities have been recognised as key actors for democratic resilience based on war time research highlighting their importance in maintaining public trust and social cohesion (Huss & Keudel, 2023).

The EU's response: rhetorical entrapment?

Given what we know so far of the relatively fast steps involved in the EU's response to Ukraine's application for membership, its assessment by the Commission, and the European Council's decision, there is a case to be made that the EU has responded to Ukraine's rhetorical action.

In terms of established steps in the enlargement procedure, the European Commission provided an unprecedentedly fast assessment of Ukraine's readiness despite the uncertainties associated with the war. It took barely more than two months between the official submission of the Commission's screening questionnaire and the delivery of the Commission's Opinion in June 2022 (European Commission, 2022b). Following the Commission's recommendation to start negotiations, albeit linked to some preconditions, the European Council of June 2022 decided to accept Ukraine as an official candidate for accession. The European Council stated, 'The future of these countries and their citizens lies within the European Union' (European Council, 2022a).

The EU's official discourse on enlargement has shown a clear shift in argumentation, linking Ukraine's resistance to EU values. Initially, EU leaders have

adopted a collective framing of the war against Ukraine as transformative for the EU's agenda, especially 'the need to reduce dependence on Russia' or increase defence capabilities (Laffan, 2022, p. 18).

Two weeks after the start of the invasion, the informal summit of the European Council in Versailles issued a declaration stressing the following:

> The European Council acknowledges the European aspirations and European choice of Ukraine […] [W]e will further strengthen our bonds and deepen our partnership to support Ukraine in pursuing its European path. Ukraine belongs to our European family. (European Council, 2022b)

While the recognition of the illegality of Russia's invasion and its implications for European security fits with the EU's self-interest, it does not necessarily represent evidence of the effects of rhetorical action. However, further statements made by EU leaders mirrored the link made by the Ukrainian President between European values, defending freedom against Russian aggression, and Ukraine's aspirations to join the EU.

Addressing President Zelenskyy on 9 May 2022, European Council President Charles Michel said:

> You have decided to choose the free world […] [Y]ou know that we know that you and the people of Ukraine are fighting for your homeland, for the future of your children, and for your freedoms. But you are also fighting for our common European principles, values and democratic rights. (European Council, 2022c)

Similarly, during a meeting of the College of Commissioners with President Zelenskyy in Kyiv, Commission President Ursula von der Leyen linked fundamental EU values with support for Ukraine:

> The whole of the European Union is in this with Ukraine, for the long haul. We will stand up for Ukraine, as we stand up for the fundamental rights and the respect of the international law. (von der Leyen, 2023b)

These examples suggest there is a linkage between decisions on enlargement and EU leaders framing Ukraine's resistance and defence against Russia as deeply congruent with the Union's constitutive values. Once publicly committed to a line of argumentation, rhetorical actors need to act in accordance with the claims they made referring to community norms and values, even if these claims run counter to their self-interest. Following Schimmelfennig, political actors that do not act consistently with the rhetorical commitments they have made stand to lose credibility and, ultimately, the legitimacy they have gained by appealing to the community's norms and values (Schimmelfennig, 2003, pp. 221–222).

Evidence of entrapment effects can be found in further developments of the enlargement debate. Mentioning a target date for accession has been defined as a high threshold for commitment, a clear path for a process fraught with obstacles. In August 2023, at the Bled Strategic Forum, European

Council President Michel urged the EU to prepare itself for the accession of Ukraine and other candidates by 2030. He stressed the need to increase the credibility of the EU's commitment to candidate states.

> It's time to get rid of the ambiguities. It's time to face the challenges with clarity and honesty. The road to the EU for the Western Balkans began more than 20 years ago. […] I agree with Chancellor Scholz when he says Europe must keep its promises. (Michel, 2023)

Further, Michel linked enlargement to Ukraine's resistance in defence of shared values:

> As we speak, the people of Ukraine are heroically defending their country. The Kremlin is not only attacking a free and sovereign neighbour. The Kremlin is attacking all that we believe in — freedom, democracy, prosperity, and cooperation. So, in June last year, we granted candidate status to Ukraine and Moldova. […] So now enlargement is no longer a dream. It is time to move forward. (Michel, 2023)

While institutional discourses stemming from the EU institutions have changed and echoed Ukrainian arguments, a serious challenge is presented by leaders who have moved away from commitment to the values of liberal democracy. Having presided over a decade of democratic backsliding in Hungary under the label 'illiberal democracy', Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán has aimed to decouple European integration from liberal democracy (Meunier & Vachudova, 2018). Not surprisingly, he has not shown signs to have been entrapped by democracy arguments. Similar obstacles, linked to processes of autocratisation, may come into play under Slovakia's recent government led by Robert Fico, although Fico's control of Slovak media, civil society and other institutions does not by far match Orbán's.

The Hungarian government's pro-Russian position and hostility to Ukraine has led to continuous clashes with other EU member states at key decision-making moments, although there are good reasons to believe that it is a strategic use of the veto to blackmail the EU to release funds for Hungary. For example, the European Council of December 2023 had to resort to the unprecedented measure of taking a decision on Ukraine while Orbán stepped out of the room. After weeks of threatening to veto the decision on starting accession negotiations with Ukraine, Orbán left the meeting, allowing for a unanimous decision by the remaining members (European Council, 2023). Behind Orbán's compromise on blocking the Ukraine decision, however, was a deal that involved the European Commission's release of €10.2 billion in funding for Hungary, which had been frozen due to rule of law violations (Brzozowski, 2023).

Poland's position is more ambiguous and has changed over time. Former Polish Prime Minister Morawiecki spoke of the first hours of the war as 'the EU awakening from the geopolitical slumber' (Sorgi, 2023). Polish support for

Ukraine in military and policy terms has initially been remarkably strong, yet it wavered under the pressure of farmers' protests against the import of Ukrainian grain. Neither Poland's previous government, nor the new one under Donald Tusk, can afford to ignore the current and potential future effects of large-scale Ukrainian agricultural imports into the EU. Yet Poland's position has not been entirely unaffected by their previous statements of support made at the start of the war and Polish politicians are sensitive to their own appeals of support for Ukraine. Their position on Ukrainian imports rather illustrates a key feature of enlargement negotiations, namely the externalisation of internal, sometimes bilateral problems (Preston, 1997).

These challenging cases lead us to an insight regarding the scope conditions for rhetorical action to be effective. Theoretically, rhetorical action is only likely to have an impact if members of a particular community, in this case governments and political leaders, derive domestic legitimation as well as international legitimation from adhering to the core values of the community. If a different legitimation narrative is used, the domestic costs of not adhering to community values would not be high, although the international costs will likely remain substantial.

Enlargement as a long road of reforms

Rhetorical entrapment is, however, still a matter of political actors' cost–benefit calculations, whereby harm to self-interest may outweigh losses in credibility (Schimmelfennig, 2003, p. 222). Commitment to the eventual accession of Ukraine and other candidate states, such as Moldova and Western Balkan candidates, to whom the EU has opened the door in the last year would necessitate major reforms (Dimitrova, 2023).

EU leaders realise that the potential accession of Ukraine could be costly for the Union, and affect its capacity for action, the distribution of voting power under Qualifies Majority Voting (QMV), policies such as the CAP and, by extension, the budget. Discussions of the necessary reforms have been initiated among different configurations of member states. In May 2023, a group of six EU member states raised the issue of further transition from unanimity to qualified majority in foreign policy decision-making (German Federal Foreign Office, 2023).

The discussion around qualified majority voting and the debates on policy reform will reawaken existing tensions between member states. Reforms have a potential for creating delay by opening existing bargains in sensitive areas such as the rule of law, taxation, or defence expenditure. To pre-empt potential escalation, Commission President von der Leyen stressed in her 2023 State of the Union speech that enlargement could proceed even without treaty change (von der Leyen, 2023a). A discussion initiated by the Swedish Minister for EU Affairs suggested to start seeking consensus on

the indispensable reforms – only in policy areas most likely to be affected by enlargement (Swedish Minister for EU Affairs, 2023).

Alternative explanations

What alternative explanations are there for the EU's exceptionally fast turn in supporting Ukraine's steps towards membership? Many have evoked the importance of geopolitical arguments, in previous enlargements and in particular the enlargement to the East. The Baltic states, for example, saw their EU integration as a process that secured their place in a community of democratic states. As former Estonian negotiator Streimann (2007) testifies, 'the Estonian accession process had a strong political component related to foreign policy, although the main driving factor was still the desire to simply become part of a normal, democratic, stable, wealthy community with shared values' (p. 158).

Geopolitical arguments have been paramount in the debate around the West's response to Russia's invasion. Even a cursory exploration of speeches and statements on Ukraine shows that a strong linkage has emerged between the war, security in the EU as a whole and specific member states and Ukraine's bid for EU membership.

There are, however, several reasons why the geopolitical shift alone may be a necessary, but not sufficient to explain the EU's change of direction regarding Ukraine's bid and the revitalisation of the whole enlargement process. First, the geopolitical threat from Russian destabilisation actions as well as increasing Chinese influence were already clearly visible for the EU with respect to the Western Balkans (Mirel, 2019; Mirel & Mirel, 2020). In response, there was a considerable adjustment of the EU's enlargement strategy and approach – the enhanced political steering of enlargement – in 2018 and 2020. Neither adjustment led to speeding up of accession of Western Balkans candidates (Petrovic & Tzifakis, 2021). Serbian Minister for European Integration Miščević attested that the EU has lacked momentum in the Western Balkans. 'The EU did not react as fast as it reacted with Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia two years ago, or now. They missed this type of reaction at the beginning of this century when it comes to the Western Balkans' (Sorgi, 2023).

The EU has been re-examining its geopolitical role since the invasion of the Crimea and in its Global Strategy (European Union, 2016) and Strategic Compass (European Union, 2022), yet its increased geopolitical awareness did not led to speeding up enlargement. Not only with regard to Western Balkan candidates but also with respect to Ukraine, the EU has been reluctant till 2022, even after Ukrainians defended their European choice in the Revolution of Dignity. Politicisation has represented a serious constraint to enlargement (Börzel et al., 2017). There has been a mobilisation by far-right parties on enlargement and association, as illustrated in the defeat in the Dutch referendum on the Association agreement.

A more powerful aspect of an alternative, geopolitics-based explanation is the experience of the war itself. The war has been a painfully immediate illustration of the threat of instability and terrifying vision of human suffering that would continue if the EU (and other Western allies) does not defend its allies. Ukrainian scholar Petrov and his co-author Hillion have suggested the EU engages in 'enlargement through war' defined as a faster, less elaborate enlargement process (Petrov & Hillion, 2022).

However, responding to the Russian aggression is possible without offering membership, as the support offered by the US, UK, Canada and others show. From Ukraine's side, military support and NATO accession have prioritised in terms of security. The EU's decision to take up Ukraine's long-standing request for joining the EU requires more explanation than the geopolitical security imperative.

A tentative approach to explain the shift in the EU's position is to emphasise the linkages between the changed geopolitical context and the arguments of key actors. The importance of rhetorical action, then, lies in the linkage that Ukrainian leaders (and civil society) and their EU interlocutors have made between EU values, Ukraine's defence on the battlefield and enlargement. Compared to other cases of military aggression by Russia, for example in Georgia in 2008 – where such linkage to the defence of democracy has not been so powerfully articulated by Georgian leaders – the EU is reacting with much more decisiveness, internalising the debates about the threat to Ukraine as an existential threat to the EU itself (Tocci, 2023). In other words, it can be argued that the war has been a shock to policy makers that would have certainly led to internal discussions and debates on defence, but it has been Ukraine's pro-active attitude on enlargement and rhetorical action that has provided the ideational framework for a shift in policy that has been in deadlock for a decade.

Community identity and vetoes against the enlargement of the EU and NATO

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The eastern enlargement of the EU not only prompted a new research agenda on theorising EU enlargement (Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2002, 2005b) but also specifically on the role that speech acts, collective identities, and shared community norms played in the enlargement process (Fierke & Wiener, 1999; Schimmelfennig, 2001; Sedelmeier, 1998, 2000, 2005; Sjursen, 2002). While there are certain disagreements within this strand of literature, which pertain largely to the extent to which socialisation into community norms is thick or thin,[1] they appear relatively minor compared to the broad agreement on the importance of collective EU identity for decisions to

enlarge. A key advantage of the 'thinner' version of socialisation underpinning RaR (Schimmelfennig, 2003) is that it lends itself more readily to generalisation and falsifiable empirical expectations. One of the seminal contributions of RaR is to craft from these insights a theoretical framework that not only explains the case of the EU's eastern enlargement of 2004 but is generalisable and testable for other enlargement cases, including the enlargement of other international institutions, such as NATO, that share a strong collective identity as an international 'community of democracies' (Risse-Kappen, 1995).

Twenty years after the publication of RaR, we can, therefore, assess how well this explanatory framework has fared with regard to subsequent enlargement episodes of the EU and NATO and draw out implications for the prospect of further enlargements towards Ukraine and other current candidate states.

Community constraints on vetoing enlargement: hypotheses derived from RaR

At its most basic, a key observable empirical implication of the RaR argument is the absence of a veto to enlargement, even if at least one member state has to fear that the accession of a particular candidate country would leave it worse off than the status quo. At the same time, a more nuanced reading of the RaR argument suggests that simply counting the number of vetoes may produce false negatives: effective community constraints do not rule out the use of a veto. Instead, the RaR argument identifies clear scope conditions for member states to use their veto.

First, a strong community ethos narrows the scope for *legitimate* objections to the accession of a candidate country. Objections to enlargement are legitimate when they are consistent with community norms. In the case of the EU, these community norms have been partly established through accepted practice in subsequent enlargement rounds, and partly codified by the European Council in 1993. These Copenhagen criteria focus on applicant countries' adherence to constitutive values like democracy and the market economy, their ability to comply with membership obligations, and the compatibility of enlargement with making further progress with the integration process. At the same time, the legitimacy of objections to applicant country can vary, depending on the extent to which the community norms on which the objection is based are specific and constitutive to the community. RaR allows us thus to formulate a clear general hypothesis about the conditions under which a veto to enlargement is likely.

> H1: Vetoes to enlargement are limited to objections based on and consistent with community norms and its constitutive values.

Second, the condition of a strong collective identity for effective community constraints does not entirely preclude the possibility of illegitimate vetoes[2] to enlargement. Instead, it highlights the significance of the identity of the

sender of a veto: if a member state diverges from constitutive community values, community constraints become less effective, and it becomes more likely to use the veto for idiosyncratic reasons. In simple terms, the more a member state becomes an outlier in a democratic community, the more likely it is to use the veto for reasons that are incompatible with community norms. RaR then allows us to formulate an expectation about the sender of a veto that does not conform to community norms.

> H2: Only those member states that diverge from the community identity use vetoes against enlargement that cannot be justified on the basis of community norms and constitutive values.

Identifying vetoes in the enlargement processes

The falsifiable expectations about vetoes to enlargement allow us to test RaR against the empirical record of EU and NATO enlargement episodes. At the same time, such a test raises methodological challenges. For a probabilistic assessment, an appropriate metric would be to ask in how many of those instances in which a member state had to fear net losses from the accession of a candidate country this member state actually used the veto. Yet, assessments of actual or perceived net losses from enlargement are methodologically challenging. Moreover, the absence of a veto in such a case may be a false positive. The reason why some member states that fear the loss of membership benefits from enlargement do not cast a formal veto may not be successful entrapment. Instead, they might use the *implicit* threat of a veto as a bargaining strategy to reduce or eliminate such losses. Distributional conflicts in accession negotiations typically result in accession treaties that are highly unfavourable to new member states precisely because their bargaining power is reduced by the high costs of no-agreement. In such cases, the absence of an explicit veto may mask the willingness of incumbents to use the veto if a candidate does not submit to their bargaining position. Yet, such cases may still be considered in line with RaR's expectations: several rounds of EU accession negotiations have arguably established the legitimacy of shifting the burden of adjustment to the newcomers in distributional conflicts about club goods. In view of these difficulties, I focus on episodes of formal vetoes, which should be the clearest cases to disconfirm RaR, and assess whether they are still aligned with RaR.

A further methodological challenge with focusing on veto episodes is that there are different types of vetoes. In principle, vetoes can be used at various stages of an accession process: they can range from blocking an agreement to accept a country formally as a candidate for membership to withholding ratification of an accession treaty, with the possibility of blocking the progress of the accession process at different stages in-between. A veto can also be either categorical or consist of a temporary obstruction of accession

negotiations until the demands of the sender of the veto are met.[3] In the following, I will consider all such forms of an explicit veto against would-be members at all stages of the accession process.[4]

Veto episodes in the enlargement processes of the EU and NATO

My rough assessment of RaR's explanatory power for the use of vetoes in the accession processes of the EU and NATO proceeds as follows: For each veto episode, I provide a brief qualitative assessment of whether the use of the veto is in line with community norms (H1) and whether the sender – the member state using the veto – diverges from the community's liberal democratic identity (H2). On the basis of these considerations, I then summarise whether the case disconfirms the expectations of RaR for the use of the veto. Following this discussion, Table 1 provides an overview of the cases and assessment.

Table 1. Instances of vetoes in enlargement episodes of the EU and NATO.

Veto instance	Target (candidate state)	Sender (member state)	Legitimate objection?	Sender divergence from community identity?	Case consistent with RaR?
EC[a] (accession negotiations)	UK (1963)	France	+/−	−	+/−
EC (accession negotiations)	UK (1967)	France	+/−	−	+/−
NATO (accession)	N. Macedonia (2008–2018)	Greece	−	−	−
EU (start of accession negotiations)	N. Macedonia (2009–2018)	Greece	−	−	−
EU (ongoing accession negotiations)	Croatia (2008–2009)	Slovenia	−	−	−
EU (ongoing accession negotiations)	Türkiye (2009–)	Cyprus	+	−	+
EU (accession negotiations)	N. Macedonia (2019–2020)	France	−	−	−
EU (accession negotiations)	Albania (2019–2020)	France, Denmark, Netherlands	+/−	−	+/−
EU (accession negotiations)	N. Macedonia (2020–2022)	Bulgaria	−	+/−	+/−
NATO (accession)	Sweden (2022–2023)	Türkiye	−	+	+
NATO (accession)	Sweden (2022–2024)	Hungary	−	+	+

Notes: [a]European Communities (EC). +/−: case not clear-cut.

Even if the main question of this contribution is how well RaR explains enlargement episodes since the first post-Cold War enlargements of the EU and NATO, the first, and very high-profile, use of a veto against a would-be member were the successive vetoes by the French President de Gaulle against the UK in the 1960s. While the objections to UK membership were certainly not a clear-cut case of UK non-adherence to constitutive community values, it may be possible to interpret the vetoes at least partly based on community norms. For example, the UK's stance that the Treaty of Rome should be re-negotiated as part of the accession negotiations can be seen as a threat to community rules (the *acquis communautaire*). Moreover, de Gaulle's concern that the UK's accession would break up the community due to its alleged preference for Atlanticism and aversion to the goal of an ever-closer union may be seen as rhetorically aligning the veto with community values.

One of the most protracted veto episodes for both the EU and NATO concerned North Macedonia. In 2008, Greece vetoed the country's accession to NATO, and, in 2009, the start of EU accession negotiations. These vetoes clearly disconfirm RaR's expectations. The veto was not justified on the basis of community norms; Greece used it strategically to extract concessions in the bilateral dispute over the candidate country's use of the name 'Macedonia'. Neither is this a case in which Greece, as the sender of an illegitimate veto, lacks a liberal democratic identity. This episode thus disconfirms RaR's expectations.

Similarly, the subsequent French veto in 2018 to start accession negotiations with North Macedonia, as well as with Albania, after the Greek veto had been lifted, does not fit well with the expectations of RaR. In his call to reform the EU enlargement process before starting accession negotiations, President Macron barely attempted to link the veto to shared community norms. While the French President's reference to the need to strengthen EU institutions and decision-making may go somewhat in that direction, it is less credible as a veto to the start of accession negotiations, which leave much time to address institutional change prior to enlargement. The French veto against Albania's start of accession negotiations was linked with the North Macedonian case, which underlines the motivation as a general opposition to enlargement rather than adherence to Community norms. At the same time, at least with regard to Albania, President Macron referred to insufficient reforms to fight corruption and organised crime, which could be interpreted as an attempt to provide a justification aligned with community values, leading to the Danish and Dutch governments supporting the veto against Albania.

Bulgaria's veto against North Macedonia in 2020 also has to be considered illegitimate with regard to community norms. This veto against the start of EU accession negotiations was designed to obtain North Macedonian

acquiescence to Bulgarian demands – e.g., for constitutional guarantees for the rights of the Bulgarian minority and concerning the distinctiveness of (North) Macedonian language and identity. However, what could possibly save the RaR expectation from disconfirmation is the questionable liberal democratic identity of the Bulgarian government at the time. Although democracy in Bulgaria was not as defective as in Poland, Hungary, or Turkey, it was among the most problematic cases in the EU based on most indicators (see, e.g., Sedelmeier, 2024).

A similar episode of using the veto as bargaining leverage in a bilateral dispute was Slovenia's blocking of new chapters in accession negotiations with Croatia in 2008 over a maritime border dispute. This case clearly disconfirms RaR's expectation as the veto could not be justified with Community norms, nor did Slovenia lack a liberal democratic identity.

Other veto episodes are more straightforward to reconcile with RaR. Cyprus used its veto to block the opening of several new chapters in the accession negotiations with Türkiye in 2009. Yet, the justification for the veto aligns with Community norms, namely the non-recognition of Cyprus as a state, leading to Türkiye's failure to apply its association agreement to Cyprus. Due to Türkiye's continued backsliding on the EU's constitutive liberal democracy values, the EU Council has decided to freeze the negotiations from 2018.

The vetoes against Sweden's accession to NATO by Türkiye and Hungary from 2022 to 2023 and 2024 respectively also fit with the expectations of RaR. Turkey's veto did not pertain to legitimate objections compatible with community norms but served to put pressure on Sweden to clamp down domestically on the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), on the US to authorise the sale of F-16 fighter jets, and on the EU to pave the way to Turkish EU (Wintour, 2023). The Hungarian government did not even provide any substantive justification for its initial refusal to ratify Swedish membership, although it explained to its domestic audience that it responded to Swedish criticism of the state of democracy in Hungary (Dunai & Milne, 2023). Yet these vetoes are fully compatible with RaR's expectations that the senders of such an illegitimate veto diverge strongly from NATO's liberal democratic collective identity.

Discussion and conclusion
On balance, the overview of instances of vetoes against EU and NATO enlargements provides partial support for the expectations of RaR. Some cases are clearly consistent with the expectations of RaR, either because the veto was justified with regard to community norms (e.g., the Cypriot veto during Turkey's EU accession negotiations) or because the senders of an illegitimate veto diverged from the liberal democratic community identity (e.g., Turkey and Hungary's blocking of Sweden's NATO accession). For several other

cases, it is less clear-cut that they align with RaR's expectations, but it is not implausible. Yet, four cases appear to contradict the expectations: the separate vetoes against North Macedonia by Greece, France, and Bulgaria, and the veto by Slovenia against Croatia. On balance, it appears that while RaR still has significant explanatory power, the community constraints on opposition to enlargement are looser than expected. One reason why these constraints are loosening is entirely consistent with the explanatory logic of RaR. The strength of the liberal democratic identities of the EU and NATO is decreasing as several member states diverge sharply from these constitutive values. A further reason that RaR did not consider is reflected in the French veto against opening accession negotiations with North Macedonia and Albania: the increasing domestic politicisation of enlargement in the member states. Although public opinion towards the 2004 enlargement in the member states was also fairly negative, governments largely ignored it. By contrast, elites now appear much more vulnerable to populist mobilisation of opposition to enlargement.

These observations have mixed implications for the accession prospects of the current candidate countries. On the one hand, the EU's formal recognition of the candidate status for Ukraine, Moldova, and Bosnia–Herzegovina is a significant step, as it raises the argumentative requirements for member states that might want to delay these countries' accession processes. Moreover, geopolitics now serve as an additional constraint on opposition to enlargement. On the other hand, greater deficiencies concerning constitutive community values and more severe distributional conflicts regarding club goods make these accessions more challenging both from a norm-based and an interest-based perspective. Moreover, the ban on grain imports from Ukraine by Poland, Hungary, and Slovakia in September 2023 does not bode well for hopes that the geopolitical impetus can be used by governments to silence domestic parochial interests that fear the distributional consequences of enlargement. From an RaR perspective, the worst-case scenario is that geopolitical imperatives will instead make the EU compromise on its constitutive liberal democratic values when faced with deficiencies in candidate countries.

'Rules and Rhetoric' in a changing international order: views from the margins

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What changes when the normative environment from which rhetorical action draws becomes contested from without and from within? Put differently, how well does Frank Schimmelfennig's theory of rhetorical action travel beyond the heydays of the Liberal International Order (LIO)? This brief contribution

approaches Frank Schimmelfennig's 'Rules and Rhetoric' (RaR) from the margins of the LIO. The focus is on two very different outsiders who share a legitimate claim towards the Western community but challenge its post-national tenets from without and from within: post-soviet European countries and non-European refugees. In so doing, this contribution highlights dialectics of inclusion and exclusion that were less salient in 2003 but that are inherent in any integration theory based on collective identity. These dialectics point at the boundaries of European community formation and, eventually, of its post-national foundations.

We start by contextualising the notion of the Western international community as a resource and constraint for strategic action. We then confront the theory with the case of post-soviet European countries and non-European refugees. In the conclusion, we concede that Frank Schimmelfennig's most recent work on boundary formation already provides an answer to the point we want to make but insist on asking what this entails for the fabric of European community building.

Liberalism and the Western international community

Developed in the late 1990s/ early 2000s to explain EU and NATO enlargement, and intellectually rooted in the scholarly debates between upcoming constructivists and mainstream rationalists (see Risse in this debate section), RaR sets out to demonstrate the power of liberal values and norms in key political decisions of the time. Against mainstream rationalist IR theories, Frank Schimmelfennig takes the constructivist and sociological focus on inter-subjective cultural and ideational structures seriously (Schimmelfennig, 2003, p. 68ff.). The EU's and NATO's normative environment is identified in the 'Western international community'. This environment provides a powerful resource for pro-enlargement actors to shame opponents into acquiescence. Even if the strategic actors do not believe in the norms they invoke, they derive influence from the legitimacy these norms enjoy as part of the community's collective identity (Schimmelfennig, 2001, p. 63).

Frank Schimmelfennig defines the 'Western international community' as based on liberal values; it combines a post-national or civic identity with the adherence to universalistic norms (Schimmelfennig, 2003, p. 80). Universalism is rooted in the liberal notion of human rights 'that are at the center of the Western international community's political culture' (Schimmelfennig, 2001, p. 59; 2002, p. 248). These features imply that the 'Western international community' is inherently expansive: its members perceive its norms as being 'the only legitimate principles of political order or conduct'. Therefore, 'the liberal community seeks to expand its membership by disseminating its values and norms' (Schimmelfennig, 2003, p. 80). Importantly, Frank Schimmelfennig specifies that the liberal post-national community differs from what Cederman (2001) coins a 'pan-national community' (pp. 13–14): in

contrast to the latter, which mobilises essentialist, therefore exclusive notions of common descent or nationhood, post-national community building renounces to historical, symbolic, or cultural attributes of ethnic identity (Habermas, 2001). Post-national identity formation is therefore contrasted with the history of nation states that heavily relied on essentialist assumptions of common descent or ethnicity (Smith, 1991). For Frank Schimmelfennig, this means that the post-national liberal Western community is open to outsiders who share its norms and values, it thus is 'acquirable' (Schimmelfennig, 2003, p. 80). This alleged openness conceals the fact that any process of community or identity-building necessarily implies processes of exclusion and boundary formation (Cederman, 2001, p. 5ff.), including in its post-national posture (Diez, 2004; Neumann, 1999; Rumelili, 2004).

Twenty years after the publication of RaR, power transitions, newly flared ideological conflicts, the crisis of the LIO, and, at the theoretical level, the interrogation of Eurocentric or Western-centric worldviews shift the focus on 'the rest' (Bhambra, 2022; Nicolaïdis & Youngs, 2023; Zarakol, 2019). This includes the repercussions of Western/European community building for those states and individuals who want but cannot join the club and those international powers and community formations that compete with the Western international community. Contextualising the Western/European order in its wider international environment points at its boundaries and externalities. It also raises the question of the reverse effects of a more conflictual international environment on its constitutive norms and values.

Challenges from without and from within

If the recent history of EU and NATO enlargement has taught us anything, it is to abandon the presumption that rhetorical action is benign. It is benign in the sense that it occurs within a community of shared values and is, therefore, aimed at entrapping insiders with their own commitments. This seems all the more benign given that it occurs within a liberal community with universalist ideals. As Antoaneta L. Dimitrova vividly shows, Ukrainian President Zelenskyy's appeals to Western support against the aggressor and his claim to EU membership emphasise the rhetoric of European identity. And indeed, as the Central and Eastern European countries before, Ukraine is legitimate to do so. The EU's founding documents and enlargement discourses underline the pan-European vocation of the integration project (Schimmelfennig, 2003, pp. 193–194). In contrast to the EU's 2004 enlargement, however, when European leaders still believed in the triumph of liberalism, including timidly democratising Russia, today's geopolitical undertone is unmistakable. The widespread perception that Russia was 'a country that had terminated the Soviet legacy of enmity to the West and sought a cooperative relationship including institutionalised relations with Western organizations' (Schimmelfennig, 2003, p. 41) has been proven wrong. For EU member states

opposed to the accession of Ukraine or other post-Soviet states, conceding to rhetorical entrapment today means more than overcoming fears of costly repercussions in terms of agricultural subsidies, voting power in EU institutions, or, more importantly, consequences for the supranational aspirations of the European project (Schimmelfennig, 2003, p. 164ff.). The decision to enlarge is a stance in an ongoing war with Russia, and rhetorical entrapment is an ideological stance against the counter-community that Russia and, possibly, alleged allies seek to impose.

Of course, one would be mistaken to believe that Frank Schimmelfennig's theory of rhetorical action has ever been naïve. Far from that. RaR clearly posits that strategic actors may leverage community norms to mask other, perhaps more self-serving, rational interests. In Frank Schimmelfennig's words: 'political actors do not take the cultural values and norms institutionalised in their international environment for granted or internalise them but rather regard them as external constraints on, or resources for, domestically motivated action' (Schimmelfennig, 2002, p. 420). From this point of view, the seemingly bright moral appeal of rhetorical action has always kept the door open for the dark side of politics. Still, the belligerent entrapment of enlargement discourses today and the new ideological contest between the Western liberal order and rising authoritarianism from Russia to China and beyond have implications for rhetorical action. Rhetorical action will either be fuelled or inhibited; in any case, this will impact the fabric of Europe's imagined community. Much like the European peace project, the Western international community has been imagined from within. Perhaps it is time today to also consider it from without (Lavenex & Öberg, 2023).

The altered geopolitical context challenges the Western international order from without. The figure of the refugee, like, more broadly, the phenomenon of populism and post-truism (Risse in this debate section), challenges it from within. Based on the norms of the Western international community, refugees who fulfil the criteria for being recognised as such have a legitimate claim to protection in the EU. This claim is rooted in EU member states' and the EU's liberal commitments as anchored in the 1951 Geneva Convention, the European Convention of Human Rights, the EU Human Rights Charter, the EU asylum directives, or national laws and constitutions. Rhetorical action from the inter-war period onwards and corresponding treaties and laws have constructed the notion of refugee protection as a constitutive norm of liberal statehood and international society (Hurrell, 2011). 'Normative power Europe' (Manners, 2001) no exception. Notwithstanding its initially limited mandate in the matter, the EU has developed an ambitious common European asylum system. The crux is that the EU, driven by domestic politicisation and populist movements, has at the same time heavily invested in dispositions that effectively preclude access to this liberal asylum system. A look at the root factors of forced migration, including

persecution, wars and environmental degradation, suggests that immigration pressure will remain high – exacerbating the demand for stricter external borders and circumscribing support for liberal asylum and human rights norms. The official coexistence of rhetorical action calling upon liberal norms – which, as Frank Schimmelfennig shows, are engrained in the EU's DNA – and strategic action undermining these norms introduces a new twist to the theory. The EU is rhetorically entrapped in the sense that it cannot but declare truth to its normative ambition. As Frank Schimmelfennig (2002) argues, however, 'it is in national settings that the most important and powerful political offices are allocated (e.g., through elections). Thus, political actors will usually be more responsive to domestic demands and pressures than to international norms and obligations' (p. 420). The result of these tensions between the community's liberal identification and contrasting strategic priorities is 'organized hypocrisy' (Brunsson, 1989; Lavenex, 2018), the decoupling of normative ambition and political action. These double standards challenge the Western international community from within. They not only question the EU's credibility, a necessary condition for rhetorical action (Schimmelfennig, 2003, p. 220). They also show how agency can subvert and eventually alter the normative structures in which the political drama unfolds.

Conclusion

Twenty years after the publication of RaR, the causal mechanisms of rhetorical action theory remain indispensable in helping scholars puzzle through what is driving enlargement today. What has changed, however, is their ideational foundation, our understanding of the Western international order. As illustrated by the case of geopolitical enlargement and organised hypocrisy in EU policy making, in 2024, the Western international order is contested from without and from within. The question that remains is what repercussions this contestation will have on the fabric of the Western international order. Frank Schimmelfennig (2003) opens the door to the possibility of change in the normative environment when he writes that 'liberal identity is acquirable and changeable. Neither adherence to liberal values and norms, nor their rejection, is regarded as "natural" or "immutable" characteristic of a state' (Schimmelfennig, 2003, p. 80) – or, for our purpose, the EU.

Without engaging in an agent-structure debate, it seems plausible that both geopolitical enlargement and organised hypocrisy have implications for the normative substance of the Western international community. The framing of Russian President Vladimir Putin's brutal war against Ukraine as a war against the European liberal order may fuel European societies' identification with this order. History, however, has shown that war and the forming of political collectivities often go together but hardly in post-national terms (Wimmer, 2012). Rather, war tends to fuel essentialist feelings and politics.

This may reinforce existing tendencies towards inward-looking identity politics in 'postfunctionalist' societies (Hooghe & Marks, 2009). Or it may rally identities around the EU flag, seemingly reinforcing the shared normative environment. In substantive terms, however, both options are likely to strengthen essentialist (pan-)national over post-national connotations in the making of collective identities. This is because geopolitical enlargement is primarily about securing post-soviet states' sovereignty, nationhood, and territorial integrity. These are of course legitimate causes under a liberal international community as is the desire to belong to Europe. The emphasis on territory, nation, and sovereignty, however, which was also very much present in the 2004/2007 enlargements, is not without tension with the EU's supranational vocation.

Similar questions arise from the EU's increasingly manifest incapacity to live up to its normative commitments in the case of refugee and migration policy. Organised hypocrisy marks the opposite of rhetorical action in so far as it consists in decoupling normative rhetoric from strategic action. If one believes in the power of normative environments, as RaR suggests, then this decoupling indicates that strategic action may no longer be empowered and constrained by the norms of the international community. Or it unveils contradictions and limitations that are inherent to the normative environment but were masked by a propitious strategic, geopolitical environment before. In our case, these limitations have to do with the Cold War context, sustaining strategic interests in refugee policy, and manageable numbers of asylum seekers. The comparably smooth intake of Ukrainian refugees in times when EU member states raise fences against non-European refugees recalls the mutually reinforcing effect of geopolitical context, ideational environment, and political action. At its core, the figure of the refugee discloses the structural tension between the particularism of the sovereign territorial order based on statehood and the universalism of human rights embedded in the LIO (Simmons & Goemans, 2021). This structural tension is inherent in an international community abiding to liberal standards. It may, in situations of external pressure, generate a dynamic of endogenous contestation exposing inconsistencies in the liberal order (Goddard *et al.*, 2024; Lavenex, 2024).

In sum, both geopolitical enlargement and the EU's difficulties in living up to its liberal standards emphasise the primacy of sovereignty and territory in unprecedented ways. This raises the question of the boundaries of the European project – and indeed, Frank Schimmelfennig's latest work addresses precisely this question of boundary formation (FreudIsperger & Schimmelfennig, 2023; Schimmelfennig, 2021). Without a doubt, this research will yield important insights into the dimensions and dynamics of bordering, as well as its repercussions on the European normative environment. Perhaps we will see more rhetorical action around the notion of protecting/promoting

'Our European way of life' (Foret & Trino, 2023). Or we will see more differentiated integration (Schimmelfennig & Winzen, 2020). Or a generally more intergovernmental Europe. In either case, the post-national tenets of the Western international community are under pressure.

'Rules and Rhetoric' twenty years on: deep contestations of the liberal international order

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Schimmelfennig's 'Rules and Rhetoric' has been a path-breaking contribution: theoretically with regard to our understanding of the effects of discursive action on state behaviour and empirically concerning our knowledge about NATO and EU enlargement at the beginning of the century (Schimmelfennig, 2003; see also Schimmelfennig, 1995, 2001, 2005). Today, some of RaR's underlying and implicit assumptions are becoming clearer, particularly since these presuppositions can no longer be taken for granted. For instance, RaR assumes that state actors believe in the legitimacy of an order, be it national, regional, or international (Schimmelfennig calls it 'community ethos', see his contribution in this debate section). Members of a liberal community become rhetorically entrapped when non-members and their supporters convince them through words and action that they deserve community membership since they share the characteristics of the community, e.g., as fellow liberal democracies and market economies. Twenty years on, this mechanism still appears to work, at least to some extent, see the recent EU candidate status for Ukraine and Moldova (see Dimitrova in this debate section).

However, this is my first argument in the following, the liberal order on which Schimmelfennig's empirical argument rests is now deeply contested, both inside and outside liberal communities, by autocratic and illiberal regimes (from Hungary to Turkey, Russia and China) as well as authoritarian right-wing populism in various liberal democracies (from the Trump-dominated Republican party in the US to France's *Rassemblement National* and Germany's *Alternative für Deutschland*; on authoritarian populism see Norris and Inglehart (2019) and Schäfer and Zürn (2021)). The goal is no longer to become community members but to undermine the community itself. Worse, these actors contest a liberal epistemology based on a truth regime according to which truth claims can be adjudicated through some common standards of evaluation, however contested they might be (Adler & Drieschova, 2021). As a result, the resilience of the LIO (see e.g., Lake *et al.*, 2021b; Wiener *et al.*, forthcoming) including regional orders such as the EU, is now at stake.

My second point is that the contemporary contestations point to ontological and epistemological commitments on which Schimmelfennig's

arguments rest, namely that international cooperation is preferable to a 'dog eat dog' world and that we can distinguish lies and 'fake news' from commitments to truthful statements. More generally, these assumptions have been taken for granted by both rational choice and social constructivism during the debates of the 1990s and early 2000s. This is no longer the case.

Third, does this mean that the arguments developed in RaR and elsewhere are increasingly irrelevant for understanding the contemporary international (dis-)order, including regional integration and the EU? I do not think so. Deep contestations are not the end of the LIO including the EU as we know them. The resilience of an order strongly depends on its defenders and their persuasiveness as well as its ability to deliver on its promises.

I proceed in two steps. First, I reconstruct Schimmelfennig's approach and identify the assumptions on which RaR and the larger debates to which it contributed, are based. Second, I ask what RaR and the related debates have to contribute to understanding the contemporary deep contestations of the LIO – and where the limits are.

'Rules and Rhetoric' between rational choice and social constructivism

Schimmelfennig understands rhetorical action as the instrumental or strategic use of arguments and justifications to convince others of the legitimacy of a particular course of action or policy. In his empirical studies, advocates of CEE countries' NATO and EU membership successfully appealed to opponents that these countries, after their transition from communism, rightfully belonged to the community of liberal democracies (see Sedelmeier in this debate section).

On the one hand, CEE countries and their supporters inside NATO and the EU were instrumentally or strategically motivated in their use of arguments supporting membership. This is the rational choice part of Schimmelfennig's approach (see also Schimmelfennig in this debate section). For RaR, it is irrelevant whether the supporters of enlargement believe in their own rhetoric. In the case of NATO, e.g., the Baltic states and Poland might have simply wanted to join to protect themselves against future Russian aggression (a not completely irrational interest given what happened in the Russian periphery from the mid-2000s on).

On the other hand, however, the success of their rhetorical action depended crucially on whether the opponents of Eastern enlargement shared the community identity of the club of liberal democracies. At a minimum, they needed to be concerned about their own reputation as community members. Accordingly, they had to agree that the new democracies qualified for membership as 'part of us', i.e., liberal democracies, and, thus, that they had to live up to their previous commitments. This is the 'rhetorical entrapment' part of Schimmelfennig's approach. Rhetorical entrapment is successful if community members share a certain logic of appropriateness

(March & Olsen, 1989, 1998) and are socialised in the community norms, including the community's identity. Otherwise, they would be unable to evaluate the rhetorical arguments as legitimate. RaR assumes at least what Checkel called 'type 1' socialisation, that is, the knowledge and adoption of particular community roles irrespective of whether one believes in their validity or not (the latter would be 'type 2' or deep socialisation (see Checkel, 2005)). For rhetorical entrapment to work, socialisation in community norms – however 'thin' or 'type 1' – must be able to override other instrumental interests (such as: 'Is it really in our security interest to risk the survival of Western Europe in defence of some tiny Baltic states bordering to Russia?'). This is the social constructivist or sociological institutionalist part of rhetorical action.[5]

Thus, Schimmelfennig attempted to integrate the study of norms and their impact in a rational choice framework broadly defined. He recognised that the IR social constructivists of the 1990s were correct in arguing that social norms and collective identities mattered in international politics (foundational texts are, e.g., Kratochwil and Ruggie (1986); Kratochwil (1989); Onuf (1989); see also Katzenstein (1996)).

At the same time, Schimmelfennig responded to a particular debate in social constructivist IR at the time, namely the so-called ZIB debate in German-language IR.[6] In 1994, Müller introduced Habermas' theory of communicative action and the logic of arguing and persuasion to the IR community of scholars (Müller, 1994). A debate of about ten years followed (see Schimmelfennig (1997) for his contribution; see also Risse (2000)).

Schimmelfennig's RaR and related works aimed to overcome the paradigmatic warfare between rational choice and social constructivism of the 1990s and early 2000s. It was often overlooked at the time that both sides of the debate shared normative and epistemological fundamentals: First, there was a normative commitment to what is now called a 'liberal international order' (or LIO), at least implicitly. Cooperation theories tried to understand how and under what conditions international coordination and collaboration (including regional cooperation) were possible 'under anarchy' in order to solve collective action problems and deal with the global commons (see, e.g., the different approaches exemplified by Oye (1986) and Keohane (1984), on the one hand, and Onuf (1989) as well as Kratochwil (1989), on the other). At least implicitly, international cooperation and integration were deemed preferable over a 'dog eat dog' world of (structural) realism in which 'might makes right'.

Second, and perhaps more importantly, rational choice, as well as social constructivist scholars, shared an epistemological commitment to the possibility that truth and validity claims can be adjudicated and evaluated by reference to some commonly shared methodological standards, however fragile, preliminary, and time-bound such claims are. In short, there was a general

commitment to a liberal truth regime (Adler & Drieschova, 2021). Even more significant, this commitment extended to assumptions about actors 'in the real world'. Schimmelfennig's rhetorical action and the concept of rhetorical entrapment do not work in a world outside a liberal truth regime (see below).

Both epistemological assumptions and normative commitments are deeply contested today. What does this mean for rhetorical action?

Twenty years on: deep contestations of the LIO and rhetorical action

Twenty years after RaR was published, we live in a paradoxical world. On the one hand, the LIO has been enormously successful: The open world economy has lifted millions out of poverty, particularly in Asia, including China. Income and wealth inequalities between states have decreased (even though they have increased within countries). Human rights conditions have improved across the world, particularly if one controls for the fact that our information about human rights violations has drastically improved while human rights standards have increased everywhere, thus 'moving the goalposts' (see Sikkink, 2017). The recent democratic backlash notwithstanding, there have never been fewer full-fledged autocracies in history. And this success story includes the EU. EU and NATO enlargements have been huge successes, particularly for the new member states and the liberal promises of welfare and peace (see various contributions in this debate section). The EU has been through a 'perma-crisis' (Börzel, 2023) – and has been strengthened along the way – from the euro crisis in the early 2010s to the migration challenges to Brexit and Covid-19 (Börzel & Risse, 2018, 2019; Heermann et al., 2023). It has offered candidate status to Ukraine, Moldova, and even Georgia while speeding up the accession negotiations with selected Western Balkan states.

On the other hand, the fundamentals of the LIO are deeply contested (Lake et al., 2021a; Wiener et al., forthcoming). Russia's aggression against Ukraine has destroyed the post-Cold War European security and peace order. It has violated the LIO's as well as the territorial state-based order's core principles of national sovereignty, territorial integrity, and the prohibition against wars of aggression enshrined in the United Nations (UN) Charter. China, while being deeply ambivalent about the LIO, particularly its linkage of an open international economy to a rule-based international order, is trying to build a counter-alliance against the allegedly Western-dominated LIO. Other rising powers such as India, Brazil, and South Africa – all at least 'electoral democracies' according to Varieties-of-Democracy (V-Dem) standards – are sitting on the fence trying to figure out how to deal with the 'West' and a rising China. Even more significantly, the LIO is deeply contested by authoritarian or right-wing populism inside core liberal states (Norris & Inglehart, 2019; Schäfer & Zürn, 2021). The US is more polarised than ever, with half of the political spectrum captured by Trumpist illiberalism (Börzel et al., 2024). On the other side of the Atlantic, the EU incorporates at least one

electoral autocracy (Hungary), and right-wing populism is on the rise almost everywhere, including in core states such as France (*Rassemblement National*) and Germany (*Alternative für Deutschland*).

What does this mean for rhetorical action, given its strong reliance on the legitimacy of liberal order(s)? First, there is the ugly side of rhetorical action: Schimmelfennig's actors twenty years ago used rhetoric to become members of a liberal order, thereby strengthening its legitimacy (whether willingly or not). Today, rhetorical actors such as Vladimir Putin, Donald Trump, or Victor Orbán often use liberal rhetoric not to strengthen the order but to undermine it. For instance, Putin 'justified' the invasion of Ukraine as an effort to protect the human rights of Russians in the country. Orbán refers to collective self-determination to safeguard Hungarian sovereignty against the intrusions of Brussels. In sum, rhetorical action is used to destroy the liberal order, not to appeal to some liberal 'community ethos' (see Schimmelfennig in this debate section).

Second, the contemporary contestations point to the limits of 'rhetorical entrapment': Actors who do not accept the legitimacy of an order or do not have reputational concerns with regard to the order cannot be 'entrapped' in it. The EU can remind Hungary's Orbán of their commitments to the rule of law for as long as it wants to – to no avail. Or take Finland's and Sweden's accession to NATO: These countries' efforts at rhetorical entrapment had no impact on Türkiye and Hungary, the two holdouts. The deals struck in the end were purely transactional – with Türkiye adding one demand after the other.

Third, and perhaps most importantly, the liberal truth regime on which the success of rhetorical action is based, is itself contested (Adler & Drieschova, 2021). In a world of 'fake news', misinformation, disinformation, and 'post-truth', we enter the realm of epistemological insecurity since we have to assume that we all lie to each other or that we live in different 'realities'. If we do not assume anymore that our counterparts mean what they say (and vice versa), no meaningful communication is possible. If the liberal truth regime outlined above is gone, actors can no longer intersubjectively reach a common ground in their communications and make credible commitments. The 'post-truth' world is a world of aliens in the true sense of the word. Schimmelfennig's 'rhetorical entrapment' is no longer possible in such a world.

But there is a paradoxical catch: Propaganda, lies, and disinformation still assume that at least parts of the audiences continue to believe in a liberal truth regime, even if the rhetoric tries to destroy exactly that regime. The Putins, Trumps, and Erdogans of the world must assume that their audiences still believe that there is some truth and some legitimacy to be found. Rhetorical actors might lie (see Schimmelfennig in this debate section), but they can only entrap audiences that still believe in some truth regimes, if only for

reputational reasons (the desire to be part of a community). The crowds celebrating Donald Trump at his 'Make America Great Again' rallies appear to truly believe that the liberal order is rotten in its core. In a wicked way then, they are committed to a liberal truth regime. If we were truly in a 'post-truth world', rhetorical action can no longer be successful.

Russian President Vladimir Putin is a case in point: His lies, disinformation, and 'fake news' have resulted in a situation in which almost nobody in his neighbourhood and outside Russia itself trusts him or the Russian government any longer that they are willing or able to keep their word. This makes even simple transactions very difficult if credible commitments can no longer be made. Brute force is the only means at Putin's disposal.

Conclusions: the resilience of the LIO

This contribution tried, first, to re-construct Schimmelfennig's argument about rhetorical action between rational choice and social constructivism. Second, I argued that the LIO and its legitimacy to which the rhetorical actors in RaR appealed, is now itself deeply contested. Today's rhetorical actors – whether illiberal right-wing populists on either side of the Atlantic or some autocrats in Russia and elsewhere (China is a more complex case) – try to destroy the LIO rather than become part of it. Third, the liberal truth regime as the LIO's epistemology is itself contested through 'fake news', outright lies, and disinformation. But RaR still has a point: Liars can only be successful if at least part of their audience still believes that truth can be had.

This leads me to a more hopeful conclusion: The social mechanisms identified by Schimmelfennig in RaR still work in a world in which the legitimacy of the LIO including its regional components, such as the EU, is deeply contested. Such contestation need not be the end of the world as we know it. Rather, it crucially depends on how the defenders of the order react to the contestations, including the violation of its constitutive rules. Do they let those intent on destroying the order get away with it, or do they defend the order, both materially and ideationally, using counterarguments? Rhetorical action can be matched by counter-rhetoric to sway those in the audience who remain undecided about whom to follow. Concerning the LIO and the many 'fence-sitters' in the international community (e.g., those states abstaining in the UN General Assembly who did not follow Western states in the condemnation of Russia's invasion), one can (and should) try to rhetorically entrap them by reminding them of their commitments to a rule-based international order. With regard to the deep contestations of authoritarian populists at home, rhetorical entrapment might still be successful in convincing the many undecided voters who are frustrated with the policies but remain committed to liberal values.[7] Silencing the debates, avoiding politicisation, or – worse – adopting right-wing populist language by mainstream parties

will not work (May & Czymara, 2024; on politicisation in the European public sphere see Risse, 2015). There has been an impressive mobilisation of civil society in many European countries in defence of a liberal order including Central Eastern Europa (Blackington *et al.*, 2024). In Poland, voters succeeded in kicking authoritarian populism out of power. To paraphrase Mark Twain, reports about the LIO's death might be greatly exaggerated.

Rules and Rhetoric 20 years after: testing the boundaries of Europe's liberal international community

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The EU, NATO and the Integration of Europe. Rules and Rhetoric (RaR) (Schimmelfennig, 2003) was written in a specific political and academic context. Politically, this was the post-Cold War period of democratisation, dynamic European integration, and expansion of the LIO. Academically, the debate between rationalism and social constructivism was de rigueur not only in International Relations (IR) but had also reached the study of European integration (Christiansen *et al.*, 1999).

RaR contributed to both themes. It proposed an account of the enlargement of the EU and NATO, the most relevant regional organisations of Europe's liberal international community, to Central and Eastern Europe. Often described as the 'EU's most successful foreign policy', enlargement proved to be the most profound venue for the LIO to expand in Europe. Yet, it had remained a marginal topic in theory-guided studies of European integration. Moreover, RaR put forward a synthetic theoretical approach arguing how actors with self-centred material preferences (as assumed in IR rationalism) may converge on a negotiation outcome reflecting collective identities, values, and norms (as posited by IR constructivism).

The proposed mechanism was 'rhetorical action' and 'rhetorical entrapment' (Schimmelfennig, 2003, pp. 199–225). Actors whose (egoistic) preferences happen to be in line with the constitutive ideas of the community in which the negotiation takes place strategically use arguments that are based on the identity, values, and norms of the community to strengthen the legitimacy of their claims. At the same time, they name, shame, and blame those actors whose preferences contradict the community ethos. To gain or preserve a reputation as members of the community, those actors feel compelled to act in conformance with their prior normative commitments to the community. In essence, rhetorical action and entrapment provide micro-foundations for how international institutions develop in line with the identity, values, and norms of the communities that underpin them. At the same time, the effects of rhetorical entrapment depend on structural conditions that can be subsumed under the 'strength of international

community', i.e., the extent to which the community ethos is clearly defined and internally consistent, states are committed to it, and the subject matter of the negotiation is regulated by the community ethos.

Both the political and the academic context have thoroughly changed since the book was published. The LIO has been challenged and contested from within liberal states and organisations and by its international detractors (Lake *et al.*, 2021b). The EU has been plagued by 'enlargement fatigue', accepted a single new member state (Croatia) after the 2004/2007 enlargement, and kept the remaining Southeast and East European membership hopefuls in limbo. Moreover, IR and integration theory have long moved past the rationalism-constructivism debate. Correspondingly, all contributions to the debate section address the issue of the continued relevance of RaR.

In doing so, they kindly pass over the hard (meta)theoretical questions that RaR was confronted with at the time, such as: Is this rather a rationalist or, in the end, more of a constructivist argument? To what extent do the actors have to internalise and truly believe in the community ethos for rhetorical entrapment to work? (Thomas Risse offers an excellent answer to this question in his contribution.) How do we know whether the use of arguments is strategic or sincere? Can you adduce any direct, actor-level evidence for the rhetorical entrapment mechanism? Nor do the contributions to the debate section question the book's analysis of post-Cold War EU and NATO enlargement – even Ulrich Sedelmeier's otherwise scathing critique finds no disconfirming evidence for this period. Instead, they focus on the real-world relevance of liberal rhetorical action beyond the post-Cold War heyday of Europe's liberal international community. Though the international situation '20 Years After' is thankfully not as dire as in the science-fiction movie of the same name, the contestations of the LIO are so severe that – given the pivotal importance of community strength for the theory – RaR might simply have fallen out of time. The debate section, therefore, offers a welcome opportunity to test the boundaries of Europe's liberal international community and rhetorical action.

Rhetorical action, membership norms, and enlargement

Rhetorical action is by no means specifically tailored to the 'widening' of international communities but can be equally applied to their 'deepening', i.e., as a strategy to achieve internal reforms, such as parliamentarisation and the institutionalisation of human rights, in line with the constitutive values and norms of the community (Rittberger, 2005; Rittberger & Schimmelfennig, 2006; Schimmelfennig, 2010). At the same time, RaR does not claim that rhetorical action is the only relevant mechanism of these processes. Different theories apply to different stages of the EU's parliamentarisation process (Rittberger, 2012). If the general decision to enlarge to the East resulted from rhetorical action, the further process was shaped by accession

conditionality (Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2005a) and intergovernmental bargaining about the terms of accession (Schneider, 2009). Moreover, Daniel Thomas describes how the membership norms of the EU have changed over time. Whereas liberal democratic membership norms have only gradually established themselves since the 1960s, the post-2005 period saw the breakdown of the liberal-democratic consensus amidst discussions about absorption capacity and religious culture as well as domestic politicisation (Thomas, 2021).

The historicisation of the liberal membership norm goes some way to explain the many deviant cases that Ulrich Sedelmeier identifies in his contribution, which either occurred before the liberal democratic membership norm was established or after the liberal democratic consensus on membership had broken down. Moreover, Sedelmeier's findings depend on a specific case selection – formal vetoes of individual member states – which are rare events in the EU enlargement process. For one, member states often express their opposition to further steps in the enlargement process informally during intergovernmental deliberations and negotiations. At this point, EU institutions refrain from advancing to decisions that individual member states could formally veto. In addition, the member states collectively have made numerous decisions – at least once every year – against granting a state a membership perspective or candidate status, and against the opening, expansion, or conclusion of accession negotiations. Some of these decisions, such as the persistent refusal of the EU to grant Ukraine and other Eastern European countries a membership perspective, would add to Sedelmeier's catalogue of disconfirming cases. Many others, however, could be justified as refusals of liberal democratic countries to advance the accession of countries that fail to meet liberal democratic standards. The full picture would also have to include positive enlargement decisions and check whether these were in line with the EU's liberal-democratic standards. RaR includes a quantitative analysis showing a systematic association between candidates' level of democracy and their inclusion in the EU and NATO (Schimmelfennig, 2003, pp. 112–151) until the early 2000s. It would be useful to replicate this analysis for the past 20 years to see whether the pattern still holds.

The question remains whether the breakdown of the liberal-democratic consensus is compatible with the RaR explanation of enlargement. Indeed, several conditions of the post-2005 period weakened the rhetorical entrapment mechanism. The rhetorical trap the more likely snaps shut, the better the candidate countries conform to the community standards for membership and the more the opponents of enlargement are committed to the community and its norms. First, the Southeast and East European post-2004 applicants have never reached the same level of liberal democracy as the Central European candidates at the time of accession (Börzel & Schimmelfennig, 2017, p. 282). Already the accession of Bulgaria and Romania was accompanied by growing doubts about their fitness for membership.

Democratic backsliding in Hungary and Poland further increased concerns. That individual member states oppose enlargement for reasons that have nothing to do with the community norms is entirely compatible with the rhetorical action approach, but to overcome this 'illegitimate' opposition, the supporters of enlargement need to demonstrate that the candidates fulfil the standards of the community. This argument became a harder sell in the post-2005 period.

Second, the 2005 referendums on the Constitutional Treaty, especially the one in France, signalled that enlargement had become a salient and contested issue of mass politics, which constrained the room for manoeuvre in intergovernmental decision-making. By definition, the Eurosceptic detractors of enlargement lacked the commitment to the EU's liberal international community that is required to shame opponents into norm conformance. Moreover, governments facing strong domestic political constraints are less easily shamed into conformance in the otherwise conducive setting of the Brussels institutions.

Do the decisions, since 2022, to start accession negotiations with Albania, Bosnia–Herzegovina Moldova, North Macedonia, and Ukraine, and to grant Georgia candidate status, indicate the revival of the liberal-democratic membership norm? Hardly so. Measures for liberal democracy and quality of government do not indicate an overall improvement for the Western Balkans and East European membership hopefuls in the run-up to the EU's recent enlargement decisions. According to the Liberal Democracy Index of V-Dem, only Moldova has come close to the score of Croatia, the most recent member state. Nor had liberal community norms made a comeback among the current members of the EU, which have been veering toward the Eurosceptic populist right (Risse, in this debate section).

Rather, we appear to have entered a novel phase of 'geopolitical' enlargement, which is primarily concerned with securing EU borders, stabilising adjacent countries, and denying systemic rivals control over the EU's neighbourhood (Akhlevediani, 2022; Anghel & Džankić, 2023), and only secondarily with the consolidation of 'good governance'. We are witnessing the emergence of a modified membership norm that accords the right to join to countries that defend the post-Cold War European order and resist coming into the sphere of influence of Russia – similar to the original anti-communist norm of EU membership (Thomas, 2021). It is true that geopolitical considerations, broadly defined, were present in earlier enlargement rounds, not least in the Western Balkans (Vachudova, 2014), but external security threats could not explain either the timing of enlargement decisions or the selection of accession candidates. Even now, EU enlargement is not an efficient 'realist' response to the Russian military threat but an act of community building and demarcation (Freudlsperger & Schimmelfennig, 2023).

Therefore, as much as I agree with Antoaneta L. Dimitrova's analysis of rhetorical action and entrapment in the Ukraine crisis, it is important to stress

that the emphasis has shifted from the domestic foundations of the liberal international community to its external defence and demarcation. On the other hand, whereas I share Sandra Lavenex's analysis of a geopolitical turn in enlargement, there are few indications in the rhetoric surrounding the Ukrainian war that the EU's 'post-national', value-, and norms-based community is being transformed into a 'pan-national' community based on essentialist, ethnic traits of Europeans.

Dimitrova makes a convincing case for how Ukrainian President Zelensky used rhetorical action focusing on common European values and a common 'European way of life' (European Parliament, 2023). Correspondingly, he has othered Russia as 'anti-European', having 'different values' and a 'different way of life', and likened Russia to the historical 'other' of the EU, i.e., Nazi Germany. He even went on to shame Hungarian Prime Minister Orbán personally by challenging him to visit the 'Shoes on the Danube' holocaust memorial in Budapest (Zelenskyy, 2022). It is also noticeable that he emphasised the role of Ukraine as a defender of freedom, the LIO, and European values in general rather than focusing on the Ukrainian achievements in fighting corruption and institutionalising the rule of law.

As Dimitrova also shows, EU leaders have been responsive to Zelenskyy's 'defence of common European values' framing. The synchronisation of frames boded well for rhetorical entrapment. The most concise summary of the new enlargement rationale by European Council President Charles Michel warrants repeating: 'The Kremlin is attacking all that we believe in – freedom, democracy, prosperity, and cooperation. So, in June last year, we granted candidate status to Ukraine and Moldova' (Michel, 2023). At the same time, the EU has not officially changed its reform – and merits-based enlargement doctrine:

> Enlargement countries are expected to advance steadily on their respective reform agendas in the areas of the "fundamentals", pursuing reforms and demonstrating concrete progress in the rule of law, the economy, the functioning of democratic institutions, and public administration reform. (European Commission, 2022a)

However, whether Ukraine and other membership hopefuls had significantly advanced on this agenda, did not feature in the EU's justifications for its enlargement decisions of 2022.

Conditions for rhetorical entrapment are more favourable than they have been for a long time. The Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine helped the EU, and the membership hopefuls shift the focus of the enlargement debate from transformation deficits to political commonalities and from internal disagreements to external unity. First, the common enemy and threat outshone any conflicts within Europe. In contrast to the Russian political system, values, and behaviour, the differences between members and non-member states looked small. Second, the war shifted the attention from the domestic to

the international, from the candidates' domestic legal situation to Russia's blatant violation of international law and from their domestic order to the international order. Third, citizen concerns about enlargement gave way to a broad wave of solidarity with Ukraine. Most importantly, framing Ukraine's fight for national survival and independence as the heroic defence of Europe's values and order indicated the strongest commitment a country can make to the liberal international community. In this situation, it would have been morally difficult not to offer Ukraine and other threatened countries an invitation to membership – and pedantic to keep pointing to reform deficits. It is likely, however, that the focus shifts back to these deficits if the military threat subsides and candidates move closer to accession.

On the margins, foundations, and counter-narratives of the liberal international community

Other contributions to the debate section probe the boundaries of rhetorical action and liberal community-building even further. Sandra Lavenex's insightful piece portrays the liberal community as a 'post-national' community of universalistic civic norms. However, RaR emphasises in addition that the 'Western international community is an interstate community' (Schimmelfennig, 2003, p. 77). Moreover, the EU refers to a regional rather than a global community: it offers membership to 'any European state that respects its values' (Art. 49 TEU). This perspective has several implications. For one, the EU's commitment to community building (inter alia through enlargement) does not extend beyond Europe or states. Accordingly, the EU is obliged to protect refugees under international law but not to treat them as members of its community. This is different for refugees coming from European (potential) member states of the community. This distinction explains at least in part the EU's different and generous treatment of Ukrainian refugees in comparison with non-European refugees. This argument does not take anything away from Lavenex's analysis of EU asylum policy as 'organized hypocrisy' (Lavenex, 2018). Yet, it suggests why it is difficult for cosmopolitans in a regional international community to expose this hypocrisy through rhetorical action.

Thomas Risse thoroughly inspects the normative and epistemological foundations rather than the social margins of the liberal community. His claim that successful rhetorical entrapment is predicated on a liberal truth regime requires some nuance, however. Rhetorical action starts from the assumption that speech acts are strategic. That includes the 'truth-subversion practices' of false speak and double speak (Adler & Drieschova, 2021). RaR does not assume that public rhetorical commitments to liberalism and the rule of law – which both Orbán and Erdoğan have amply made in the past – are enough to keep strategic speakers on course. What matters is whether untruthful speakers are held to account for their past argumentative

comments. Without formal sanctioning mechanisms, accountability is based on social influence. This works, indeed, if untruthful speakers who accept the liberal truth regime in principle are shamed into norm conformance when their inconsistency is exposed. However, RaR also expects effective rhetorical entrapment if these actors seek the social approval and respect of the community to which they (aspire to) belong – even if they are not intrinsically committed to its norms or truth regime (Schimmelfennig, 2003, p. 218). To the extent that leaders such as Orbán and Erdoğan have ceased to care about the social approval of the West, however, this 'last resort' of rhetorical entrapment will fail, too. In this case, as Risse points out, all that is left to do for the defenders of the liberal order is to try to reach the domestic public of its detractors with persuasive counter-messages. I thank my colleagues contributing to this debate section for developing such a rich research agenda for rhetorical action and liberal international community building.

Notes

1. For example, Schimmelfennig (2001, 2005) suggests that actors use arguments only instrumentally, actors are strategically entrapped by others, and compliance results from the costs of social sanctions. By contrast, for Sedelmeier (1998, 2005, 2024) arguments are used sincerely, actors are self-entrapped by their collective discourse, and they comply with their rhetoric through self-sanctioning due to internalised norms.
2. In the following, I use the term 'illegitimate vetoes' for vetoes that cannot be legitimised with regard to community norms and the constituted values of the community.
3. The Turkish veto against Sweden's NATO membership is an example of the latter case. I therefore consider it a 'veto episode' even if the veto was lifted after Sweden met conditions set by Türkiye (but which were not based on generally accepted community norms).
4. At the same time, not any event that prevents or delays closer relations between the EU/NATO should be considered a veto if it does not pertain to decisions on a specific stage of the accession process (such as opening accession negotiations, closing/opening chapters in negotiations, or signing of an accession treaty). In this sense, e.g., the negative outcome of the referendum that delayed the Dutch ratification of the EU's association agreement with Ukraine does not constitute a veto in the accession process.
5. One problem of RaR is that this part of the argument is under-theorised. If we assume instrumentally rational actors, where do the 'community ethos' and its legitimacy come from? Rhetorical action can only be successful if at least some (dominant) actors in the audience believe in the rightfulness of the order and its legitimacy.
6. Named after Zeitschrift für Internationale Beziehungen (ZIB).
7. According to a recent study based on surveys, the number of Germans with extremist right-wing attitudes has increased to 8 per cent, with another 20 per cent holding partially right-wing views. This still leaves 70 per cent of the population in the democratic camp (see Bertram, 2023).

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