Master's Thesis

Bonding Strategic Narratives in the EU Enlargement Discourse: Moldova's European Path in a Time of Geopolitical Uncertainty

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ABSTRACT

The way political actors speak about belonging serves as signal to their strategic positioning. In the case of the EU enlargement, Moldova's accession narrative has increasingly become a space where language is used not only to reflect reform progress, but to suggest direction, identity, and strategic intent. This thesis explores how the EU–Moldova enlargement narrative has evolved, particularly in the context of geopolitical instability following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Based on the framework of bonding strategic narratives, the study looks at how past, present, and future references are used to legitimise Moldova's European path and to reinforce the idea of a shared future.

The analysis draws from thirty public communications delivered by both the EU and Moldovan actors between 2021 and 2025. By using NVivo, a qualitative method of document analysis, the researched follows a discursive approach grounded in Adams et al. (2024) framework, alongside emerging themes of security and urgency to identify broader shifts in discourse. To reflect how different temporal dimensions are combined within a single message, the study also introduces the concept of temporal blending, which helps identify instances where past, present, and future references are layered together.

The findings suggest that different temporal timeframes play distinct roles in the narratives. Past-oriented bonding narratives recall shared memory and reaffirm identity. Expanding on this, present-oriented narratives outline reform security, resilience and geopolitical alignment, while future-oriented narratives set narrative consistency and shared direction for the actors involved. After the geopolitical turning point of 2022, references to present and future become more prominent and deliberate, marking a change in tone towards greater urgency and stronger focus on strategic alignment. At the same time, Moldova's narrative reaches more agency. State officials no longer simply mirror the EU language but began to adapt it, shaping the message to reflect national priorities.

By emphasising how the EU and Moldova co-construct the enlargement narrative through time, the study contributes to the broader discussion on enlargement discourse, strategic communication and narrative agency. It shows that the enlargement process is not only institutional, but also deeply narrative, shaped by the way political actors link memory, performance, and ambition into a coherent story of belonging. The concept of temporal blending offers a novel lens to understand how institutional language maintains discursive coherence in moments of instability.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the European Union (the EU) enlargement has returned to the top of the political agenda, marked by the Russian Federation's (hereafter Russia) full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. The decision of the European Council to grant candidate status to the Republic of Moldova (hereafter Moldova) and Ukraine, and European perspective to Georgia (European Council, Council of the European Union, 2022b), signalled a shift in how enlargement is framed and communicated. The EU's discourse started to move beyond institutional criteria and reform measures, increasingly adopting strategic language that framed enlargement as a response to geopolitical threats and as a means for strengthening regional stability. Moving from the margins of neighbourhood policy to the centre of enlargement discussions, Moldova emerges as a particularly relevant case. Long viewed as a neighbour rather than a candidate, Moldova's accelerated move to candidate status raises critical questions about how its EU path is constructed discursively both by its own leaders and by the EU institutions.

This thesis explores how the narrative around the EU–Moldova enlargement has evolved in the face of growing geopolitical pressure. It focuses on the use of bonding strategic narratives and how these narratives shift across different points in time. Building on the framework developed by Adams et al. (2024), the study investigates how references to the past, present, and future are employed to legitimise Moldova's path towards EU membership. It pays particular attention to how these framings shift before and after the critical point in February 2022, and Moldova takes part in shaping the narrative through its agency.

The main research question guiding this study is:

How do bonding strategic narratives in the EU enlargement discourse evolve across temporal dimensions under conditions of heightened geopolitical pressure?

To address this question, the following sub-questions are explored:

- How does the EU's enlargement discourse use past, present, and future-oriented bonding narratives to frame Moldova's EU accession before and after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine?
- How does Moldova express narrative agency through alignment, adaptation, or contestation within the EU's enlargement narrative?
- How do bonding strategic narratives contribute to shaping legitimacy and political alignment in the EU-Moldova relationship under current geopolitical conditions?

This study seeks to understand how bonding narratives evolve in moments of external pressure and political change, and how they help shape legitimacy and a shared trajectory in the EU–Moldova relations. A qualitative research design is used, based on a selected set of thirty official documents, including speeches, press releases, and joint statements from both the EU and Moldovan actors between 2021 and 2025. The analysis was conducted through NVivo software, with the documents coded according to the temporal bonding framework, along with additional themes such as narrative agency, security framing, and geopolitical urgency. To identify how different temporal dimensions are blended within political messages, the study introduces the concept of temporal blending, used to reflect moments where multiple temporal layers appear within a single narrative.

The research builds on existing work on strategic narratives in the EU foreign policy, especially focusing on how these narratives are used in relations with neighbouring countries to promote partnership, alignment, and political belonging. Previous research has looked into how the EU portrays its role and identity through external narratives. However, less emphasis was put on how enlargement is shaped and conveyed during times of geopolitical uncertainty. Viewing enlargement through the lens of temporal dimensions of bonding strategic narratives is largely missing from the literature. Approaching enlargement from this perspective will contribute to filling a significant gap in current research. By focusing on Moldova and applying the bonding narrative framework through a temporal lens, this thesis offers a more detailed account of how enlargement is communicated not only by the EU, but also by candidate countries that seek to shape how their path is perceived.

The thesis begins with a review of the literature on strategic narratives, closely approaching how they relate to the EU's neighbourhood and enlargement policies. It then follows with the theoretical framework, focusing on the concept of temporal bonding developed by Adam's et

al. (2024). The methodology chapter outlines the case selection, data collection and operationalisation, followed by the analysis organised into several thematic sections. The final chapters reflect on the findings in relation to the research objectives and conclude by summarising the study's main contributions, suggesting directions for future research.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Narratives as Foreign Policy Tools

Since its inception, the European Union has relied on the construction of multiple narratives to legitimise its existence and evolution (Bondebjerg, 2008; Niţoiu, 2013). In contrast to nation-states, which base their identities and legitimacy in historical memory (Haines & Haas, 1959) and social processes (Fraser, 2010; Goode, 2010), the EU emerged as an intendedly forged political project, shaped by its political and intellectual elites (Eriksen, 2007; Fossum & Schlesinger, 2007).

The use of narratives in EU studies is relatively recent (Manners & Murray, 2016), but it has proven central in understanding how the EU constructs legitimacy, both internally and externally (Niţoiu, 2013; Kaiser, 2015; Manners & Murray, 2016; Cianciara, 2017). Within the EU context, narratives imply intersecting discourses, institutionalised through political and social practices to discursively construct and diffuse a sense of shared purpose, allegiance and legitimacy across the public sphere within and beyond its Member States (Niţoiu, 2013; De Vries, 2023). On the attempt to build a unifying narrative for Europe, political actors have employed cultural, historical, and social elements to frame the EU as a natural progression in the continent's development, while adapting to crises that challenge its self-image (Niţoiu, 2013).

Much of the academic body on EU narratives is circulating around its foreign policy and self-image building in the international arena. Multiple identity and system-level narratives often coexist within the EU's external action, offering institutional actors a degree of flexibility in shaping and promoting particular narrative framings. Among the prominent narratives identified in the literature are the *threat/risk security narrative* (Christou, 2010), which centres on managing external dangers, and the *duty/opportunity narrative* (Niţoiu, 2013; Schumacher, 2015), which depict the EU's international engagement as a normative power. The later involves several interrelated sub-narratives: the EU as a promoter of peace, democratising force, good neighbour, and the advocate of people's well-being. These narratives are actively employed to balance out the internal shortfalls and gridlocks such as economic crisis and the failure of the *permissive consensus* between member states (Cianciara, 2017).

In exploring the temporal dimensions of these narratives, Europe has invoked the post-World War II reconstruction and the Cold War opposition to authoritarianism (Niţoiu, 2013) as past-

oriented narratives, employed its role as a peace actor and guarantor of democratic values (Christou, 2010; Schumacher, 2015) as present-oriented narratives, and subsequently has envisioned shared prosperity, integration and geopolitical stability (Dabrowski, 2024) as future-oriented narratives. These temporal dimensions, later conceptualised as *bonding strategic narratives* (Adams et al., 2024)*,* will be explored throughout this review as structuring principles that underpin EU policy discourse.

2.2 Strategic Narratives in the European Neighbourhood

An expanding body of scholarship on the discursive construction of the EU's neighbourhood policy (ENP) emphasise the persistent issues of coherence, consensus and continuity within the policy framework (Cianciara, 2017; Crombois, 2021; Manners & Murray, 2016; Miskimmon, 2017a; Niţoiu, 2013; Schumacher, 2015). This literature also points to the influential role of third actors in shaping both the meaning-making and the impact of ENP. Importantly, Russia as a regional power and an alternative geopolitical reference point for neighbouring states (at least before its invasion of Ukraine) played a critical role in the narrative construction surrounding the Eastern dimension of the neighbourhood. Some scholars analyse how Russian elites perceive and frame these EU policies (Gretskiy et al., 2014; Piet & Kanet, 2016; Romanova, 2016), while others explore the broader discursive interaction where both the EU and Russia act as complex narrative agents, attempting to shape each other's interpretations of the region and the strategies directed towards it (Korosteleva, 2016; Casier & DeBardeleben, 2017; Akchurina & Della Sala, 2018; Mikalay & Neuman, 2023).

In regards to the identified narratives developed around the ENP, scholars' debate has been increasingly dominated by security concerns and the advancement of common values such as rule of law, democracy and fundamental freedoms (Cianciara, 2017; Kaunert et al., 2023; Miskimmon, 2017a). Particularly in relation to the Eastern Partnership, Crombois (2021) identified two main conflicting narratives. The first one relies on EU's normative power and transformative capacity, by aiming to employ norm diffusion and legal framework alignment, which can be perceived as a normative past-oriented narrative. The second narrative, however, extends to the geopolitical present-oriented imperatives where the EU positions its Eastern partners as a strategic buffer to counter Russian revisionism. This narrative mismatch has produced what scholars refer to as the *capability-expectations gap* where the EU continues to invoke its commitment to democratic values, but the prioritisation of its security cooperation towards its Eastern partners has signalled a deprioritisation of these normative goals. This

inconsistency led towards scepticism and undermined credibility on the perception of policy efficiency among partner countries (Miskimmon, 2017b; Kaunert et al., 2023).

Furthermore, while many studies explore how the EU and Russia construct competing narratives about the region (Korosteleva, 2016; Casier & DeBardeleben, 2017; Akchurina & Della Sala, 2018; Mikalay & Neuman, 2023), less attention has been given to how partner countries themselves perceive, engage or resist these narratives. Most of existing scholarship tends to adopt either a predominantly EU or Russia-centric perspective, or approaches the topic through direct comparison between the two (Delcour, 2015; Horbyk, 2016; Skolimowska, 2018). Hence, the agency of partner countries in shaping or contesting dominant narratives remains underexplored, this pointing out an important gap on the role of these states in co-constructing and adapting to dominant narratives.

In the same vein, Shuibhne and Cremona (2022) offer a valuable contribution to understanding the EU's evolving foreign policy narratives, especially in its neighbourhood. Although they do not explicitly frame it through strategic narratives, their study aligns with the temporal structure of bonding narratives. First, the authors exemplify how the EU has historically constructed a discursive boundary between *membership* and *integration without membership,* embedding neighbourhood relations in legal and normative frameworks (2022, p. 156), this reflecting a past-oriented bonding narrative, where historical norms and legal arrangements shape current partnerships without full accession. However, following the events of 2022, the Union moves towards a more geopolitical and strategic posture (Nizhnikau & Moshes, 2024), indicating present-oriented bonding narratives, where the EU experiences an institutional shift towards deeper engagement with the Eastern partners, making them immediate strategic allies in response to geopolitical threats (Shuibhne & Cremona, 2022; Karadağ, 2024; Nizhnikau & Moshes, 2024). At the same time, this shift begins to project future-oriented bonding narratives centred on shared destiny and political alignment, gradually blurring lines between integration and enlargement. Together, these shifts provide a fertile ground to investigate how bonding narratives of past, present and future are employed, adapted, or instrumentalised under high geopolitical threats. They help base the focus of this thesis into how such narratives are constructed and restructured in the case of Moldova's EU trajectory.

2.3 Enlargement Discourse – From Normative Alignment to Strategic Interests

Strategic narratives, as conceptualised by Miskimmon (2017a), are defined as "means by which political actors attempt to construct a shared meaning of the past, present, and future of

international politics to shape the behaviour of domestic and international actors" (2017a, p. 6). These narratives operate at multiple levels – identity, system, and issue—and serve to frame international relations and justify foreign policy decisions (2017a, p. 7). Within this framework, Adams et al. (2024), introduce the concept of *bonding strategic narratives* which according to their typology categorise as past, present and future-oriented bonding narratives. These narratives help political actors foster alignment and legitimacy by evoking a shared history, emphasising current strategic convergence, or projecting a common vision of the future (2024, p. 49).

While this temporal typology has been previously applied in studies on EU foreign and security policy (Miskimmon et al., 2014; Chaban et al., 2019; Crombois, 2021; Kaunert et al., 2023), its application to EU enlargement discourse remains underexplored. Yet, the accession process, particularly under high geopolitical pressure, offers an interesting context to investigate how bonding narratives arise and adapt over time.

Although the literature on strategic narratives has grown in recent years, its specific use in the context of EU enlargement remains limited and often fragmented. Traditionally, the EU enlargement has been justified through normative instruments such as norm diffusion (Lavenex, 2004), conditionality (Grabbe, 2005) and external governance (Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2005). These mechanisms reflect past and present-oriented bonding narratives, which emphasise shared cultural and historical roots, common political values, and the EU's role as a normative power extending its model beyond its borders.

However, recent geopolitical developments have led to a renewed scholarly debate. Studies point to a growing concern that EU enlargement is increasingly driven not by historical ties or normative commitments, but more and more by geopolitical urgency and strategic alignment (Bojinovic-Fenko & Kocan, 2022; Kovacevic, 2022; Radic-Milosavljevic & Domaradzki, 2022). Some scholars raise the question whether the granting of the candidate status to Moldova and Ukraine, and European perspective to Georgia, reflect genuine commitment or performative alignment with strategic narratives, as they identify the EU's discourse post-2022 as increasingly securitised (Kovacevic, 2022). Kovacevic (2022) argues that the EU enlargement policy that was once the "most successful transformative foreign policy instrument" has become a mechanism of exerting short to medium-term geopolitical influence (2022, p. 355). This shift in narrative reflects a wider strategic pattern, where candidate countries are treated differently based on their perceived security importance. This makes the

EU's enlargement policy less consistent and creates uneven ideas of who is considered to truly "belong" in the Union. (2022, p. 355). This points to the idea that present and future-oriented bonding narratives appear to be gaining traction as these narratives emphasise the urgency of political alignment, shared security goals, and a common future within the EU's evolving geopolitical context.

2.4 Strategic Narratives in Enlargement Practice – Cases of Precedence

Along the same lines, throughout the history of enlargement, political factors have often influenced how the EU shapes its narrative strategies. Cyprus represents a key example where the EU admitted a divided country despite the absence of a resolution to its territorial conflict. As Shaelou and Athanassiou (2024) note, Cyprus's accession in 2004 was mainly driven by concerns over security and sovereignty, rather than economic readiness or shared values. Cyprus viewed membership as a way to strengthen its position in relation to Turkey and gain more international recognition despite the ongoing conflict. The EU, in turn, applied its accession rules only to the areas under the control of the Cypriot government (2024, p. 234), effectively admitting a member state with unresolved territorial and geopolitical challenges. While Cyprus's historical and cultural ties to Europe reflect a past-oriented bonding narrative, the decision to grant accession suggests a more strategic focus on present and future priorities, particularly regional stability and long-term political integration.

Similarly, Croatia's accession in 2013 also carried normative commitments and political pragmatism. Even though there were certain concerns in regards to institutional and rule of law alignment, scholars argue that the EU offered full membership to Croatia with the goal of maintaining the momentum in the Western Balkans and signal credibility in the region (Noutcheva, 2012). This outlines how future-oriented bonding narratives focused on regional integration and stability can at times take precedence over concerns about democratic standards or legal compliance.

North Macedonia, on the other hand, illustrates the tension between the EU's strategic objectives and internal divisions. Although the country had made significant progress in aligning with the acquis, its accession process was delayed for years due to unresolved bilateral disputes first with Greece, and later with Bulgaria. Only after the 2018 Prespa Agreement, where Greece and then the Republic of Macedonia reached an agreement about the naming dispute (Kmezić, 2019), its candidacy advanced and reshaped the EU's discourse around the country. Turčalo et al., (2024) argue that this marked a turning point where symbolic gestures

and regional diplomacy began to reshape the enlargement narrative. While North Macedonia's European identity had long been framed through past-oriented narratives, its candidacy has only gained momentum once present diplomatic conditions became more favourable, showing that the salience of temporal bonding narratives may shift depending on what is politically feasible.

2.5 Moldova as a Case of Narrative Adaptation

The cases of precedence show how the EU enlargement narratives often shift in response to geopolitical imperatives and strategic calculations. They also underline the variability of bonding narratives depending on institutional or political feasibility. This makes it even more important to study how such shifts occur today, particularly in cases like Moldova, where candidate status was granted amid major regional insecurity.

Moldova, in the post-2022 context, presents a contemporary test case of how bonding narratives may be adapted in response to heightened security threats and shifting foreign policy priorities. As a country with an unresolved territorial conflict (Transnistria) and significant geopolitical vulnerability (Russian interference), Moldova occupies a unique position in enlargement discourse. Historically treated within the framework of the European Neighbourhood Policy, Moldova's relationship with the EU had been constructed through past-oriented bonding narratives, emphasising shared cultural roots and historical ties to Europe (Całus & Kosienkowski, 2018). These narratives were foundational in the early 2000s, used to support Moldova's European trajectory through symbolic appeals to collective memory and European identity.

Yet, in contrast to earlier periods, the security context post-2022 has led the EU to elevate Moldova's candidacy status swiftly, shifting its rhetoric from a neighbourhood partnership model to one of strategic enlargement. This shift signalled a clear turn towards present and future-oriented bonding narratives. Scholars point out this as a pivotal moment where geopolitical urgency overrode chronological precedence, especially in comparison to the Western Balkans (Akhvlediani, 2022).

Radić Milosavljević and Petrović (2024) further describe this shift through a realist lens, arguing that the urgency applied to Eastern partners such as Moldova and Ukraine mirrors a selective and strategic use of enlargement rhetoric. They suggest that while enlargement policy still employs normative language, it is increasingly instrumentalised to achieve short and medium-term security objectives. Moldova thus embodies the fluidity of bonding narratives,

where discursive focus changes in response to external pressures and evolving priorities (2024, p. 55).

By examining Moldova's case, this thesis explores how the temporal dimensions of bonding narratives, anchored in past legitimacy, shaped by current alliances, or projected as a shared future, operate under acute geopolitical conditions. This directly connects to the main research question, as it shows how the EU's enlargement rhetoric can shift in response to crisis, and how a candidate country may adapt to the dominant narrative. At the same time, Moldova's case raises broader questions about narrative agency: how much discursive space is available to candidate countries, and how they position themselves within a shifting enlargement discourse. Analysing these dynamics offers not only a more nuanced view of Moldova's path to EU integration but also helps us understand how the EU manages its identity, legitimacy, and strategic priorities in uncertain times.

2.6 Gaps in Literature

Existing studies acknowledge that the EU has progressively embraced geopolitical language in response to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine (Kovacevic, 2022; Shuibhne & Cremona, 2022; Radić Milosavljević & Petrović, 2024). However, few of them explore how this shift impacts the temporal framing of enlargement narratives, particularly whether the EU's discourse is moving away from past-oriented narratives, such as shared history and cultural ties, towards more present and future-oriented narratives grounded in security imperatives, political alignment, and a shared vison of integration (Adams et al., 2024).

While scholars have extensively explored the EU's use of narratives in foreign policy (Niţoiu, 2013; Miskimmon, 2017a; Crombois, 2021), the specific application of bonding narratives to enlargement discourse remains underdeveloped. The literature often treats enlargement separately from neighbourhood policy or focuses on institutional or policy conditionality-based perspective (Grabbe, 2005; Lavenex, 2004; Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2005), without paying sufficient attention to the relational and discursive strategies the EU uses to legitimise enlargement in shifting geopolitical contexts.

Moreover, the perspective of candidate countries themselves is largely missing in these analyses, particularly in relation to how they engage with or respond to EU narratives. Moldova represents a clear gap in this sense. Despite its swift rise to candidate status, the country is rarely studied as an active discursive participant that mirrors, adapts or contests the EU's strategic communication. This is especially relevant in the light of Moldova's geopolitical

vulnerability, historical ties to Europe, and its current pursuit of deeper institutional alignment with the Union.

In addition, limited research investigates how bonding narratives, those designed to foster political closeness and legitimacy, can either strengthen or strain EU–candidate state relations. While some authors highlight the growing instrumentalised nature of EU discourse in crisis periods (Kovacevic, 2022), fewer studies explore the relational logic central to these narratives. This leaves a gap in understanding how enlargement narratives operate not only as policy tools but also as ways to forge lasting political alliances in times of heightened geopolitical tension.

Finally, only a handful of studies consider how bonding narratives evolve across different timeframes or in moments of geopolitical urgency. This thesis responds to that gap by focusing on Moldova before and after February 2022, aiming to identify and assess narrative shifts that have not yet been systematically analysed in the existing literature.

2.7 Contributions of this Study

In the light of this context, this thesis contributes to the emerging literature on bonding strategic narratives (Adams et al., 2024) by applying their temporal framework of the past, present and future to the study of EU enlargement narrative, particularly in the case of Moldova. It explores how such narratives are constructed and adapted over time, especially during periods of geopolitical pressure. Specifically, it investigates whether the EU's narrative is shifting from historical bonds to present-focused solidarity and resilience, and future-oriented visions of shared integration.

The paper also looks at the enlargement policy as a product of strategic agency, not only one sided from the EU perspective, but also complemented by a candidate state's power of agency in shaping the discursive landscape of enlargement. Rather than portraying Moldova as a passive recipient of EU messaging, the study analyses how the country reflects, adjusts, or even contests the dominant narrative, positioning itself not just as a policy taker but as a rhetorical actor engaged in constructing its European identity.

Additionally, by comparing documents issued before and after February 2022, the thesis follows how bonding narratives shift in response to crisis. The use of temporal comparison reveals not only what kind of narratives are used but how they change, intensify, or reorient as political priorities evolve.

Building on this, the study also identifies and introduces a novel theoretical lens of *blending of temporal dimensions* within political discourse. While the existing literature (Adams et al., 2024) tends to treat past, present, and future-oriented bonding narratives as distinct temporal framings, the empirical material suggests that political actors often construct temporal continuities, linking historical memory to present alignment or projecting current cooperation into a shared future. To capture this nuance, the coding scheme introduces "temporal blending" as a category in its own right. This analytical nuance offers a more accurate representation of how time is strategically constructed in enlargement discourse and suggests that bonding narratives may gain rhetorical strength when temporal framings are layered and interconnected.

Lastly, this study offers a methodological contribution by combining qualitative document analysis with a structured coding approach in NVivo. The coding scheme involves both temporal narrative dimensions and Moldova's forms of narrative agency, providing a nuanced understanding of narrative dynamics in EU-Moldova communication that can be replicated in future studies.

In doing so, this thesis makes both conceptual and empirical contributions. It applies Adams et al.'s (2024) framework of bonding strategic narratives to a new empirical setting, and offers a thorough understanding of how EU enlargement is framed and co-constructed in moments of geopolitical urgency, when narratives of belonging and alignment become more politically charged.

CHAPTER 3: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

3.1 Strategic Narratives

Strategic narratives are stories that are driven by political actors to shape domestic and international politics, serving as "framework for collective action, defining a community's identity, its values and goals, and the stakes of its struggles" (Levinger & Roselle, 2017) and as "shared meaning for the past, present, and the future" (Miskimmon et al., 2015) . The term was first used in 2006 by Lawrence Freedman who explored how narratives can be strategically employed in warfare against adversaries. Later Miskimmon et al. (2017b), developed a broader understanding of the concept by expanding its use beyond armed conflict or foreign policy strategy, by illustrating its role in shaping international politics. Strategic narratives are referenced alongside a related term of soft power in both academic and policy body. It is argued that the position a political actor expresses on the global arena embodies a fundamental element of soft power. This aspect has gained increasing relevance in an era where the framework of international order is undergoing changes due to the emergence of new global powers (Roselle et al., 2014).

In terms of their narrative function, strategic narratives imply three interlinked processes of narrative *formation, projection and reception* that unfold in cyclical and progressive ways (Miskimmon & O'Loughlin, 2019). As for the nature of strategic narratives Miskimmon et al. (2017b) identify: *international system narratives*, which define the structure of global order and the identities of international actors. Instances serve the Cold War, Russian foreign information manipulation, the peaceful rise of China or the emergence of BRICS states in the global economy (Van Noort, 2019; Arceneaux, 2022). Second, *issue narratives* which serve as justification of a political behaviour in the context of policy changes, by framing them as necessary and normatively desirable (Bevan et al., 2020). Examples present the US foreign policy employed after 9/11 against terrorism such as the military operations in Afghanistan (Arceneaux, 2022; Walldorf, 2022) and US sanctions imposed on Russia (Sokolshchik et al., 2024) where the narratives were strategically framed to legitimise its foreign actions. Lastly, *identity narratives* that express a state's or entity's identity, values and aspirations (Chaban et al., 2019), and project the *norms of appropriateness*, influencing the perception of who is accountable for addressing policy issues (Miskimmon & O'Loughlin, 2019). The EU serves as an example where its concept of *EU identity* stresses the narrative and fosters a sense of collective belonging both within and internationally (Arceneaux, 2022). Correspondingly,

narrative analysis provides means for understanding how identities of *self* and *others* are constructed and positioned in opposition.

3.2 Strategic Narratives of Bonding – the Core Framework

Adams et al.(2024) identify a fourth form – *bonding strategic narratives* – which explicitly contribute to the establishment and strengthening of relationships between states. These respectively divide into *past, present* and *future-oriented bonding narratives*. Past-oriented bonding narratives focus on the historical experiences as means to create a shared collective memory and sense of continuity. Present-oriented narratives point out shared characteristics such as political systems, values, or geographic and demographic similarities. The future-oriented bonding narratives strategically depict a common, often idealised, vision for the two entities. Collectively, these narratives consolidate shared beliefs, interpretations and understandings of commonalities between nations and aim to foster and preserve friendship between states.

3.2.1 Past-Oriented Bonding Narratives

A closer look at each type of bonding narrative reveals its specific function and strategic implications. Firstly, when referring to past experiences, bonding narratives are closely related to collective memory. Collective memory implicates creating consensus (Adams et al., 2024) through a continuous process of negotiation (Simko, 2021) by building and reforming to reach a pertinent meaning for a social group's perceptions, interpretations and understanding of the past (Olick, 2007; Bekus, 2021) in order to explain the present and frame the future (Adams & Vinitzky-Seroussi, 2023). Political actors employ collective memories in their discourse to foster their objectives by legitimising the prevailing political and social circumstances (Graham et al., 2004).

Due to globalisation and the *culture of connectivity* (Van Dijck, 2013), where ideas and beliefs can be transferred across borders, memory is no longer confined to one nation or cultural group. This transnational mobility of memory challenges traditional notions of belonging and in case of the EU, it allows political actors to strategically employ foreign memories to reinforce a collective European identity. Instead of preserving the past, these memories are intentionally used in political speech to shape and justify narratives of inclusion. The transnational dimension of memory has been explored through the concept of *traveling memory*, which emphasises how remembrance is shaped by movement and reinterpretation across different societies (Rothberg, 2014). Scholars have emphasised the strategic use of memory in political

discourse, where foreign memories are integrated into national narratives to secure recognition of *full Europeanness* (Mälksoo, 2009). This is particularly noticeable in post-Cold War Eastern European states, where memory politics have played a critical role in positioning these countries within a broader European framework (Dujisin, 2021). Considering that collective memory has been constructed around national historical events to emphasise a distinct national identity (De Cillia et al., 1999), the embodiment of traveling memory into the political rhetoric is an explicitly strategic process (Black, 2020) for shaping the perception of a collective identity or achieving a foreign policy goal. This mechanism is instrumental in bonding narratives, which seek to unite various identities by framing memory as a shared experience. In this way, traveling memory serves not only as a tool of remembrance but also as an instrument of political legitimation, fostering cooperation and reinforcing positive relations and integration within a broader collective (Adams et al., 2024).

At the same time, the deployment of collective memory in bonding narratives is highly selective and contingent on the strategic context. As Adams and Baden (2020) observe, political leaders frequently use foreign or shared memories not to honour the past, but to construct resonance with current political needs. These memories are recontextualised and strategically framed to support contemporary objectives, suggesting that historical reference is not a binding element of bonding but a situational means. This supports the idea that past-oriented narratives may be sidelined in favour of other temporal framings, especially when those past references do not align with the urgency or focus of current challenges.

Furthermore, past-oriented bonding narratives are not universally applicable or always effective. As Budrytė (2022) explains in his review of *Collective Memory in International Relations*, Kathrin Bachleitner argues that states engage in a "self-reflective struggle over memory" and may re-narrate themselves in response to evolving international contexts (2022, p. 371). Her concept of *temporal security* (the need for consistency between a state's collective memory and its foreign policy) helps explain how historical narratives serve as tools of legitimacy and identity under stable conditions. Yet, when those conditions are disrupted, such as by geopolitical shocks or security threats, the utility of memory-based narratives can diminish (2022, p. 371). In such contexts, past-oriented narratives may lose salience, giving way to more pragmatic, present or future-oriented bonding efforts aimed at immediate alignment and strategic cooperation. This dynamic suggests that historical bonding may be a *fair-weather* phenomenon (more likely to be employed in stable, low-threat environments)

whereas under high-stakes conditions, political actors may prefer narratives rooted in shared contemporary interests or forward-looking commitments.

3.2.2 Present-Oriented Bonding Narratives

Following, present-oriented bonding narratives are closely connected to the practices of cultural and public diplomacy, which enable actors build stories by emphasising shared cultural heritage and common values in pursuit of foreign policy goals (Holoborodko et al., 2024) or even idealistic aims such as conflict prevention (Mark, 2009). *Cultural diplomacy* as a diplomatic practice, is primarily conducted by national governments but also exercised by sub-national authorities and supranational entities such as the EU. It serves a range of functional objectives, including the promotion of trade, political, diplomatic, and economic interests (Mark, 2009, pp. 8–9). *Public diplomacy*, traditionally, is a more citizen-focused approach to diplomacy where the primary audience is not just governments but also various national and global communities (Cull, 2010). However presently, public diplomacy is increasingly managed by government bodies and has been used to support nation branding and strategic interests objectives (Ang et al., 2015). As a result, the distinction between the two terms has become rather blurred.

Furthermore, cultural diplomacy distinguishes from cultural relations as compared to the later, cultural diplomacy occurs within formal events where diplomats, serving national governments, guide and influence the cultural exchanges to serve national interests (Bennett, 2020). In this regard, cultural diplomacy also intersects with the term of *soft power.* It functions as a strategic tool through which political actors communicate shared values, ideologies, and policy objectives internationally (Mark, 2009). This soft power dimension reinforces the intent of present-oriented bonding narratives by promoting interstate engagement through inclusive and dialogic means, fostering trust, mutual respect and enduring relationships (Ang et al., 2015, p. 367). It is further argued that cultural diplomacy extends beyond the narrow national focus and can even rebuild ties with countries where diplomatic relations are strained or absent as this practice plays a role in fostering a people-to-people connection and a positive agenda of cooperation (Ang et al., 2015, pp. 368–369).

3.2.3 Future-Oriented Bonding Narratives

While past and present-oriented bonding narratives have received increasing attention in academic literature (Miskimmon et al., 2015, 2017b; Roselle et al., 2014; Miskimmon & O'Loughlin, 2019; Chaban et al., 2019), there is currently no distinct conceptualisation of

future-oriented bonding narratives as a category of their own. Nevertheless, this type of narrative is closely interconnected with the other two, and it appeals to the same structural elements: the construction of collective identity, the delineation of in and out groups, and the projection of shared history and common values through strategic narratives (Miskimmon et al., 2014; Roselle et al., 2014). The differentiation is in its temporal focus by employing current and historical narratives for a shared vision of positive interstate relations (Baruah, 2024).

As Miskimmon et al., (2017a) argue in their foundational work on strategic narratives, all political narratives inherently hold a future dimension. Strategic narratives work across the past, present, and future to shape international order, aligning actors' perceptions and expectations. Adler and Pouliot (2011) say that these strategies revolve around the alignment of practices of cooperation, recognition, shared commitments, and meaning-making between political communities, emphasising that collective understandings are temporally embedded, allowing groups to imagine themselves into a common future.

Future-oriented bonding narratives also rely on historical references as a source of legitimacy. Ohnesorge and Owen (2023) further enrich this perspective through the concept of *mnemonic soft power*, where shared values, institutional trajectories, and historical interpretations serve as narrative anchors for projecting common futures. They claim that mnemonic strategies do not simply recall the past, they are deeply invested in shaping the future by fostering legitimacy and guiding belief systems toward a desirable order. This temporal dimension of bonding strategic narratives is particularly relevant in international settings such as the EU, where future-oriented bonding narratives are not just expressed discursively, but also institutionalised through policy, enlargement strategies and formalised commitments to shared values (Lacroix & Nicolaïdis, 2010).

3.3 Narrative Agency – Complementary Framework

In addition to the use of bonding narratives in EU discourse, this thesis acknowledges that candidate countries are not just recipients of strategic discourse. Instead, they hold varying levels of narrative agency, which refers to the ability to reflect, adapt, or contest external narratives in ways that align with their own political standing. In international relations, scholars explore how meaning is shaped through interactions, especially in unequal power dynamics, moving beyond sender-receiver models of communication (Roselle et al., 2014; Miskimmon & O'Loughlin, 2019). This perspective describes political actors' ability to engage with dominant discourses, not only by aligning with them, but also by adapting or contesting

them to gain acknowledgement, legitimacy, or greater autonomy (Adler-Nissen & Zarakol, 2021).

This is particularly relevant for candidate countries like Moldova, whose geopolitical vulnerability and aspirations for integration create both constraints and opportunities for narrative engagement. Moldova's discursive behaviour in response to EU messaging can reveal how it seeks to position itself, not only as a reform-oriented partner but as an active co-author of the enlargement story. In this way, narrative agency becomes an analytical lens through which to explore how Moldova negotiates its European identity in relation to shifting strategic imperatives. It adds a necessary dimension to the study of bonding narratives by foregrounding the relational and dialogical nature of meaning-making in EU–candidate state interactions.

CHAPTER 4: METHODOLOGY

4.1 Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative research design to explore how bonding strategic narratives are constructed and operationalised in the political and institutional communications of the EU and Moldova in the period before and after 24 February 2022. The temporal scope is mainly centred on the year preceding the invasion and the period following up to the present day.

The study combines document analysis with a case study design, using official communication materials and relying on NVivo software (Version 14) for systematic data organisation, coding, and comparative analysis. The aim is not on measuring the frequency of certain narratives, but rather to revealing the patterns, meanings, and narrative shifts that emerge in political communication, particularly in times of heightened geopolitical tension.

The focus is relational, in the sense that it looks at how the EU and Moldova construct meaning together through language, especially when navigating moments of political change or external pressure (Adler & Pouliot, 2011; Miskimmon et al., 2014). Strategic narratives are not merely top-down tools of influence, but emerge in dialogical interaction between actors (Roselle et al., 2014). This approach is especially suitable for studying EU enlargement discourse, which does not only concern policy alignment, but also mutual recognition, legitimacy-building, and symbolic framing negotiated through public communication (Bicchi, 2006). This study follows how bonding narratives shift across time and actor, and how Moldova expresses its narrative agency by mirroring, adapting, or contesting dominant EU framings.

Moldova provides a timely and strategically significant case to explore these dynamics. Geographically situated at the EU's Eastern frontier, with a protracted territorial conflict in Transnistria, Moldova's EU integration narrative is complex. A major political turning point in the EU's neighbourhood policy was Moldova's quick rise to candidate in 2022. This event established a new sense of urgency in discussions about belonging, security, and European identity. This situation helps understand how Moldova manages its own story within shifting enlargement discourse.

In its relationship with the EU, Moldova represents a most-likely case for observing how bonding strategic narratives are used and evolve. It is a country that has clearly expressed its European aspirations, has a government committed to reform and EU integration, and found itself pushed into the spotlight after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. At the

same time, the EU increased its political and financial support, making Moldova an ideal setting for studying how the Union uses narratives to reinforce partnerships and how these are received or adapted. As Seawright and Gerring (2008) argue, most-likely cases are used when researchers want to test whether a theoretical expectation holds under ideal conditions. At the same time, Moldova represents a critical case, where the meaning of EU integration had to be renegotiated under pressure, reflecting how enlargement narratives respond to institutional and geopolitical change.

Methodologically, the single-case study serves the purpose of theory-testing or theory-informing (Junk, 2013). While Moldova is seen as a unique case, its focus on discursive co-construction goes beyond Moldova, reflecting dynamics likely to arise in other high-stakes enlargement processes under geopolitical pressure. The analysis also allows for within-case variation (Yin, 2018), by comparing discourse across actors and time periods, deepening the understanding of how bonding narratives evolve before and after the invasion. Moldova's limited attention in narrative-based enlargement studies makes it a meaningful case for refining theoretical approaches to strategic narrative construction in EU foreign policy.

4.2 Document Analysis

This research uses qualitative document analysis to trace how bonding strategic narratives are constructed and negotiated in the EU–Moldova relationship. Document analysis is a method that helps make sense of meaning in political texts such as speeches, official statements, and joint press conferences by looking at patterns, shifts, and how ideas are framed over time (Bowen, 2009). In a field where language carries both symbolic and strategic weight, documents can reveal how actors position themselves in relation to each other, especially in moments of diplomatic visibility (Prior, 2003).

Document analysis provides a focused and accessible framework for studying official communication. This approach is especially suitable given the thesis's focus in following narrative framings over time and understanding how Moldova positions itself within strategic narratives constructed with the EU.

The empirical data consists of public speeches and official statements delivered during bilateral visits, either by Moldovan officials in Brussels or by EU officials visiting Chişinău, or in other international meetings. Foreign visits are important moments of symbolic diplomacy, where narratives are amplified and carefully performed (Adams et al., 2024). As Adams and Baden (2020) point out, speeches during these visits go beyond formal protocol, they are intentional

performances that express shared memories, future hopes, and political identities. Due to this, these documents provide valuable insights into how the relationship is shaped not only by policies but also through storytelling.

By selecting these types of documents, the analysis can reveal how the EU–Moldova relationship is symbolically framed, how bonding narratives evolve across time, and how Moldova expresses its own narrative agency amid geopolitical uncertainty. Document analysis helps keep the research grounded in actual official communications. It also allows the researcher to work with clear and accessible sources while maintaining the study's focus on how shared language and narratives shape the EU–Moldova relationship.

4.3 Data Collection

The primary data for this research consists of a balanced set of 30 documents, including speeches, official declarations, press releases, and joint statements issued by high-level actors as follows: the European Commission, the European Council, the Council of the European Union, the European Extern Action Service, the Moldovan Presidency, and the Moldovan Government. These documents were selected based on their relevance to Moldova's EU path to EU membership, focusing especially on those that explicitly address EU–Moldova relations or enlargement discourse. The documents were retrieved from official websites such as *ec.europa.eu*, *eeas.europa.eu*, *consilium.europa.eu*, *presedinte.md*, *gov.md* and *mfa.gov.md*. To allow for a comparison over time, the dataset includes documents published both before and after February 2022, the moment Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine. For the pre-invasion period, the year leading up to February 2022 is considered sufficient to sum up prevailing narratives around EU enlargement and Moldova's agency in the accession process. For the post-invasion period, data collection extends up to May 2025, enabling the analysis to include the latest developments in the accession trajectory.

4.4 Operationalisation

To investigate how bonding strategic narratives are constructed in EU–Moldova political discourse, and how Moldova engages with these narratives discursively, this study applies a qualitative document analysis using NVivo as a data management and analysis tool. The operationalisation of this analysis was based on a structured coding scheme rooted in the theoretical framework of Adams et al. (2024) on bonding strategic narratives. To complement

this, the study looks at narrative agency, particularly how Moldova engages with or responds to the EU's framing.

In NVivo, the analysis was structured by creating two main cases, one for the EU and one for Moldova. Each uploaded document was assigned to its corresponding case and classified according to several attributes that support comparison across time, actors, and types of discourse. These attributes were organised under *Case Classifications* and include:

- *Document Type* (speech, press release, statement, joint statement)

- *Date* (before or after 24 February 2022)

- *Actor* (the European Commission, the European Council, the Council of the EU, the European External Action Service, the Moldovan Presidency)

The coding process followed the logic of the theoretical model, using the core concepts outlined earlier as a guide for how narrative content was identified and categorised. Three main types of bonding narratives were used as primary nodes: past-oriented, present-oriented, and future-oriented. Each of these was guided by several possible subcodes:

- *Past-oriented bonding narratives:* cultural ties, European heritage, and travelling memory.

- *Present-oriented bonding narratives*: Democratic system compatibility, strategic alignment, institutional reform and convergence, security and resilience, and shared values.

- *Future-oriented bonding narratives:* common future, peace and enlargement commitments, prosperity and stability, strategic positioning, and a broader vision of integration.

These three temporal dimensions were supplemented by a second set of nodes under the category of *narrative agency*, which focused on how Moldova positioned itself in relation to the EU discourse. This node was divided into three subcategories:

- *Narrative Alignment* (when Moldova echoed the EU's message),

- *Narrative Adaptation* (when Moldova adjusted or added its own perspective), and

- *Narrative Contestation* (when/if Moldova challenged or introduced alternative viewpoints).

Alongside these, two optional thematic codes were applied for *security framing* and *geopolitical urgency*. These codes identified sections that presented EU integration as a response to instability, security threats, or wider regional challenges, especially in documents published after 2022. The decision to include these thematic layers is theoretically grounded in the evolving character of present and future-oriented bonding narratives, which increasingly highlight security cooperation, resilience, and strategic alignment under conditions of geopolitical tension (Ohnesorge & Owen, 2023; Adams et al., 2024). As the EU repositions enlargement as part of its geopolitical strategy, and Moldova's candidacy is framed in terms of stabilisation and regional security, these codes help trace how narrative content is shaped by the strategic environment. They also allow for a more nuanced interpretation of how bonding narratives are mobilised not only to construct symbolic ties, but to respond to acute external pressures.

In addition to the above-mentioned nodes, a *temporal blending* node was created to account for segments where more than one temporal dimension appeared interconnected. This included two sub-nodes: *past–present* and *present–future*. These were used in cases where a single narrative passage referred both to shared historical experience and current alignment, or when current cooperation was linked to a long-term vision of integration.

In certain cases, the narratives did not refer to just one or two timeframes but combined all three within the same message. While these examples were not coded as a separate sub-node, they were included in both the past–present and present–future categories to portray their layered structure. These examples show that temporal framing in enlargement discourse is not always straightforward. Instead, references to the past, present, and future are often intentionally combined to build a sense of continuity, reinforce legitimacy, and express a shared sense of purpose. This addition offers a better understanding of how time is constructed in the in moments where temporal boundaries are less explicit.

The coding process follows a more interpretative logic rather than a pre-established scheme. The coding involved reading the texts line by line and assigning codes to segments of text that reflected one or more of the narrative dimensions. As the focus is on how temporal dimensions are constructed through bonding narratives, the analysis identifies textual segments in which actors refer to the past, present, or future in relation to the EU–Moldova relationship. These temporal references are not only categorised based on the timeframe they recall but are also further interpreted according to their narrative function for instance, whether they frame the

past as a shared memory, the present as a moment of alignment, or the future as a common goal.

Instead of applying a fixed list of codes, the analysis uses open coding, allowing narrative elements to emerge contextually and be sorted into sub-nodes reflecting their temporal orientation and rhetorical role. This flexible structure allows the study to remain sensitive to the language used in foreign visits and official statements, where meaning is often nuanced and relational.

Annotations were used to record observations directly in the text, while *memos* summarised emerging patterns, especially for specific events or groups of documents. Where multiple sources covered the same event from different institutional perspectives, *See Also Links* were created to cross-reference and analyse narrative variation.

Qualitative document analysis offers a flexible and systematic way to explore how meaning is created through language (Schreier, 2012). This approach works especially well when supported by software like NVivo, which helps organise data and simplifies coding (Mortelmans, 2025). This method allowed the author to combine theory-driven coding with emergent patterns while reading the text. After completing the coding process, matrix queries were used to identify bonding narrative shifts, compare their use across time and actors and capture Moldova's narrative agency.

Although the coding is interpretive, it was applied consistently, following the main theoretical framework of bonding strategic narratives and their temporal structure (Adams et al., 2024). References to historical memory, shared crises, symbolic milestones, or future aspirations are noted and analysed based on their narrative function in the context of EU–Moldova partnership.

4.5 Limitations

This study recognises several methodological limitations. Although document analysis offers a structured way to examine political meaning in official texts, it remains interpretive by nature. While the coding followed a consistent scheme grounded in the theoretical framework of bonding strategic narratives, identifying narrative functions such as alignment, adaptation, or contestation required analytical judgement. Reflective memos were used to maintain the analysis consistent, but interpreting political communication is rarely completely objective.

A second challenge comes from the nature of the documents themselves. The analysis relies on publicly available official documents such as speeches, press releases, and joint statements,

which are designed for formal diplomatic settings. These texts reveal how narratives are presented and performed. However, they might not fully show the informal or behind-the-scenes discussions that shape policies.

Including the thematic codes of *security framing* and *geopolitical urgency* enriches the analysis by connecting narratives to the broader strategic picture. However, applying these codes involves some interpretive judgment, especially when deciding whether certain language signals urgency or threat.

Overall, qualitative document analysis offers a grounded approach to explore narratives, but it depends on careful interpretation. This study is transparent about its analytical choices and methodological boundaries and aims to contribute a focused and theory-driven understanding of how bonding narratives and narrative agency evolve within the EU–Moldova enlargement debate.

4.6 Use of AI

This section is dedicated to disclaiming the use of artificial intelligence (AI) in the development of this thesis. The author employed the free-to-use AI tool ChatGPT (OpenAI, 2025) and AI-powered search engine Primo Research Assistant (Aalborg University Library, 2025), in compliance with the university's general principles on good academic practice. The tools were only used as supplementary means for thesis planning and navigation of relevant literature, and not as replacements for scientific knowledge.

ChatGPT was used in the early stages for brainstorming ideas related to the topic, literature review, methodology and theoretical framework, as well as for finding relevant keywords and contextual information. In the literature review, the AI programme supported the identification of essential authors and widely cited academic papers. In the methodology and theoretical framework sections, the AI tool suggested suitable qualitative methods and conceptual approaches. ChatGPT has also helped in explaining complex concepts and ideas for the author's own understanding. All AI-suggested sources were independently verified by the author and cited appropriately.

Primo Research Assistant was particularly valuable for exploring the broader academic literature around the research topic. As an AI-powered academic search engine directly connected to the Aalborg University Library system, it allowed the author to enter full research questions and not just keywords, which helped refine the direction of research. For academic

verification, all the sources were accordingly checked and accessed through the university library system. The author acknowledges the limitations of generative AI and approached the AI-generated content with caution and critical judgement.

CHAPTER 5: DISSECTING THE MOLDOVA–EU STRATEGIC NARRATIVES

5.1 Temporal Anchoring of Bonding Strategic Narratives

5.1.1 Past-Oriented Bonding Narratives

In the early stages of Moldova's EU accession journey, both Moldovan and EU actors recurred to past-oriented bonding narratives in their discourses. They referred to a shared European history, cultural ties, and a sense of familiarity that served as a starting point for shaping a feeling of legitimacy and mutual recognition. In a context where Moldova was still positioning itself as a credible candidate, this narrative helped compensate for the lack of concrete progress by resorting to something more symbolic, a common historical trajectory.

Throughout several documents in the pre-2022 period, Moldova's belonging to Europe is not presented as an aspiration to be fulfilled, but as a return to a rightful place. One statement affirmed that "we are a European country with a European language, a European history and a European political system" (Presidency of the Republic of Moldova, 2022). The repetition of "European" in this sentence clearly reflects an effort to anchor Moldova's identity in something intrinsic and unchangeable. This kind of language was used in moments when Moldova's path to the EU was still described in general or symbolic terms before official negotiations began or any clear steps of alignment had been taken.

These references are not arbitrary. They reoccur across speeches and declarations: "our language, Romanian, is an official language of the Union" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Moldova, 2022), which underlines Moldova's cultural and linguistic links to the EU. These statements do not only reflect shared values, but they also imply that Moldova is already part of the European story, even if the formal membership has not been achieved. Through this framing, they shift the EU from being just a political goal to a return to a historical home.

This type of bonding goes beyond political interests. It speaks to emotion, identity, and shared memory, trying to build a sense of belonging and familiarity that comes before any formal conditions or obligations. These references are made by Moldovan leaders however, they are absent from the EU side, which focuses on historical accountability.

Going along the same line, looking to the past is not only about closeness. In some cases, it becomes a way to bring up difficult memories of trauma and economic hardship. A few documents mention phrases such as "shameful practices of land grabbing" (Presidency of the

Republic of Moldova, 2022) or the suffering of the Moldovan people from past government issues "2014 massive banking fraud […] bringing all the responsible to justice" (European Council, Council of the European Union, 2021a). These are usually mentioned when Moldova's European path is framed as a clear break from its history of domination. These painful references are not always expanded on, but their inclusion points to something deeper: they help justify Moldova's desire for protection and a safer future within the EU.

While these kinds of messages were not frequently present before Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, they start to fade even more in the later documents. After 2022, the tone becomes more urgent. The growing attention shifts to rapid reforms, rising security concerns, and tangible progress that Moldova takes to align with EU policies. The earlier symbolic and emotionally charged language starts to fade, making room for a more pragmatic and strategic tone.

This does not mean that past-oriented bonding disappears, rather, it becomes less central. The calls upon heritage, language, and identity are still present, but more often in ceremonial speeches or symbolic statements, rather than as core justifications for integration. What is observed is a shift in discursive tools: from historical reassurance to present-day performance and future-oriented commitment.

In this context, past narratives remain a quiet anchor, offering continuity and symbolic grounding, but are no longer the primary lens through which Moldova's European path is communicated. As the accession process became more real and more political, the narrative needed to reflect urgency, delivery, and transformation. Belonging was no longer something to be claimed through memory, now it had to be demonstrated through reform.

Table 1: Use of Past-Oriented Bonding Narratives by Actor

	European Union	Republic of Moldova
Past-oriented bonding narratives	6	20
Cultural ties	0	4
European heritage	0	6
Historical Accountability	5	10
Travelling Memory	0	2

Source: Author's own coding, based on qualitative data analysis conducted in NVivo.

In the above matrix, there is a clear asymmetry in how EU and Moldova use past-oriented bonding narratives. Moldovan actors refer to such narratives over three times more frequently

than their EU counterparts. While the EU does invoke past-oriented bonding in general terms (6 references), it largely avoids deeper cultural framing, with no coded references to sub-themes like *European heritage, cultural ties*, or *travelling memory*. Instead, the EU recurs to *historical accountability*, which is linked to acknowledgments of past injustices or external threats.

Moldova's discourse, on the other hand, makes broader use of sub-themes related to the past, accounting for 20 references in total. Still, the most frequent is historical accountability (10), followed by European heritage (6) and cultural ties (4). This matrix supports the earlier understanding that Moldova builds a strong emotional and historical case for belonging to the EU, while the EU tends to engage with Moldova's past in a more reserved and selective way.

5.1.2 Present-Oriented Bonding Narratives

After 2022, the discourse clearly shifted towards the present. The focus turned to the reforms Moldova is carrying out, the partnerships it is building, and its resilience in a region marked by instability. In this narrative, belonging is no longer concerned with shared history or cultural memory. It's something that must be earned through action, progress, and credible institutions.

The most occurring theme here is strategic alignment. Moldova's authorities consistently try to show the country as a reliable and like-minded partner of the EU, especially in the context of regional uncertainty. Official declarations often mention Moldova's "full alignment with EU Common Foreign and Security Policy" (European Council, Council of the European Union, 2024a) and these are not just technical details, they are presented as political signals, showing where Moldova stands and who it stands with.

Closely connected to this is the emphasis on institutional reform and convergence. Moldovan officials regularly point to the progress made on the European Commission's recommendations. One emerging example is the claim that Moldova has implemented "94% of the nine steps required for accession negotiations" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Moldova, 2023b). This kind of statement acts as proof of commitment that turns political ambition into measurable results. The discourse moves from vague reform goals to more detailed reporting, with a focus on fighting corruption, reforming the justice system, and improving public administration.

At the same time, security and resilience have started to take up more space in Moldova's present-day narrative. These ideas often come up in relation to the war in Ukraine and the risks

it creates for the region: "Moldova has responded resolutely to hybrid actions led by Russia and its proxies, displaying remarkable resilience" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Moldova, 2024). Moldova is also portrayed alongside the EU as a partner that shares the burdens of European security "continue to stand firmly for peace, working shoulder to shoulder to shape our shared future" (European Council, Council of the European Union, 2025). This framing shifts the focus from Moldova as a vulnerable state to one that actively contributes to regional stability. It's a way of showing that the country has agency besides needs.

Another recurring theme in Moldova's present-oriented discourse is the idea of democratic system compatibility, that suggests that Moldovan institutions are becoming more in line with European standards of governance. Progress is often described not just as technical or formal, but as part of a deeper effort to rebuild trust in the state. As this official statement mentions: "We are working to strengthen democratic processes […] taking serious steps to ensure that […] election campaigns are legally and transparently funded […] working to fight disinformation and build a strong and resilient civil society and media" (Presidency of the Republic of Moldova, 2022). These elements of transparency, active civil society, and freedom of expression are all central to the EU's political culture. Their repeated appearance in Moldovan discourse points not only to compliance, but to a real attempt to align more closely with the EU system.

The EU institutions also reflect this message, often recognising Moldova's efforts to carry out reforms, especially in areas such as the rule of law, fighting corruption, strengthening democratic institutions, public administration, and the economy. These acknowledgements help support Moldova's message of being compatible with the EU and show that its progress at home is being noticed and appreciated. Democratic reform is presented not just as a box to tick on the path to accession, but as a shared process on which Moldova and the EU are working together.

Lastly, the idea of common European values brings together all the other parts of this present-oriented narrative. This kind of language is often used by Moldovan leaders to express not just political ties, but a deeper bond based on shared values and society. In the speech to the European Parliament, President Maia Sandu stated: "The values of the EU are our values – respect for human life and the realisation of everyone's dreams in dignity and peace" (Presidency of the Republic of Moldova, 2022). These kinds of statements appeal to emotion and mirror the wording often used by EU institutions themselves. One Commission

communication, for example, refers to "our common values of democracy, the rule of law and respect for human rights" (European Union External Action, 2021) as the shared basis for stronger cooperation.

Even when support is tied to conditions, like the EU financial assistance, these values are at the centre. In the words of one governmental statement: "We understand that this money does not come for pretty eyes, but with conditions for our state to respect European values and strengthen good governance, the rule of law, the fight against corruption and institutions" (Government of the Republic of Moldova, 2025). This shows a more mature form of discourse from the Moldovan side, where values are not only ideals to aspire to, but tools that shape the way cooperation, expectations, and progress are structured.

Table 2: Use of Present-Oriented Bonding Narratives by Actor

	European Union	Republic of Moldova
Present-oriented bonding narratives	122	115
Common values	45	45
Democratic system compatibility	17	9
Institutional reform and convergence	61	60
Security and resilience	40	24
Strategic alignment	24	35

Source: Author's own coding, based on qualitative data analysis conducted in NVivo.

The matrix above illustrates how present-oriented bonding narrative are used by the European and Moldovan officials. Generally, the two actors rely on this type of language at a comparable rate. The close numbers (122 to 115) suggest that the present time has evolved into a shared space where both parties build legitimacy, trust and a sense of belonging.

There are some distinctions when looking closer at the sub-themes. Compared to Moldova, the EU references more the compatibility of democratic system (17 to 9), which illustrates its role in establishing and maintaining the requirements placed on candidates to EU membership. Moldova, by contrast, places stronger emphasis on strategic alignment (35 to 24), using this to feature its foreign policy positioning and alignment with EU priorities.

The number of references to institutional reform and convergence is almost equal, indicating a strong shared focus on tangible reforms, particularly around the rule of law. Similarly, the theme of common European values appears equally in both the EU and Moldovan discourse, showing consistency that both sides rely on in shaping their vision of belonging.

At the same time, the EU refers more often to security and resilience compared to Moldova (40 to 24). This could imply that while Moldova is more reserved when addressing security-related concerns, the EU seeks to place Moldova within a larger narrative of regional stability and strategic responsibility.

In sum, the matrix shows that both actors shape the formation of present-oriented bonding narratives. Moldova aims to build its legitimacy by taking tangible actions and aligning with the EU views, whereas the EU not only supports these initiatives but also helps shape the narrative through its own rhetoric.

5.1.3 Future-Oriented Bonding Narratives

As Moldova's relationship with the EU has evolved, future-oriented bonding narratives have grown into a key narrative layer suggesting where Moldova aspires to reach but also showing the kind of European future both Moldova and the EU imagine building together. These narratives focus less on achievements already made and more on long-term convergence, shared political community, and symbolic certainty, to legitimise the path towards chosen aspirations.

One of the most common themes in future-oriented discourse is the idea of a shared future, framed both as a political direction and a sense of common identity. The phrase "The future of Moldova and its people lies within the European Union" (European Council, Council of the European Union, 2023, 2024a) appears frequently in EU statements, Council conclusions, and Moldovan speeches. While it may sound ceremonial at first, the way it is repeated and where it appears gives it weight. It is often used at the start of joint declarations or as the final line in important speeches, making it a key signal of political intent. In the 8th Association Council statement, that exact phrase opens the section on political engagement, setting the tone right away and showing that Moldova's EU path is being imagined as something already in motion, and not just by Moldova.

This ties in with another theme that has grown stronger after 2022: enlargement as a peace and security project. The war in Ukraine changed the way enlargement is framed. It is no longer only about technical reforms or institutional fit, now it is also about stability. Moldova's integration is often mentioned alongside regional security concerns. Charles Michel, for example, declared that "It is our European duty […] to increase support for your stability, security, territorial integrity and sovereignty" (European Council, Council of the European Union, 2022a), adding that Moldova's place in the Union is a reflection of this shared

responsibility. Moldovan officials have started using similar wording. As a reaction to the European Commission's opinion on Moldova's application for EU membership, Deputy Prime Minister Popescu noted: "a decision that will anchor us to the longest-standing project of peace, prosperity and democracy on the European continent" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Moldova, 2022). These messages frame Moldova's EU path as more than just a reward for reforms, it becomes part of the EU's answer to rising instability and external threats.

Prosperity and stability are also focal in the future-oriented bonding narrative. In this instance, EU membership is about improving people's lives, building better institutions, stronger governance, and economic resilience. Moldovan leaders often present reforms as investments, not obligations. At the Growth Plan presentation, Prime Minister Recean called the agreement "a historic investment" not just in infrastructure, but in Moldova's prosperity, democracy and long-term security (Government of the Republic of Moldova, 2025) and stressed that "we are already in the middle of the accession process" (2025). The EU leaders use similar framing, underlining how membership can bring energy independence, funding opportunities, and greater connectivity. What stands out is that prosperity is not described as something far off, it is rather portrayed as something already starting to take shape.

Another important narrative is Moldova's changing role from a reforming neighbour to a strategic partner. Both EU and Moldovan officials gradually present the country as part of the EU's broader vision. Moldova is now described as contributing to regional stability through its participation in the EU–Ukraine Solidarity Lanes, the Security and Defence Partnership, and various digital and energy initiatives. One joint statement notes: "EU and Moldova confirmed their close cooperation on security and defence […] elevating this cooperation to a new strategic level" (European Council, Council of the European Union, 2024a). As seen, Moldova also mirrors this view, often framing the alignment with the EU policies as a matter of security and responsibility, not just compliance. In this way, the country positions itself not only as preparing to join the EU but already acting like a member with something to offer.

Lastly, there's a broader vision where Moldova is already imagined practically inside the EU's structures. References to Moldova's future place in the Single Market, to plans for SEPA integration, and to the gradual alignment with EU legal and fiscal norms are noticed. In the statement that announced the start of accession talks, President Michel stated: "When the will of the people is followed, visionary leadership delivers and democracy is put into practice, we see the fruit of real progress" (European Council, Council of the European Union, 2024b). This

framing shows that Moldova is not being addressed as a country hoping to be let in, but as one already building its place inside the system.

This shift is even more visible when looking back at the pre-invasion period. Before 2022, Moldova spoke of EU membership as a goal, while the EU only cautiously echoed it in its discourse. Most statements focused on reforms and cooperation, with little mention of enlargement as a concrete outcome. In Charles Michel's 2021 Eastern Partnership speech, Moldova wasn't mentioned at all in relation to EU membership. Moldova had already begun expressing a clear desire to join, but this wasn't reflected on the EU side. After 2022, the language became more confident, and more balanced. Moldova's future in the EU began to be described not as a long-term possibility, but as a shared direction already unfolding.

Across all these narratives from peace and prosperity to strategy and integration, the future is employed to normalise Moldova's place in the EU, and Moldova's EU membership is no longer presented as a question of if, but when. These narratives reflect Moldova's ambition and help create the political space for that ambition to become credible and eventually fulfilled.

Table 3: Use of Future-Oriented Bonding Narratives by Actor

	European Union	Republic of Moldova
Future-oriented bonding narratives	89	83
Common future	42	38
Peace and enlargement commitments	21	19
Prosperity and stability	42	33
Strategic positioning	26	18
Vision of integration	41	55

Source: Author's own coding, based on qualitative data analysis conducted in NVivo.

The matrix on future-oriented bonding narratives shows that this type of discourse has become a central part of how both Moldova and the EU talk about integration and importantly, it is now more evenly shared between the two. Unlike past-oriented narratives, which appeared less frequently and were mostly driven by Moldova, future-oriented narratives seem to be jointly shaped by both actors. This also contrasts with present-oriented narratives, where Moldova took a more active role by using reform progress to demonstrate its readiness for membership. In those cases, the focus was on proving Moldova's place in the EU. Future-oriented narratives, on the other hand, already place Moldova within the Union. They focus less on possibility and more on a shared destination. The more balanced use of these narratives by both sides reflects

this shift. What is noticeable is a transition in discourse from proving legitimacy in the present to expressing belonging in the future.

5.2 Narrative Agency in the EU–Moldova Relations

As Moldova's relationship with the European Union has matured, its discursive role has also evolved. No longer only a recipient of the EU's strategic narrative, Moldova increasingly participates in shaping the way its accession is talked about, both by its own institutions and, at times, by the EU itself.

Before the war in Ukraine started, Moldova's discourse was closely following the one of the EU institutions. At this stage, Moldova's main goal was recognition and credibility, and full alignment served that purpose. For that reason, Moldovan actors adopted the EU's framing, often integrating terms such as the rule of law, European family and irreversible path to reform to show commitment to the EU values. By strategically mirroring the EU language, Moldova positioned itself as a credible partner. This is clearly reflected in President Maia Sandu's 2022 speech in the European Parliament, where she thanked the EU for its support and reaffirmed Moldova's commitment to shared values (Presidency of the Republic of Moldova, 2022).

After receiving candidate status and with this the regional context shifting, Moldova's discourse changed its tone, moving from alignment to adaptation. Moldova still echoed the EU's framing but added its own priorities. This can be noticed in Moldova's growing use of deadlines and targets, for example, Prime Minister Recean's remark "we are already in the middle of the accession process […] not in 10 years, not in 20, but in 4 years" (Government of the Republic of Moldova, 2025) reframes the timeline of enlargement in a way that goes beyond EU language. Adaptation also includes Moldova's proposals for institutional mechanisms, such as the Joint Consultative Committee with the European Committee of the Regions or calls for deeper dialogue on energy and the Green Deal (European Council, Council of the European Union, 2024a).

Another essential part of Moldova's discursive adaptation is how performance is used not only to show progress, but also to make a case. Officials often refer to the percentage of fulfilled recommendations, the number of reform chapters completed, or alignment with the EU's foreign and security policy (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Moldova, 2023a, 2023b). Besides sending messages of a cooperative partnership, this language sets clear expectations, where Moldova as a reforming partner expects reciprocity.

Alongside the same line, Moldova does not openly contest the EU narrative. Instead, it shifts the focus or adds its own meaning. When the EU talks about conditionality, Moldova talks about readiness. When the EU frames enlargement as a strategic investment, Moldova presents itself as already contributing to that goal. In the documents analysed, there were no clear cases of Moldova rejecting or directly opposing the EU language. This absence of contestation seems intentional. Moldova has chosen to stay within the EU's framing, using alignment and adaptation to build trust and credibility. Rather than challenging the narrative, it adjusts the tone. For example, while the EU is often cautious about the speed of enlargement, Moldova is more direct, stating that "We understand that the accession process is long and complicated. And we're not looking for shortcuts. We believe that accession is based on meritocracy and results achieved" (Presidency of the Republic of Moldova, 2022). These statements allow Moldova to assert itself, without seeming confrontational.

These shifts in Moldova's narrative style have unfolded in parallel with the EU's changes in its own messaging. Since 2022, the EU has moved from a more careful tone focused on reforms to stronger and more open support, using phrases like "Moldova belongs to the European family" (European Council, Council of the European Union, 2025) and "The EU and Moldova share a common future" (European Union External Action, 2024). At the same time, Moldova has gradually shifted from a language of application to one of participation. There is a growing sense that Moldova is no longer narrating itself only to the EU, but also to its neighbouring states and to other candidate countries. This broader positioning suggests a more mature form of narrative agency, not just speaking the language of the EU, but co-authoring the discourse around what EU membership means in this moment of geopolitical change.

5.3 Security, Reframed Enlargement and Geopolitical Urgency

5.3.1 Enlargement as a Reform Path

Before Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the EU's approach to Moldova's enlargement was shaped mainly by targeted reforms, legal approximation, and institutional preparedness. Security was mentioned from time to time in the context of resilience, energy cooperation, or governance but it was not treated as a pressing or existential issue. Instead, the enlargement process was framed as a long-term, conditional journey based on meeting technical and legal standards.

This tone is especially clear in Charles Michel's 2021 Eastern Partnership speech. Moldova is acknowledged as a reforming neighbour, but there is no mention of its potential future as an

EU member. The speech avoids geopolitical topics and focuses instead on democratic development, digitalisation, and economic recovery (European Council, Council of the European Union, 2021b). A similar message appears in the High Representative/Vice-President Borrell's 2021 remarks. While he praised Moldova's democratic progress, his focus remained on bilateral reforms and the EU's role as a supporting partner: "The European Commission has pledged financial support", adding that all the EU institutions will remain committed to the political association and economic integration, in accordance with the Association Agreement (European Union External Action, 2021). He welcomes Moldova's goal to bring the country "closer to the European Union" based on shared democratic values but abstains from framing Moldova's future in terms of membership or geopolitical strategy (2021). These examples show that, before 2022, Moldova's path to the EU was discussed within the usual enlargement framework, one that centred more on internal reform than on external threats.

On Moldova's side, the message was more urgent. Political leaders spoke of EU integration as a national goal and referred to shared values and identity. Still, these narratives were mostly grounded in performance. Phrases like "committed to implementing reforms", "fight corruption and implement justice reform" (Presidency of the Republic of Moldova, 2021b) and "strengthening the capacity of state institutions" (Presidency of the Republic of Moldova, 2021a) were common. Although issues like resilience, energy cooperation, or regional security appeared sporadically, they were not framed as existential concerns or as central to the enlargement discourse.

Security risks were mentioned mostly in indirect or sectoral terms, such as energy vulnerability or the need for independent media. A few early signs of narrative evolution appeared in Moldovan discourse during this time. For instance, in the 2021 Eastern Partnership Summit communication, Moldova referred to its "respect for principles and norms of international law" and highlighted "security and resilience" and "territorial integrity" as priorities (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Moldova, 2021). Yet the use of these terms was still embedded in the broader reform agenda. The EU actors, for their part, continued to treat these topics as governance-related rather than security-driven (European Council, Council of the European Union, 2021b). The pre-2022 framing reflected a more conventional enlargement logic, one where enlargement was a reward for successful transformation, not a response to geopolitical urgency.

5.3.2 From Reform to Resilience

After February 2022, the tone of the enlargement discourse began to shift. Moldova was no longer described mainly as a reforming neighbour. Instead, it was increasingly portrayed as a country at the frontline, one that not only shares the EU's values but also faces its risks. Both the EU and Moldovan narratives began to frame enlargement in terms of security, urgency, and regional stability.

In EU statements, Moldova started to be referred to as a "close partner", "resilient", and as part of "our European future" (European Commission, 2023a, 2023b; European Union External Action, 2024). High-level statements started to link Moldova's internal reforms directly to external threats. Disinformation, cyberattacks, election interference, and energy blackmail became recurring features in the EU's enlargement discourse. Phrases such as "some seek to undermine Moldova's path to progress, prosperity and stability through energy blackmail, fake news and hybrid attacks" (European Council, Council of the European Union, 2025) marked a clear rhetorical shift.

Security framing gradually became part of the enlargement discourse. Moldova's alignment with the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy, its involvement in the European Peace Facility, and the launch of the EU–Moldova Security and Defence Partnership in 2023 were not just presented as technical steps. Instead, they were framed as evidence that Moldova was contributing to the EU's broader security, by actively helping to protect the Union's stability. The EU documents emphasised Moldova's role in resisting Russian pressure, countering hybrid threats, and strengthening cyber capacity (European Council, Council of the European Union, 2023, 2024a). The term "resilience" appeared not only in relation to governance, but also as a way to signal Moldova's readiness to handle security challenges.

Moldova's own discourse also reinforced these framings. Officials began using stronger, more confident language, with clear references to security risks. Terms like disinformation, energy pressure, and cyber threats became more frequent, and integration with the EU was increasingly described as a way to protect peace and democratic stability. In the opening of the first Intergovernmental Conference, Prime Minister Recean framed the EU integration not only as a political goal but as "an existential imperative for Moldova to safeguard our country's security and the livelihoods of our citizens" (Government of the Republic of Moldova, 2024). The message that Moldova will achieve full alignment "with the EU acquis and tend to ensure its efficient implementation by 2030" (2024), echoed across speeches tied to the negotiation process, captures how urgency became part of the enlargement logic. This represents a shift

from legitimacy based solely on reform performance to a narrative shaped by strategic necessity.

Importantly, security risks were no longer discussed in isolation. Media pluralism, rule of law, and public administration reform were re-framed as instruments to resist external destabilisation. This is visible in Moldova's framing of judicial reform as a way to increase trust and resist foreign influence, and in repeated calls for support in addressing disinformation and election security. Statements by President Maia Sandu repeatedly referred to hybrid pressure and the politicised use of energy as tools of coercion (Presidency of the Republic of Moldova, 2022, 2024), language that was later echoed in the EU briefings and statements (European Council, Council of the European Union, 2023, 2025).

The geopolitical context also became a justification for accelerated integration. Speeches by the Presidents of the European Commission - Ursula von der Leyen, and the European Council - Charles Michel, described Moldova as "part of our European family" and argued that the country's future lies "within the European Union" (European Commission, 2023a; European Council, Council of the European Union, 2024a, 2024b, 2025; European Union External Action, 2024). These messages often blended the language of solidarity with strategic necessity, showing that enlargement was now being framed not only as an incentive, but as an obligation, part of a collective response to regional instability.

In this reframed discourse, enlargement became less about completing technical chapters and more about anchoring Moldova more firmly, both politically and institutionally, to Europe. Security concerns and geopolitical urgency were no longer secondary. They moved to the centre of the discourse and became key reasons behind Moldova's accelerated integration path.

Table 4: Security Framing and Geopolitical Urgency by Actor (Pre-2022)

	Geopolitical urgency	Security framing
European Union	3	3
Republic of Moldova	2	4

Source: Author's own coding, based on qualitative data analysis conducted in NVivo.

Table 5: Security Framing and Geopolitical Urgency by Actor (Post-2022)

	Geopolitical urgency	Security framing
European Union	16	22
Republic of Moldova	11	19

Source: Author's own coding, based on qualitative data analysis conducted in NVivo.

The two tables compare how often security-related themes appeared in the EU's and Moldova's enlargement discourse before and after the 2022 invasion of Ukraine.

Before the invasion, both actors referred to these themes only occasionally. After 2022, however, there is a clear increase, especially from the EU side. Security framing, in particular, jumps from 3 to 22 references. Moldova also shows a notable rise, especially in the same category, indicating that both actors began to speak more openly and consistently about the security aspects of the enlargement process. This is not just a matter of frequency, it points to a shift in how enlargement is framed overall, connecting it more directly to political and strategic priorities.

The relatively even growth across both actors also shows that this was not just a top-down change from the EU. Moldova picked up and reinforced the same narrative, using it to strengthen its image as a reliable partner in regional security. Taken together, the tables make clear that security and geopolitics have become central elements in how enlargement is now discussed.

5.4 Temporal Blending as a Narrative Tool

While it is analytically useful to look at past, present, and future-oriented bonding narratives as separate categories, many of the documents analysed do not follow these boundaries so clearly. Much of the EU and Moldova's enlargement discourse is marked by temporal blending that combines two or more timeframes within the same narrative. This layering is intentional. It serves to build continuity, reinforce legitimacy, and create both emotional impact and strategic meaning.

As mentioned in the methodology chapter, two sub-nodes: past–present and present–future were used to code these overlaps. However, during analysis, some examples included all three temporal layers at once. This kind of temporal layering helps create narratives that feel unified and purposeful. In Moldova's case, the past is often used to make sense of present efforts, while reforms are framed as steps toward a clearly imagined future in the EU. The message is not just that Moldova is on a path but that its journey has meaning across time. Statements like "we have chosen EU membership as a path to freedom, prosperity and peace" (Presidency of the Republic of Moldova, 2022) do more than state a goal. They bring history, present progress, and future hope into one coherent narrative.

The EU also uses this approach. Its statements often point to Moldova's recent reform efforts, while recalling the foundation laid by the Association Agreement and describing EU membership as a natural outcome (European Union External Action, 2022). This blending is particularly visible in speeches following the decision to open accession negotiations. In these moments, the message shifts from Moldova making progress to Moldova being meant to belong. Phrases like "Moldova belongs to the European Union" (European Union External Action, 2024; European Council, Council of the European Union, 2025) are no longer just long-term visions, they are part of a narrative that links past cooperation, present alignment, and future membership as one continuous process.

5.4.1 Past-Present Blending

In many documents analysed, the links between past and present are key in shaping how legitimacy is expressed. There is a sense of continuity that political actors build when referring to earlier shared experiences or commitments, while discussing current actions. For Moldova, this approach is especially meaningful. It allows present efforts to be seen not just as necessary, but as the outcome of a path it has been following for some time. In the 6th Association Council statement, for example, references to "the implementation of the Association Agreement" and "progress achieved since its entry into force" (European Council, Council of the European Union, 2021a) are followed directly by updates on justice reform, energy cooperation, and democratic governance.

Similarly, during the 2021 joint press conference with Maia Sandu, President Charles Michel referred to the EU's earlier support for Moldova, especially during times of political crisis. His message suggested that current cooperation is not new, but part of an existing and ongoing relationship (European Council, Council of the European Union, 2021b). President Sandu turned to Moldova's own past, speaking about lessons learned from the previous government failures: "The Eastern Partnership benefited Moldovans even when Moldovan Governments did not share European values" and "for the first time, people elected a truly pro-European government" (Presidency of the Republic of Moldova, 2021b). Mentioning that experience serves as context and meaning to the country's democratic efforts today.

This narrative approach becomes even more visible when Moldova receives recognition from the EU. Moldova's recent progress is often recognised in connection with earlier efforts, outlining a broader pattern of reform. In the 7th Association Council statement, reforms in areas such as the judiciary, media, and transparency are discussed in connection with the continued

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importance of the Association Agreement (European Council, Council of the European Union, 2023). The structure of this message is clear: Moldova is being recognised, but that recognition is tied to long-standing cooperation. The EU's support is not presented as a political favour, but rather as the logical outcome of a shared achievement.

For Moldovan officials, this kind of language also has a meaning in the domestic context. Reforms are not only introduced as new measures, but as part of a broader effort to move beyond a troubled past. President Sandu's message "We have eliminated a large number of corruption schemes by which the state and the people have been robbed" and the mentioning of the government efforts to "recover the stolen money and bring the corrupt fugitives to justice" (Presidency of the Republic of Moldova, 2022) are used to indicate a clear departure from previous challenges. This way of speaking presents today's reforms as shaped not just by political decisions, but by lessons learned over time.

This approach shifts the tone of enlargement. Rather than emphasising reform as something imposed by the EU, past–present blending allows Moldova to present these efforts as internally driven as part of a path it has already chosen. The EU, in this framing, is not seen as an outside judge but as a steady partner. This helps Moldova shift away from the image of a latecomer and instead appear as a country that has been steadily working towards EU membership.

5.4.2 Present–Future Blending

In recent years, especially after the war in Ukraine began, present–future blending has become one of the most common patterns in EU–Moldova enlargement discourse. Instead of talking about reforms as isolated efforts or about EU membership as a distant possibility, many documents link the two directly. Integrating present and future-oriented timeframes into the discourse, presents Moldova's current efforts as part of EU's future, and makes integration more tangible and within reach. It moves the conversation away from "if" Moldova joins, to "when", and even more than that, it suggests the future is already being shaped now.

This framing appears in both EU and Moldovan messaging. In Charles Michel's 2024 speech, Moldova is commended for its reform progress and also acknowledged as contributing to "a stronger, more united Europe" (European Council, Council of the European Union, 2024b). The emphasis is not only on Moldova moving forward, but on its role in shaping the EU's transformation. Michel's mentioning of Moldova's transformative steps joining the "European family" links the country's present efforts to a collective vision (2024b).

On Moldovan side, this present-future blending is even more evident. In a statement of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, officials note that "we are already in the middle of the accession process" (Government of the Republic of Moldova, 2025). This phrasing removes the usual distance between reforms and full membership. Instead of presenting reforms as targets Moldova is working towards, they are described as steps within a process that is already unfolding. The focus is not on starting the journey, but on continuing it.

Another example where temporal frames merge is Foreign Affairs Minister Popescu's speech following the EU Council's decision to open negotiations where he mentions "we start this stage on a solid foundation" and the fulfilment of "94% of the recommendations"(Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Moldova, 2023b), which presents the future as the next step in the work already being done.

The blending of present and future also helps manage expectations. By linking reforms to the future in a clear way, officials can maintain momentum without overpromising. It also allows the EU to keep enlargement in a positive frame where the need of reforms is not disregarded but does not make everything depend on them either.

At the same time, present–future blending helps both sides communicate stability. Moldova uses it to show that it is ready and already acting like a future member. The EU uses it to show that its commitment is serious, and that Moldova is part of a larger vision.

5.4.3 Strategic Storytelling and Political Purpose

The use of temporal blending in the EU–Moldova discourse is more than just a manner of speaking. It plays an important role in shaping how the integration process is understood and accepted. By connecting different moments in time within the same narrative, both Moldova and the EU manage to build a storyline that feels continuous, purposeful, and credible. Whether drawing connection between past and present, or present and future, this approach helps make the path to the EU feel more stable, especially in a time shaped by insecurity and uncertainty.

What makes this particularly relevant is that it gives current reform efforts more weight. When today's actions are connected to earlier commitments, as in past–present blending, they seem less like reactions and more like the continuation of a longer process. Moldova is not just following the EU demands, it is following a direction it chose years ago. This adds to its credibility. For the EU, it reinforces the idea that supporting Moldova is not just political, but a logical next step in a shared process. The same applies to present–future blending. When

reforms are framed as part of the country's future inside the EU, the distance between today and full membership starts to shrink, and the future becomes part of the current political agenda.

Temporal blending also helps both sides navigate a difficult context. The war in Ukraine, economic pressures, and ongoing debates about enlargement have made the future feel uncertain. By linking Moldova's efforts to earlier cooperation and to a shared future, the integration process appears more structured and less dependent on short-term events. This sense of continuity helps build trust when political conditions are unstable.

Looking from a deeper perspective, temporal blending strengthens the sense of connection between Moldova and the EU. It allows the relationship to be described as ongoing, active, and forward-looking at the same time. Finally, temporal blending also makes the story easier to communicate. It gives political leaders a way to talk about the past, present, and future without jumping between them. Instead, everything feels connected. This helps both domestic and international audiences follow the story more clearly. And when a message is coherent and grounded, it is easier to believe and easier to support.

Table 6: Temporal Blending References by Actor (Pre-2022)

	European Union	Republic of Moldova
Past-Present	3	6
Present-Future	13	10

Source: Author's own coding, based on qualitative data analysis conducted in NVivo.

Table 7: Temporal Blending References by Actor (Post-2022)

	European Union	Republic of Moldova
Past-Present	10	20
Present-Future	31	31

Source: Author's own coding, based on qualitative data analysis conducted in NVivo.

By comparison, the two matrices show that after 2022, temporal blending appears more often, especially the present–future references, which both Moldova and the EU rely upon more. This change reflects a new way of debating integration which is not as something far off, but as something already underway, with today's reforms closely tied to the idea of future membership. Additionally, Moldova makes more use of past–present references, perhaps to indicate that it has been on this path for some time. Overall, the increase in both types of blending suggests that time is being used more deliberately in the way both sides can build a clear and consistent narrative in a changed political context.

CHAPTER 6: REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

6.1 Framing Narratives Under Geopolitical Pressure

The findings of this study show a clear shift in how the EU enlargement is narrated in the context of growing geopolitical tension. Moldova's path to the EU, which was essentially described in terms of reforms and institutional progress, is now more often framed as a strategic necessity. Besides accelerating political decisions as granting candidate status and opening accession talks, the war in Ukraine changed how political actors communicate about the process. This change reshaped the way ideas of legitimacy, partnership, and belonging are conveyed.

In the period prior to the invasion in February 2022, the discourse around Moldova's EU integration was mostly framed about conditionality, rule of law, and alignment with EU standards. For Moldova, the enlargement was a long technical process, dependent on constant progress in targeted policy areas. Both Moldova and the EU addressed the topic with a practical tone, with Moldova situating itself as a country within the reform-based framework, and the EU responding with assistance tied to measurable progress.

After the invasion, this reform-oriented framing did not disappear, but it began to carry a new meaning. Security and resilience became central in the debate, Moldova becoming a partner on the frontline, directly involved in safeguarding the EU's geopolitical interests. References to urgency, hybrid threats, and stabilising the eastern border began to appear more often, both in high-level speeches and in ordinary policy statements. In this context, enlargement was no longer just about rewarding reforms, it became a way to respond to external threats.

This shift guides a deeper change in how the EU–Moldova relationship is being framed. What was once a mostly technical and policy-driven process, it now includes emotional and symbolic elements, as well as security concerns. Moldova is now increasingly presented not just as a reforming candidate, but as a partner whose integration would strengthen the EU's own stability and strategic position. This reflects a broader change in the EU's approach to enlargement, where political and strategic concerns are becoming more visible in how the process is justified.

One of the key takeaways from this shift is a move from gaining legitimacy through performance to gaining legitimacy through positioning. Moldova's alignment with the EU is

now described as important not only for itself, but for the region and for Europe as a whole. It is the moment when reform and conditionality are overshadowed by the strategic choice, where safeguarding democratic values, maintaining regional stability and addressing geopolitical priorities become imperative. This change creates room for Moldova to present itself as part of the European project, by drawing on a narrative rooted in shared values and regional security.

6.2 The Role of Temporal Blending

By introducing the concept of temporal blending, this analysis reveals that the enlargement narrative often connects the temporal dimensions from past to future within the same segment of speech. With the goal of shaping a more stable and constant narrative, institutional actors tend to connect different timeframes instead of treating them separately. This use of language becomes more frequent after 2022, when enlargement is described not just through technicalities, but also through past cooperation and future expectations.

When merging the past with present, it supports the credibility of speech as past moments of cooperation such as the Association Agreement and other reform commitments help the narrative of current efforts seem coherent and less reactive. This way, Moldova's reform efforts follow a pre-established path, part of a long-term engagement with the EU.

Present–future blending, in turn, is used to build confidence and direction. It links Moldova's recent reforms to the idea of future membership, suggesting that integration is already underway. Statements using this feature often blend current reform developments with phrases that imply belonging, creating the expectation that membership is the logical action to follow.

What becomes clear from the analysis is that temporal blending strengthens the overall structure of the enlargement narrative. It brings a sense of continuity and purpose, helping both Moldova and the EU to position reforms and cooperation within a shared trajectory. Moldova is not only shown as a country fulfilling the necessary requirements, but as one that is part of a broader story, one that links past cooperation with future membership. In a less predictable context, where priorities evolve and the political environment is shaped by external threats, referring to different timeframes together also allows political actors to deliver a more grounded message, one that creates emotional resonance and reinforces the sense of continuity and direction.

In this way, temporal blending strengthens the bonding effect between Moldova and the EU. It allows both sides to address integration not as a distant ambition or a new decision, but as something rooted in a longer process. Moldova is shown to be consistent, and the EU's support appears justified. The result is a narrative that connects the different stages of Moldova's European path into a more complete and convincing narrative.

6.3 Moldova's Agency and the EU's Framing

Current communication shows that Moldova's narrative has become more structured and confident. While the country continues to align closely with the EU language, it also shows a growing sense of ownership. Alongside progress on recommended reforms and efforts to demonstrate compliance, Moldova is increasingly asserting its presence in the enlargement discourse by actively seeking more space for participation in shaping the integration process.

What becomes more noticeable when comparing Moldova's narrative to that of the EU is the difference in tone and pace. Moldova reflects a forwards-leaning tone with increasing confidence, while the EU tends to communicate in a more cautious and general way. Moldova's efforts are recognised by the EU institutions, but the EU actors are careful in phrasing their message as they need to stay consistent across all candidate countries and avoid political promises they might not be able to deliver.

While Moldova shapes its messaging to present integration as both well-earned and timely, the EU continues to rely on broader statements of support and references to strategic partnership. This difference is not surprising, but it becomes more relevant in the post-2022 context, when enlargement is increasingly framed as a response to geopolitical instability. Moldova uses this moment to assert its credibility and to reduce the perceived distance between current alignment and future membership. The EU recognises this momentum but remains careful in its language.

In this discursive interplay, Moldova's agency is not expressed through confrontation, but through subtle shifts in framing, emphasising initiative, using reform statistics as narrative tools, and gradually embedding itself into the language of shared belonging. The EU, while setting the framework, leaves enough narrative space for Moldova to shape its role. What results is a co-constructed, though asymmetrical, narrative: one in which Moldova moves from echoing EU priorities to helping define the direction and tempo of its own integration story.

CHAPTER 7: CONCLUSION

This thesis aimed to explore how the EU-Moldova enlargement narrative has changed in response to shifting geopolitical conditions through the lens of bonding strategic narratives, particularly their temporal dimensions, investigating how they are used to build legitimacy, express urgency, and support a shared sense of direction. This study approached the enlargement from a discursive perspective focusing on how political actors spread the ideas of belonging, credibility and strategic priorities. By analysing a set of thirty documents comprising official statements, speeches and press releases from both Moldovan and EU sides for the period between 2021 and 2025, the research used a qualitative coding approach to follow how narrative strategies adapted in time and how Moldova's role in shaping the discourse has changed.

The findings revealed that the temporal dimensions of past, present and future are used to serve distinct purposes. Past-oriented bonding narratives were often invoked to reaffirm Moldova's European identity by drawing on common history and earlier cooperation. These references were used to signal continuity and to place current reforms within a longer trajectory. Present-focused discourse became more prominent after 2022, with the tone shifting towards urgency, security, and the need for stability in a changing geopolitical environment. Future-oriented narratives were used to signal direction and shared purpose, framing Moldova's accession not as a distant goal, but as something already taking shape within a common European future. Together, these temporal framings added to a more coherent and continuous narrative that places Moldova within the EU's political and institutional space.

Moreover, a key assumption of this study was that in moments of heightened geopolitical pressure, the use of past-oriented bonding strategic narratives would lose salience, making space for present and future-oriented framings. The findings sustain this view as after 2022, the emphasis in both Moldovan and EU discourse shifted towards immediate concerns and future ambitions. This way, themes such as security, resilience and EU membership became more prominent and structured in the messaging of both actors, reflecting a shift in the way integration is legitimised and communicated.

One of the main contributions of this thesis is the concept of temporal blending as a way to understand how different timeframes are used together in a single narrative. Rather than separating the past, present, and future, political actors often combine them to reinforce their

message and build a sense of continuity. This approach enabled both Moldova and the EU to maintain a coherent narrative, even during a period of uncertainty.

This study also adds to the broader discussion on narrative agency in asymmetrical relationships. Besides aligning with the EU messaging, Moldova has also asserted itself by adapting and introducing its own framing. This shift was evident in how Moldovan actors stressed reform achievements, set expectations, and used institutional progress to frame the country as ready for the next step. Even when staying within the language of alignment, Moldova's narrative choices reflected initiative and a more strategic effort to shape its role in the enlargement process.

Taken together, the findings suggest that the EU enlargement is shaped not only by conditionality and legal framework alignment, but also by narratives that surround it. Political actors make strategic use of temporal framings to strengthen their message, build a sense of belonging, and navigate uncertainty.

7.1 Future Research Directions

This thesis has shown how time is used strategically in enlargement narratives to reinforce belonging and credibility, particularly under shifting geopolitical conditions. Since the bonding framework is still relatively underexplored in the context of EU enlargement, a possible direction for future research could be to include other candidate countries to explore whether similar temporal patters appear in different accession processes. The concept of temporal blending, introduced in this study, could also be tested further by investigating how references to the past, present and future are combined in other cases to maintain legitimacy and a sense of continuity. To move beyond what document analysis can show alone, future research could also include interviews with policymakers or institutional actors to learn more about how these narratives are shaped and communicated in practice.

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