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To cite this article: Antoaneta Dimitrova & Elitsa Kortenska (2017) What do citizens want? And why does it matter? Discourses among citizens as opportunities and constraints for EU enlargement, *Journal of European Public Policy*, 24:2, 259-277, DOI: [10.1080/13501763.2016.1264082](https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2016.1264082)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2016.1264082>



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Published online: 07 Feb 2017.



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What do citizens want? And why does it matter? Discourses among citizens as opportunities and constraints for EU enlargement

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the role of citizens' discourses as constraints and opportunities for future enlargements. Public opinion is an increasingly important factor influencing EU's integration capacity. When governments' decisions on enlargement are challenged in referenda, the credibility of the EU's promise is diminished and integration capacity is negatively affected. We take a discursive institutionalist approach that focuses on citizens' perceptions and understandings of enlargement expressed in several discourses in each member state. We argue that political élites can turn to citizen discourses to identify conditions under which enlargement would be acceptable to citizens. Identifying empirically citizen discourses in two old and two more recent member states, we find discourses supportive to enlargement, constraining discourses and a third group that would approve of enlargement but under certain conditions. Examining these conditions we find that to increase integration capacity, enlargement policy needs to be objective, to involve citizens in the member states and to promote better governance in candidate states.

KEYWORDS Discourses; EU enlargement; public opinion; Q methodology; persuasion; integration capacity

1. Introduction: citizens and the EU's integration capacity

Will the European Union (EU) be able to enlarge again in the future and absorb new members in the face of apparent opposition from its citizens? Increased politicization of European integration, combined with challenges from extreme right or left parties to the moderate positions of mainstream political parties have ushered a period of 'constraining dissensus' affecting all aspects of the European project (Hooghe and Marks 2009). Given the institutional constraints defined by unanimous decision-making on enlargement, what effects do citizen attitudes and perceptions of enlargement have on the Union's integration capacity?

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Noting the persistently negative trends in public support for enlargement, we argue that to proceed towards accession rather than the process that prepares it, EU institutions and governments need to gain a deeper understanding in the arguments and emotional responses underpinning citizen attitudes. In this contribution, we explore citizen perceptions of enlargement through an analysis of discourses in two old member states – Germany and the Netherlands – and two recent entrants – Poland (joined in 2004) and Bulgaria (joined in 2007). Through this analysis, we seek to gain insight in the boundaries that citizen discourses establish for future political action on enlargement and the possibilities they reveal for persuasion.

By selecting two of the oldest member states and two more recent entrants, we have sought to understand how their citizens have experienced the enlargement of the EU to the East. The selection of Germany and the Netherlands is motivated by the key role they play in enlargement policy, as respectively the leading member state on enlargement and a key 'brakemen' member state (Adebahr and Töglofer 2015; Blockmans 2015). In Poland, and even more so in Bulgaria, enlargement is part of recent memory and respondents could reflect on the expectations and reality of EU membership.

Following Dryzek, we define discourses as shared sets of meaning and understandings embodied in language, enabling people to organize their assumptions, judgments, evaluations, dispositions and capabilities around certain narratives (Dryzek 2000; Dryzek and Berejikian 1993; Dryzek and Niemeyer 2008).¹ The discourses we have identified in the selected countries contain opinions of facts and values, rational and emotional arguments, perceptions of utility and elements of history and identity (Dryzek and Berejikian 1993). Therefore, they can provide insights into the complex motivations of citizens to reject or accept future enlargements.

To put citizen discourses in a broader context, we first outline what role we expect them to play within a discursive institutionalist framework (Dryzek 2000; Schmidt 2006). We conceptualize the role citizen discourses play in enabling or constraining (enlargement) policy decisions. Next, we provide an overview of the methodological approach, the data collection and selection of respondents. In the following section, we present the discourses from Germany, the Netherlands, Poland and Bulgaria, and some public opinion data providing essential context for these narratives. Next, we compare the discourses across countries by grouping them based on the key arguments and responses and whether these enable, constrain or condition future enlargements. Finally, we reflect on the significance of these findings for the EU's integration capacity.

2. Discourses in the context of enlargement

Discursive institutionalists see discourses as a key element interacting with formal and informal rules within institutions, enabling and constraining

political action (Schmidt 2006, 2008). As discussed by the most prominent proponent of discursive institutionalism, Vivien Schmidt, discourses can articulate different types (cognitive, normative), and forms of ideas (narratives, frames, collective memories or stories). They encompass not only ideas, but the interactive process of communication between different actors (élites or citizens) whereby they are conveyed (Schmidt 2008: 305–9). While co-ordinative discourses are generated in the domain of those engaged with the making of a policy, communicative discourses serve to transmit the policy to the general public in the political arena (Schmidt 2008: 310–11).

In contrast to Schmidt's treatment of discourses as transmission belts between élites or between élites and the public, we explore the role *citizen discourses* play. Their importance lies not only in the communicative and co-ordinating functions, but the fact that discourses contain citizens' perceptions of policy issues, or their 'causal beliefs' that can be a source of change in formal institutional structures (North, 1990: 44; North *et al.* 2009: 27).²

At the most basic level, élite discourses can contain paradigms or programmatic ideas that enable policy-makers to connect worldviews with specific policy ideas (Schmidt 2008: 306). Discourses among citizens, by definition, play an important cognitive role, as they help citizens to make sense of political developments or policies. Discourses identified through Q methodology contain dispositions towards a policy domain, evaluations of the present and prescriptions for the future ((Dryzek and Berejikian 1993; Dryzek and Braithwaite 2000: 245). The evaluations and prescriptions contained in competing discourses 'help condition what is possible and likely in terms of political development' (Dryzek and Holmes 2002: 6).

While some citizen discourses might enable some policies by evaluating them positively, others might express negative attitudes and evaluations that constrain the same policy. By making policy decisions consistent with at least some of the arguments, prescriptions and beliefs contained in citizen discourses, politicians can ensure that a policy is understood by the public. Combined with public opinion survey results, discourses can provide a basis for policy action. Therefore, also from a political legitimacy perspective, the different discourses shared among citizens define the boundaries of political action, at least for élites in democratic political systems and for policies subject to public interest.

The claim that citizen discourses define the possible range of policy decisions should not be understood literally to mean that politicians respond to one or several citizen discourses directly with a change of policy. However, at least in democracies, policies that do not resonate with any of the perceptions, arguments and responses of voters are unlikely to be sustainable in the longer term. When citizen discourses and élite discourses are at odds, there would be pressure for institutional or policy change or a need for a strong communicative discourse. In the case of the EU, the

tension between new practices developed with advances in European integration and traditional visions of national democracy that continue to be communicated by European political leaders represents, as Schmidt has argued (2006: 2), a threat to the legitimacy the EU as a whole.

By engaging in a strong communicative discourse, politicians can play the role of norm entrepreneurs and attempt to change societal norms or present different arguments to their electorate. They can also provide cues to activate certain ideas, understandings or identities. Political debates can be influenced by strong communicative discourses by élites, elements of which can be incorporated in citizen discourses. The public acceptance of specific policies can be ensured through successful communicative discourses (Schmidt 2000, 2008).

As Carrubba (2001) and Steenbergen *et al.* (2007) have demonstrated, however, the flow of ideas and cues between élites and citizens is two-directional: on the one hand, citizens rely on trusted élites to receive information and form an opinion; on the other, political élites echo their constituencies' stances in an effort to mobilize them. Therefore, public opinion and citizen perceptions as captured in discourses represent constraints for policies. This is especially true for European integration policies that have become politicized and where debates are captured by extreme right- or left-wing parties (Hooghe and Marks 2009).

In the case of enlargement, we know that there has been very little domestic political debate in the EU's older member states on the Eastern accession, in contrast to the candidate states (Dimitrova 2011). In as much as élite discourses about the Eastern enlargement have been present in the older member states, they have reflected only the utility arguments developed during the policy co-ordination process between national governments, candidate states and the European Commission (Herranz-Surrallés 2012). The discourses used to communicate the Eastern enlargement have resembled more co-ordinative discourses in emphasizing cognitive, rational arguments and including little reference to normative appropriateness (Herranz-Surrallés 2012; Schmidt 2006: 254–5). As a result of the scarcity of debates during the period enlargement took place and the emphasis on rational arguments in communicative discourses on Eastern enlargement, there is a considerable gap between élite and citizen discourses.

At the same time, enlargement, as many other EU policies, has recently become increasingly politicized and come to the centre of domestic political debates in the member states. Given the involvement of extreme right and left parties in political debates on enlargement (see also Hooghe and Marks 2009), we argue that citizen attitudes and discourses are becoming increasingly problematic for governments negotiating in the shadow of future accession treaty ratification. The link between 'constraining dissensus' among citizens (Hooghe and Marks 2009) and opposition to enlargement is

exemplified by the use of referenda such as the recent Dutch referendum in which citizens rejected the EU's Association agreement with Ukraine.

The citizen discourses on enlargement presented here, therefore, represent perceptions, beliefs, arguments and emotional responses, which can serve as important constraints to future enlargements. This is especially relevant given the possibilities for direct political action affecting EU policies through popular referenda that have become increasingly common in recent years (De Vreese and Boomgaarden 2005; Lubbers 2008).

At the same time, some arguments, dispositions and understandings expressed in citizen discourses can serve as a resource for élites struggling to formulate positive communicative discourses about enlargement. Given the two directional character of the cuing process, we expect some citizens holding inclusive identities to be open to persuasion regarding future enlargement (Hooghe and Marks 2009; Risse 2010). More debate by mainstream parties and positive communicative discourses regarding future enlargements could potentially increase the Union's integration capacity. If we accept that persuasion is possible, at least for some, the discourses we present here reveal the type of arguments that could be used.

Based on these considerations we analyse citizens' discourses as enabling and constraining or conditioning future enlargement policy and thereby affecting EU's integration capacity. Like Schmidt (2008: 305), we stress that discourses encompass not only ideas (beliefs, perceptions or prescriptions), but also the interactive process whereby these are conveyed. This aspect of discourses is operationalized through the use of Q methodology, which explicitly aims to capture people's intersubjective understandings. The Q method and our approach to identifying discourses are explained in the following section.

3. Identifying discourses: methodology and data collection

To identify discourses on enlargement we have followed Dryzek and Berejikian's (1993) approach, which employs Q methodology. Q methodology is a bottom-up method in which interpretation of qualitative results is constrained by statistical analysis. Q methodology, in contrast to surveys, does not use pre-defined questions sorting subjects' responses along established political categories. Instead, this approach allows citizens to define the domain – in this case, the EU enlargement – through communication and in their own terms. The method, as we have applied it, combines focus groups and individual face-to-face interviews with a statistical analytical approach to produce a set of factors, or discourses, for each country. While the results of the Q method analysis are not representative in terms of the share of a country's population aspiring to one discourse or another, they illustrate and clarify the attitudes expressed in mass surveys. Furthermore, they

define perspectives in the national arena in a nuanced way which takes into account human subjectivity and the complexity of people's orientations towards a given domain (McKeown and Thomas 2013: 47–52). Even though the group of subjects interviewed through the Q method is relatively small, discourses found among them generally relate closely to the discourses existing among the larger population (Dryzek and Berejikian 1993: 52).

We have conducted two stages of empirical data gathering, following the established steps of Q methodology (McKeown and Thomas 2013). To ensure the comparability of results, a common research design was applied in all the countries and fieldwork took place approximately at the same time, in 2014. The first stage, focus group discussions, was conducted from February to June 2014 and the second stage, face-to-face interviews, from August to December 2014. Respondents in both fieldwork stages were selected to represent diverse groups according to major socioeconomic characteristics – age, gender, education, occupation and, where applicable, ethnic background.

In each country study we identified a broad and diverse population of statements on enlargement by means of focus groups involving citizens of various backgrounds. Three to five focus groups have been conducted per country, involving 10 to 20, and in one case 30, participants per group. The focus groups took place in different locations: capitals and/or big cities, medium-sized cities as well as small villages, a total of 18 locations.

Following the focus group stages, for each country we had a dataset of statements by citizens on the topic of EU enlargement. From the broad range of statements collected in the first stage, a sub-sample of 64 items was selected for each country, using Dryzek and Berejikian's (1993) political discourse analysis matrix.³

The 64 statements formed the Q set needed for the second stage of empirical work. In that stage, the Q sets were presented to about 40 respondents per country, interviewed in (eight to ten) different locations. The respondents, a different group from previous stage participants, scored the Q set statements during face-to-face interviews lasting approximately one hour. Such individual interviews capture the process whereby a respondent interacts with each statement, sorting it along a 13-point normal distribution scale ranging from –6 (most disagree) to +6 (most agree). The result from each interview, the so-called Q sort, represents each individual's subjective and holistic viewpoint on the topic.

The collected Q sorts per country were subsequently subjected to factor analysis.⁴ Finally, the resulting factor solutions were interpreted as discourses – shared narratives – in the context of each country. We have given each factor a label, which captures its overall interpretation as a discourse based on the leading arguments or emotional responses that it contains.

4. What do citizens want?

While the discourse analyses we present here are distinct from opinion polls, we believe the findings from public opinion research need to be considered in combination with discourses, as they represent two complementary ways of understanding citizen perceptions of enlargement. We start with a brief review of general trends in public opinion towards enlargement, before presenting our discourse results together with key trends in public opinion in each country.

4.1. Public opinion on EU enlargement

An overall downward trend in support for future enlargements is clearly visible from the Eurobarometer surveys: while there was a slim majority in favour of the Eastern enlargement among the EU-15 in 2004, there has been a decline ever since (Toshkov *et al.* 2014). The lowest EU-28 average levels of support for enlargement (37 per cent) and highest points in opposition (52 per cent) were registered in 2013 (European Commission 2013). Next to Austria (76 per cent) and France (70 per cent), the strongest rejection was recorded in Germany (69 per cent), and the Netherlands (64 per cent) (European Commission 2013). These tendencies remained stable in 2014, when our research on discourses took place. In 2014, 48 per cent of Europeans opposed enlargement, while 39 per cent were in favour of accession of candidate and aspirant states from the Western Balkans (European Commission 2014: 199).

While deteriorating of public support for EU enlargement is evident in all EU member states, majorities in CEE member states remain open to further widening, according to Eurobarometer polls (European Commission 2013). Poland and Bulgaria are cases in point. A majority of 64 per cent in Poland and 51 per cent in Bulgaria favoured enlargement in 2014 (European Commission 2014), although these attitudes may not reflect citizens' evaluation of their own experience with accession, as the discourses below illustrate.

Analyses of public opinion data have identified a range of factors explaining support or opposition to EU enlargement, chief among which have been anti-immigrant sentiments and perceived threats to cultural and national identity after 2004 (Boomgaarden *et al.* 2011; De Vreese and Boomgaarden 2005; Lubbers 2008). Socioeconomic conditions and individual experiences also play an important role. More specifically, as restrictions on the free movement of citizens from Central and Eastern European member states expired, the presence of labour migrants in local communities has had a significant effect for the negative results of EU-related referenda in 2005 in France and the Netherlands (Toshkov and Kortenska 2015).

It must be noted that survey results vary significantly depending on the specific country considered as potential candidate for accession (Azrout

et al. 2013; Dixon 2010; Toshkov *et al.* 2014). The potential accession of Turkey and Albania encounters the most opposition among the citizens of the EU-28 (European Commission 2014). In addition, survey results are sensitive to the wording of survey questions and the overall design of questionnaires (Toshkov *et al.* 2014).

Given these limitations of survey data and analyses, employing Q methodology to find the arguments and dispositions of citizens provides complementary and sometimes contradicting insights. Notably, in each country, discourses carry specific elements referring to its geographical position, history and institutional arrangements (Dryzek and Holmes 2002). Awareness of recent developments related to enlargement differs and reflects the different contexts of citizens of long-standing or recent member states. We turn to our findings next.

4.2. Country discourses

In this section, the results of the Q method analyses in our four countries are presented with a snapshot of each discourse. For brevity, we present only the statements characterizing each discourse at the extreme edges of the distribution (scores of +6, +5), but the interpretation of each factor is based on the ranks and scoring of all 64 statements.⁵

4.2.1. Germany

At the eve of the 2004 enlargement, in 2002 only 34 per cent of Germans were against enlargement, while 46 per cent were in favour of the accession of CEE candidates. Since then, the German public has become more negative towards enlargement and the percentage of those rejecting future accession has risen to levels among the highest in the EU. Nevertheless, German governments have remained among the proponents of the process. As discussed above, Herranz-Surrallés has found a mismatch between the co-ordinative discourses on enlargement used between élites and the communicative ones targeting the public (2012). The gap between élite and public opinion can be interpreted as a consequence of the way German élites have communicated the Eastern enlargement.

Today Germany pursues a balanced and sophisticated policy combining strict monitoring with proactive incentives for candidates from the Western Balkans (Adebahr and Töglofer 2015: 81). This fits well with the diverse perspectives and nuanced positions found in Discourses B, C and D. By contrast, Discourse A wavers between Euroscepticism and sincere questioning of European integration.

Discourse A Questioning Integration

Is this a union of independently working states, who ideally help each other grow richer and balance between one another? (47) If the roots (of the EU)

are in fact yet too weak, i.e., it grows wider and bigger, yet the roots are weak, then it will topple down fast, simply because there are too many contradictory debates. (6) The economic relations, the relations of dependency, also political dependency – this is not the purpose and the goal of the EU. And in any case it is not what I imagine it to be. (63) Currently, unfortunately, I think Europe behaves more like an octopus, a regulating octopus. (8)

Discourse B *Enlargement for the people*

The question is while we add economic connections and increase the size of the economy – which is a wonderful thing – that we do not forget to consider cultural differences that also must be preserved. That is very important too. (56) Well, for me, the question about the enlargement is first of all the question where to enlarge? And for me, the involvement of citizens plays a crucial role. (57) People and personal development have to go to the foreground as priority; this is why everyone should be invited to join the EU. It is quite a different matter if this is financially feasible. (64) I think the whole issue with accession in EU stands and falls with communication. There are many arguments for the accession, for the enlarged Europe, as well as [many arguments] in favor of a tighter union of states in Europe. (38)

Discourse C *Gradual, more rule-driven enlargement*

Prior to the next expansion, we need to take care of our internal affairs and build the respective structures [in the EU]. (53) It is easy to see that this ship in the open sea is still somehow looking for its way. About the enlargement, well, I think it should happen when it is supposed to happen; there is some kind of insecurity now. (11) If the living conditions in Bulgaria are not changed, and they are in the EU, and if people have to migrate to Germany, and only then have their life improved, then I believe any such enlargement is pointless. (32) Therefore enlargement at all costs, right now in the current situation [Turkish integration] there is no way I would support it. (25)

Discourse D *Realizing EU's global potential*

For me, above all I am an advocate for Europe, no question about that. I see it as very important. (52) Prior to the next expansion, we need to take care of our internal affairs and build the respective structures [in the EU]. (53) The issues related to the enlargement of Europe are strongly related to the fears that people don't have a clue about these countries. What are their economic systems? What kind of problems may affect us too? (42) Europe has so much more potential, and this could be used, even if it proves difficult. I don't see any other way. What would be the alternative? In the long run, we will be lagging behind, if we don't want it. (23) Definitely enlargement under certain conditions it is good for everyone. I have no problem with it. (34)

Remarkably, a separate discourse, Discourse D in Germany stresses the importance of enlargement for the EU's global role. Another interesting feature of German discourses is that sceptic and even conditionally positive discourses stress the lack of information about enlargement and its consequences. These findings echo the findings of a recent opinion poll on the Trans-Atlantic

Trade Agreement (TTIP), in which citizens criticize the lack of sufficient information about the agreement (Bluth 2016).

4.2.3. *The Netherlands*

The Netherlands was one of the sceptical ‘brakemen’ countries in decision-making on Eastern enlargement (Schimmelfennig 2001). Successive governments remain cautious towards future enlargements, favouring increased conditionality and monitoring (Blockmans 2015). Two referenda on European integration-related issues have had negative outcomes, on the Constitutional Treaty in 2005 and on the Association agreement with Ukraine in 2016. The results from the referendum on Ukraine suggested opposition to the accession of associate and (potential) new members: 61 per cent of those who voted rejected the accession treaty with Ukraine, while 38 per cent were in favour.⁶

Discourse A Ideals-driven acceptance

If we look only at money and prosperity (when enlarging), we will never have a European Union in the spirit in which it was intended. (29) You cannot say that the Union can only be enlarged if a country brings added value in the sense that we (the Netherlands) gain from the accession. (49) No, I don’t (i.e., have the feeling that the immigrants steal away the work from the Dutch), since that is entirely up to us, what jobs we are prepared to take. Many people tend to think: ‘picking tomatoes is not for me, picking peppers is not for me either’. (31) In principle, if a country fulfils the conditions, let them come. (59) For me the most important thing about the EU and its enlargement is the security in Europe, so this is what guarantees security. We haven’t been at war ever since the European Union was established, and we haven’t been part of an arms race either. (34)

Discourse B Utilitarian Rejection

Ultimately, as I see it, the population was never asked, what do you think about this (EU enlargement). It has been pushed down our throats from above, you put the news on and what do you see, yet another country has joined. (32) Yes, the decision (i.e., for more countries in the Union) will be made by politicians in the end. Yet I believe that if you go out and ask the ordinary Dutch people, they will say: ‘no, no, no, this is too much’. (28) For me unemployment is a huge problem. It *does* have to do with enlargement, and also now when the Romanians and Bulgarians do not need a permit, they can go work anywhere in the EU and many companies think: ‘this is cheaper for us and we won’t look back’. (24) I now think that it (i.e., the enlargement) has been too expensive. (20) Yet it is a fact that Wilders is constantly talking about how Europe costs us money. Literally, we pay more since the new member states receive a great deal of money. (30)

Discourse C Deepening before widening

Let’s try to make the European Union meaningful by keeping an eye on recent developments. I support the enlargement, yet it should be done selectively, not only in terms of money, but also looking at other things [attributes of the

candidates]. (62) I believe that the enlargement has to be prepared better, it has to follow a more consistent course, and certain conditions have to be strictly met. Also by the candidate country. (50) I don't mind if Switzerland joins the European Union. (6) What I think should happen is that the EU should clarify what people are required to do. And in what direction we are headed. We haven't heard a thing in four years and suddenly we find ourselves moving forward with new people around. (38)

In the past, the Dutch government has left the responsibility for communication on enlargement largely to the European Commission (Blockmans 2015: 213). The lack of cues on enlargement from mainstream parties seems to result in dissatisfaction with the lack of communication, shown clearly in the Dutch discourses B and C. Discourse A, by contrast, is much more idealistic and more pro-enlargement than the strict policy that Dutch governments have pursued (see also Dimitrova and Kortenska 2016).

4.2.4. Poland

Poland's central importance among the 2004 group of acceding countries is based on its size, geopolitical significance and previous domestic reform record. As discussed above, Poles were enthusiastic about European integration in the past. The Accession Treaty was approved by referendum in 2003 with 77 per cent in favour and a turnout of 58.9 per cent (Doyle and Fidrmuc 2006). These positive attitudes to accession are matched by the enthusiastic first discourse in Poland, emphasizing common European values.

Discourse A Celebrating European ideals and values

I don't want to look at Europe in political and economic terms only. For me it is a conglomeration of communities, multicultural, facilitating the exchange of information and ideas. (1) What incredible times we live in, to have landed in the EU. This is the result of aspirations dating hundreds of years back. This is why we build Europe together, to expand and to enjoy it. There will always be flaws. (52) This is the idea behind the EU, we talk, discuss, come up with this or that. I still believe that the European Union civilizes us, if it weren't for it, there would be more corruption, less attention for the environment. (8)

Reflecting the current strong polarization among Polish élites and citizens, the second discourse in Poland is, by contrast, strongly against the EU. The third discourse is more pragmatic and reflects a certain 'normalization' of Poland as a member state mindful of its own interest in future enlargements.

Discourse B Rejecting a bureaucratic monster

I think that some Members of Parliament view the fact that we are members of the European Union as a way to get hold of a whole lot of money. (27) They say: 'we all are equal in the EU'. But we are not, because there are differences in size and how big a say we have in decision-making, so don't speak to me about solidarity. (38) The EU is turning into some kind of crazy, absolutely unnatural

bureaucratic monster, seeking to regulate all aspects of our lives and taking away, bit by bit, our freedom. (39) There are too many commissions in the European Union, that monitor curved cucumbers and bent bananas and a few commissions that actually work well. (6)

Discourse C Pragmatic assessment

Perhaps in the future our children and the children of our children will live a bit better thanks to the European Union. The growth of the EU is inevitable, if only everything goes well. (49) We have been part of this EU for ten years now, so we cannot act in the same way as those who adopt the decisions in this EU. (63) Unfortunately, the accession to the European Union has both advantages and disadvantages. The advantages are that the young go to the EU, while the disadvantages are that we would have wanted them to stay here. (29) The EU cannot become a closed club, it should continue expanding. (55) I don't think that the enlargement of the European Union will put our labour market at significant risk. (7)

4.2.5. Bulgaria

Bulgaria represents the 2007 entrants. Arguably, citizens in Bulgaria have benefited less from economic growth in comparison to Poland. Public support for enlargement in Bulgaria has deteriorated from 2002, when 75 per cent of respondents were in favour of enlargement and only 2 per cent rejected it (Toshkov *et al.* 2014). As of 2014, 51 per cent of Bulgarians supported future enlargement with Western Balkans candidates and 25 per cent were against it (European Commission 2014).

The first discourse we found reflects an enthusiastic attitude and stresses the rationale of accepting Western Balkans neighbours to increase security in the region.

Discourse A 'The more the merrier'

I am for the EU enlargement. (50) All Balkan countries should become EU members and stop fighting with each other. (63) It will be easiest if Russia were to join. (7) I want the EU to enlarge towards the Scandinavian states, because in this way rich countries will become EU members. (57) I think that it is important for EU to enlarge, because after all this is the goal of every organization. Whether it would be a good thing or not, we will find out only after the enlargement. (38)

The other discourses we found suggest that citizens are disappointed with Bulgaria's lack of reforms and with the economic effects of accession, but also with the lack of improvement in governance.

Discourse B Striving for a Union of rules and values

So, you see, a lot of people thought that when we joined the EU our wages would be rocketing; that everything will be handed on a silver platter to us, yet, unfortunately, this didn't happen. (10) The EU has to enlarge, only under clear-cut criteria. The enlargement mainly takes place on a political basis. The states that are not

ready in legal, political and economic terms, should not be let in, they cannot become members in this way. (61) [The EU] helps societies in certain ways, for instance through programmes, yet only certain people get access to these programmes. The majority of people and those who have no idea about the administrative part hardly ever get hold of the money. (24) The entire European Union should reach the same level of development, so that everyone has the same standard of living. I mean – same union, same community, same standards. (52) EU membership is something like imposing common rules on common borders, common laws that should be observed in some way. (4)

Discourse C in Bulgaria, 'The forgotten village', is particularly interesting. It combines feelings of discontent with the respondents' economic situation with a specific rejection of Turkey's potential membership.

Discourse C The forgotten village

In the countryside, people are more interested in their everyday lives, their daily survival ... people hardly take any interest in the EU ... the people living in the rural areas. (42) They [the EU] have completely forgotten about us, the people living in the smaller towns and villages. (20) Has anyone asked us if we wanted to join the European Union or not? The politicians took that decision. (40) Our politicians should have done it differently and have the EU come and ask us to join and not us begging them to let us in. (56) We do what they [EU] tell us to do. This is a problem. One can't take a decision by oneself, someone else imposes those decisions. So they say, for instance, we need to shut down the two nuclear reactors, deal, we shut them down, in the end, then we will be buying electricity from other countries, if needed, but we cut down our production. (43) If it was for me, I would not let Turkey in. (55)

5. Discourses as opportunities, constraints and conditions

If we approach the arguments, dispositions and emotional responses contained in the discourses as constraints and enabling devices for political actions on enlargement, we need to compare them across countries. The comparison reveals a group of discourses favourable to enlargement, a number of discourses signalling conditional approval or rejection and few discourses unequivocally rejecting potential enlargement.⁷ We will first discuss the favourable and unfavourable discourses, as these two groups represent, respectively, opportunities and constraints with a clear effect on integration capacity. The remaining discourses, occupying the middle ground, provide nuances and suggest different avenues for policy change. The grouping of discourses, based on our interpretation of their content, is presented in [Figure 1](#).

5.1. Discourses enabling enlargement

There are four discourses unequivocally favourable to future enlargement in our four countries: discourses A in the Netherlands, Poland and Bulgaria; and discourse D in Germany.

Enabling Discourses	Conditional Discourses	Constraining Discourses
<p><i>A. Ideals Driven Acceptance (NL)</i></p> <p><i>A. Celebrating EU Values & Ideals (PL)</i></p> <p><i>D. Realizing Europe's Global Potential (DE)</i></p> <p><i>A. 'The More the Merrier' (BG)</i></p>	<p><i>B. Enlargement for the People (DE)</i></p> <p><i>C. Rule-Driven, more Gradual Enlargement (DE)</i></p> <p><i>C. Deepening before widening (NL)</i></p> <p><i>C. Pragmatic Evaluation (PL)</i></p> <p><i>B. Striving for a Union of Rules & Values (BG)</i></p> <p><i>C. The Forgotten Village (BG)</i></p>	<p><i>B. Utilitarian Rejection (NL)</i></p> <p><i>A. Questioning Integration (DE)</i></p> <p><i>B. Rejecting a Bureaucratic Monster(PL)</i></p>

Figure 1. Enabling, conditional and constraining discourses.

Note: The respective country code is in brackets after the label assigned to each discourse. The arrow illustrates discourses are situated on a continuum from favourable to unfavourable to future accession.

Among the idealistic discourses, the Dutch discourse A explicitly stresses that material benefits should not be the only factor to consider in enlargement policy. The Polish discourse is similarly idealistic and celebratory of the 2004 accession of Poland. As for positive discourses dominated by utilitarian motivations, Bulgaria's discourse A, 'The more the merrier', emphasizes gains from enlargement in security and trade. Similarly, proponents of discourse D in Germany 'Realizing Europe's global potential', are motivated by geopolitical and security considerations in supporting enlargement.

5.2. Discourses constraining enlargement

Discourses that unequivocally reject enlargement should be seen as constraints from an integration capacity perspective. We find such discourses in three out of the four countries, as shown in [Figure 1](#).

The Dutch discourse B illustrates respondents' utilitarian motivations for rejection of enlargement based on specific past experiences and job concerns. German discourse A, on the other hand, displays general scepticism towards European integration rather than invoking personal experiences and perceived (economic) threat. The German discourse A relates to the Polish discourse B, as both criticize the EU as a 'regulatory monster'.

Utilitarian and identity motivations intermingle in only one discourse, the Bulgarian discourse C, which expresses both disappointment with the lack of economic benefits from accession for people in villages and a strong rejection of Turkey's potential accession. This discourse combines utilitarian motivation and exclusive national identity, as anticipated by Hooghe and Marks' (2009: 18).

5.3. Conditional support or rejection

The discourses that neither reject nor support enlargement unequivocally are the most diverse set. A number of discourses express motivations and dispositions favourable to enlargement, but only under certain conditions (as shown in the central column of [Figure 1](#)). Some cite specific objections or provide insights how enlargement might work better as a policy.

As in the negative discourses above, an important line of argument stresses that enlargement took citizens by surprise. The desire for more transparency and citizen involvement is also a condition for accepting future enlargement:

It is not at all clear anymore who is joining and under what conditions. What is the situation? Where are the advantages? What are the opportunities? What are the consequences of all this? This form of transparency is just not there. (+4, discourse C, Germany)

There are several discourses in this group that argue citizens would accept enlargement only if it is based on clear rules and objective assessments of candidates. Such arguments echo the well-known ‘deepening before widening’ argument familiar from EU constitutional debates.

An improvement of political institutions and governance in their own countries is taken by respondents in Bulgaria and Poland as a major condition for the success of enlargement. Even after joining, respondents in Bulgaria find that enlargement only brings benefits if it leads to the improvement of institutions.

6. In conclusion: discourses and the EU’s integration capacity

The discourses presented above make it clear that citizens in different parts of Europe are still reflecting upon and absorbing the 2004–2007 enlargement of the EU.

The citizen discourses we present from Bulgaria, Germany, the Netherlands and Poland contain assessments of the EU’s Eastern enlargement as captured by our bottom-up approach, mixing rational arguments and emotional responses, perceived utility and references to values and identity.

In the four countries’ discourses, we find two new sets of arguments and motivations compared to what we know from public opinion survey results. First, a group of discourses links enlargement to good governance in specific institutional terms. The emphasis on impersonal and non-corrupt institutions that should evolve with EU membership is evident in the perceptions of citizens of Bulgaria and Poland. Citizens of these member states have been better informed by their governments about enlargement steps, yet their high expectations have been confronted with the reality of EU membership during a period marked by crises. This has sometimes resulted in frustration and disappointment.

Second, a number of discourses critical of enlargement emphasize the lack of consultation and discussion of previous enlargements. Citizens of older member states in particular express criticism of the non-transparent enlargement decision-making. The critical discourses in the older member states illustrate clearly the connection between scepticism and lack of consultation.

The analysis above shows that there are a number of *enabling discourses* that politicians in favour of enlargement can use as building blocks of communicative discourses on enlargement. In contrast to the communicative discourses used during the 2004–2007 enlargement (Herranz-Surrallés 2012), our citizen discourses refer to both idealistic and utilitarian motivations. It is crucial that future communications of enlargement involve emotional and normative arguments as well as rational and utilitarian ones.

Discourses that present constraints for future enlargement emphasize fears of economic loss, perceived identity threats or simply discontent. While citizen involvement, clear rules and better governance have been to some degree addressed by the EU in its latest enlargement strategy (European Commission 2015), we see little room for persuasion of citizens expressing discontent with European integration as a whole.

Based on our theoretical perspective of the role discourses play in policy stability and change and on our findings, we believe élites in the EU should develop new communicative discourses to deal with enlargement in the future. Our argument is that if member states' governments were to open the process of enlargement negotiations and make it subject of domestic political debates, at least some citizens may become more positive towards enlargement. Given the appeals to shared values revealed in discourses positive to enlargement, élites interested in further enlargement would do well to employ normative arguments for future enlargements and not just refer to utility. While it is unrealistic to expect that all citizens can be persuaded to support future enlargement, our results suggest that at least some citizens could respond to persuasion. We believe it is the member states' governments that can ensure enlargement and its consequences are debated in the domestic political arena and can provide more information and positive cues about the process.

Notes

1. There is a wide range of definitions of discourses, ranging from Habermas's (1989) communicative action to Schmidt's discursive institutionalism (2006, 2008). We follow Dryzek's approach, identifying discourses empirically by means of Q methodology and emphasizing the active role of citizens (respondents) engaging with statements to produce a holistic representation of their subjective viewpoint (Dryzek and Niemeyer 2008; Watts and Stenner 2012).
2. We draw on North's (1990) arguments about the importance of subjective perceptions as a source of institutional change. In later work, North *et al.* similarly stress the role of 'causal beliefs' for institutional change (North *et al.* 2009: 27).

3. The political discourse analysis matrix was developed by Dryzek and Berejikian (1993) to make a representative selection of statements based on core political science categories. The elements of political discourse are (a) ontology of entities recognized as existing or relevant; (b) agency; (c) motivation; and (d) (un)natural relationships among entities. The claims respondents can make are definitive, designative, evaluative and advocative (Dryzek and Berejikian 1993). Sorting statements by categories they refer to and type of claim yields a distribution of different types of statements from which we selected the final set of 64 statements.
4. We performed a centroid factor extraction, followed by Varimax rotation of the significantly loading factors.
5. For brevity, we list only the positively loaded statements. A full list of the statements and statistical results are available upon request.
6. Turnout was low at 32 per cent. Full results available here: <https://www.kiesraad.nl/nieuws/uitslag-referendum-associatieovereenkomst-met-oekra%C3%AFne> [accessed 17 May 2016]
7. In a previous analysis, we have grouped the country discourses based on key arguments and found several sets of bridging arguments across countries (Dimitrova *et al.* 2015).

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank all those who contributed to data collection for this research: in the Netherlands, Maarja Beerkens and Robin van der Zee; in Germany, Tanja Boerzel and the team at the Free University of Berlin, Nick Berger, Yordan Nikolov and Milena Stoimenova; in Bulgaria, the team of Sofia University 'Kliment Ochriski'; in Poland, Dorota Liszczyk and Oleksandra Matushenko. We would also like to thank Bernard Steunenbergh for his advice and help with the Q sort analysis, and the discussants of previous versions of this contribution presented at the EUSA conference in Boston.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Funding

Research for this paper has been supported by the FP7 programme of the EU (project "Maximizing the integration capacity of the European Union: Lessons and prospects for enlargement and beyond" [MAXCAP]) under grant agreement number 320115.

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