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DECONSTRUCTING THE EUROPEAN COMMISSION´S DISCOURSE ON SERBIA´S ACCESSION PROCESS

A critical discourse analysis on the annual progress reports from 2010 to 2021 on Serbia.

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NTNU
Kunnskap for en bedre verden

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Abstract

The Enlargement process of the European Union towards the Westen Balkans has been described of scholars to be subject of going on "autopilot-mode" and with an EU subject to enlargement fatigue. The integration is also a key issue in the context of the increasingly stronger presence of external actors such as China and Russia, all competing with the European Union for influence in the Western Balkans. This thesis enquires into the evolution of the European Commission's discourse with respect to rule of law, corruption and media development in Serbia during period 2010-2021. The study performs a critical discourse analysis with use of discourse historical approach on the annual progress reports published by the European Commission. The study uncovers that the progress reports shows patterns of both continuity and change. The topics and subtopics related to rule of law, corruption and media represents large patterns of continuity. Some new topics, mostly negative ones, have arisen during the period, but the criteria and form of evaluation seems stable. The intensification strategy in the discourse the last four years seems not to be enough to transform the EU accession process, and it seems that Serbia lacks motivation on their road to accession.

Sammendrag

Utvidelsesprosessen av Den Europeiske Union mot Vest-Balkan har blitt beskrevet av forskere som at den går på "autopilot-modus" og samtidig med et EU som er utsatt for utvidelsestrøtthet. Integreringen spiller også en viktig rolle i sammenheng med den stadig sterkere tilstedeværelsen av eksterne aktører som Kina og Russland, som alle konkurrerer med EU om innflytelse på Vest-Balkan. Denne oppgaven undersøker utviklingen av EU-kommisjonens diskurs med hensyn til rettssikkerhet, korrupsjon og medieutvikling i Serbia i perioden 2010-2021. Studien utfører en kritisk diskursanalyse med bruk av diskurshistorisk tilnærming på de årlige fremdriftsrapportene utgitt av EU-kommisjonen. Studien avdekker at fremdriftsrapportene viser mønstre av både kontinuitet og endring. Temaene og underemnene knyttet til rettssikkerhet, korrupsjon og media representerer store kontinuitetsmønstre. Noen nye temaer, for det meste negative, har dukket opp i perioden, men kriteriene og evalueringsformen den samme. Intensiveringsstrategien i diskursen de siste fire årene ser ikke ut til å være nok til å transformere EU-tiltredelsesprosessen, og det ser ut som at Serbia mangler motivasjon til å fullføre veien mot medlemskap.

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List of Abbreviations (or Symbols)

Abbreviation	Meaning
CDA	Critical Discourse Analysis
EU	European Union
GRECO	Group of States Against Corruption
HDA	Historical Discourse Analysis
LGBTI	Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
UNDOC	United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime
WB	Western Balkans
ODIHR	Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights

1 Introduction

1.1 Topic and research question

With the eastern enlargement in 2004, the European Union (EU) acquired not just ten new member states but also several new neighbours. With new neighbours, comes new neighbourhood policies.

> "The EU reiterates its unequivocal support to the European perspective of the Western Balkan countries. The future of the Balkans is within the European Union". (European Commission, 2003, p. 1)

For the first time a formal EU document included these words in 2003 with The Thessaloniki agenda for the Western Balkans: "Moving towards European Integration". Since the European Union (EU) offered the Western Balkan states the chance to join the EU, the EU has played a critical role in region. Since then, the EU has contributed to resolving ethnic conflicts and bilateral issues (Huszka, 2020, p. 3). Many years has passed since 2003 and the integration process has continued and connected the region closer to the European Union. However, since then we have only seen two former Yugoslav states join the Union, Slovenia in 2004 and Croatia in 2013.

In the most recent Enlargement Package from 2021, which is providing a detailed assessment of the state of play and the progress made by the Western Balkans (WB), it is stated that the overall integration process has been too ineffective and lack credibility and trust on both sides (European Commission, 2021; Domachowska, 2021; Economides, 2020). As a response to this, the commission has decided to reinvigorate the accession process to bring this project back to life. Nevertheless, EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy/Vice-President of the European Commission, Josep Borrell, said as a comment on the 2021 Enlargement Package:

> "The EU is not complete without the Western Balkans. It's time we come together and unite in building a stronger Europe." (European Commission, 2021)

Despite this re-engagement with enlargement and this kind of visions and claims from EU officials, internally the EU is struggling with enlargement fatigue and at the same time there is a lot of internal turmoil in many of WB countries. Scholars describe WB as a region which have fell victim to democratic backsliding and increased corruption. At the same time external actors like Russia and China have tried to increase their influence and replace the traditional main actors, EU and USA (Bieber, 2020; Economides, 2020; Tonchev, 2017; Kmezic, 2019; Bechev, 2021). However, EU are still the biggest economical contributor in the region and WB countries have an active accession process to join the Union (EU Delegation to Serbia, 2022). In this thesis, I will focus on one of these countries accession process, Serbia. The EU-Serbia relations have in recent months turned sour with the Serbian government's refusal to condemn and join the EU sanctions on Russia after the invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 (Qalliu, 2022). In spite of this, the accession process is still pending, but Serbia´s path to the European Union will remain blocked unless it can resolve its bilateral and territorial disputes with Kosovo. Kosovo declared independence from Serbia 2008, but Serbia refuses to recognize its former providence as an independent state (Grzegorczyk, 2021).

Serbia, along with 5 other WB countries, was identified as a potential candidate for EU membership during the Thessaloniki European Council summit in 2003. In 2009, Serbia formally applied for membership and on 21 January 2014, and on the 1st Intergovernmental Conference the official negotiation process started (European Commision). Accession negotiations are currently ongoing, and according to the European Commission in 2018 with the prospect of joining in 2025. However, it was noted that this was "not a target date, not a deadline" (Rankin, 2018).

In order to be accepted into the European Union, candidate countries have to fulfil numerous criteria. The accession criteria, or Copenhagen criteria (after the European Council in Copenhagen in 1993 which defined them), defines the essential conditions, which are divided into three categories. Firstly, the EU demands stability of institutions guaranteeing democracy, the rule of law, human rights and respect for and protection of minorities; these are the political criteria. Secondly, the EU specifies the economic criteria which means having a functioning market economy and the capacity to cope with competition and market forces. The last criteria revolve around having the administrative and institutional capacity to effectively implement the *acquis* (European Commission). The acquis is divided into 35 different policy areas, commonly known as chapters. The chapters ranges from fundamental criteria, which include political criteria and chapters on the rule of law, to chapters including everything from free movement of goods, information society and media, to enterprise and industrial policy.

The candidate countries are being annually evaluated by the Commission. These progress reports are a set of documents summarising and evaluating the current status and progress achieved by the respective countries in the accession process (Universität Duisburg-Essen: Institut für Politikwissenschaft, 2021). Serbia has currently 18 of 35 acquis open, and provisionally closed 2 (European Commision). Given both the historical position and the contemporary political development, and the fact that Serbia is seen as a hegemon in the region, it is interesting to look at how the integration process have evolved, especially when we look at the situation through a geopolitical lens. With this backdrop, I will investigate how the EU portray the accession process in Serbia in their own progress reports and analysing more closely the chapters regarding the rule of law, information society and media and the chapters where corruption is prominent.

This thesis enquires into the evolution of the European Commission's discourse with respect to media development, corruption and rule of law in Serbia during the period 2010-2021. More concretely, it composes the following research question: how has this discourse evolved during the said period, and to what extent does it feature patterns of continuity and/or change?

1.2 Literature review

Many scholars have conducted research on EU enlargement towards the WB. Recent litterature mainly focuses on the balkan countries´troubles on their road to EU membership. This gives us an array of conclusions. The main theme encountered when studying the litterature is the democratic backsliding in the region ((Kmezic, 2019; Bieber, 2020; Economides, 2020). This has of course affected the european integration process, however the litterature also tries to describe this from the veiwpoint of the EU. The enlargement process is described by scholars of being victim to enlargement fatigue (Economides, 2020).

Domachowska (2021) has a study where she have tried to unveil the satus of the european integration process of the WB countries. The study is based on discourse analysis (including critical discourse analysis (CDA) and content analysis). However, she does not use the progress report as data, but data from Freedom House, Transparency International´s Corruption Perceptions Index and various Commission documents. Her conclusions regarding Serbia´s accession process is characterised by its slow pace due to the country´s struggle with several factors related to building systems of the rule of law and resolving the bilateral problem with Kosovo. She also pinpoints that the EU must also intensify their work with the accession states based on two factors; maintaining a credible status for the accession states and because of the geopolitical situation (Domachowska, 2021). This conclusion also comes forward in an in-depth analysis requested by the European Parliament's Committee on Foreign Affairs; the current approach to enlargement has reached its limits and that the current "autopilot" mode cannot continue (Kmezic, 2015).

Another study using the CDA method is Tatjana Sekulic (2021) The European Union and the Paradox of Enlargement: The Complex Accession of the Western Balkans. Here Sekulic analyse the progress reports (2008-2019), and also expands the empirical evidence with interviews and additional papers (Sekulić, 2021). She suggests that EU enlargement needs mutual transformation from both new arrivals and the EU.

What I have witnessed studying EU enlargement towards WB is the lack of lingustic analysis of Commission Documents. So, with this thesis I want to study the discourse and the linguistics in the progress reports and put it in an historical context, where we can examine the enlargement process.

With this thesis I will contribute to the existing research/academic literature by pairing this topic with Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and Discourse Historical Approach (DHA). By analysing the progress reports using this method it will give us not just a longitudinal content analysis of the progress reports, but also an analysis of linguistic means and discursive strategies carried out by the Commission. It is acknowledged that it is generally not suffcent to focus only on the content of public policy. We must also look at ways of arguing anddiscursive interactions and indicators of politics (Lynggaard, 2019, p. 58).

1.3 Structure of the dissertation

This thesis consists of five chapters. Chapter 2 presents the thesis´ research design. In subchapter 2.1 I introduce the methodological framework, consisting of discourse analysis and critical discourse analysis. In subchapter 2.2 I clarify the
DHA, the data used In the study and the longitudinal approach. Chapter 3 includes my analysis and deconstruction of the discourse around rule of law, corruption and media development. In chapter 4 I answer the research question and presents some toughts about future research studies.

2 Research design

In this chapter I will describe my chosen methodological framework, and elaborate on the research methods used in the study.

2.1 Methodological framework

Discourse analysis has become a central approach in European studies (Crespy, 2015; Lynggard, 2019), but it's not yet a part of mainstream research in EU politics (Lynggard, 2019, p. 160).

Lynggard (2019) defines three common features of discourse analysis, and I will shortly elaborate on these features (Lynggaard, 2019, p. 2-3). First, the discourse is the research object of any discourse analysis. Discourse could be defined as "a specific ensemble of ideas, concepts, and categorisations that are produced, reproduced and transformed in a particular set of practices and through which meaning is given to physical and social realities" (Hajer, 1995, p. 44). Van Dijk (1993) emphasize that discourse should be perceived as a mental construct, while other definitions also add focus to the role of actors in producing discourse and the context of discourse (Schmidt, 2008). Even if different aspects of discourse could be highlighted, the common denominator for any discourse analysis is focus on the production of collective meaning systems. Second, the focus of discourse analysis is the products of discourse. These products could be tied to the agents positions, knowledge practices and legitimation of political behaviour and policies. So it's not only mapping, but also explanations of causes and consequences of political discourse (Lynggard, 2019, p. 12). Third, discourse analysis is about the structure and boundaries of discourse. So all in all, as described by Lynggard, a discourse analytical study "are devoted to the study of the development of the discursive structures and boundaries and their effect on actor positions, knowledge, authority and legitimacy in an area of social reality…" (Lynggard, 2009, p. 3).

So what does it mean that discourse analysis is critical? According to Fairclough (2012, cited in Lynggard, 2019, p.7) CDA is challenging current state and develop strategies for progression, and evaluates constructs against what is just and legitimate. This problem-driven approach often addresses specific critical empirical questions that challenges the state of affairs. To be critical could also mean gaining distance from the data, clarifying positioning of discourse participants and focus on continuous self-reflection (Reisigl & Wodak, 2017). But there is a lot of variation in the critical part of studies based on choice of research topic and critical aspiration.

CDA emphasizes the mutual constitutive relation between societal practices (context) and discursive practices (text) (Lynggard, 2019, p. 7). CDA does not have a unitary theoretical framework or methodology, but it could be viewed as a shared perspective including a range of approaches (Amoussou & Allagbe, 2018). Common for all the approaches of CDA is a number of principles; CDA addresses social problems, discourse constitutes society and culture, discourse is historical and that through CDA the link between text and society is mediated (Huckin, Andrus, & Clary-Lemon, 2012). Van Dijk's socio-cognitive approach the focus is on the social cognitions that are shared by social collectives (Van Dijk, 1993, p. 254), and Fairclough's socio-cultural approach focus on

ideological effects and power relations between social classes or groups (Fairclough, 2001 cited in Amoussou & Allagbe, 2018). Wodak presents the Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA) as a form of CDA that focuses on the "...historical sources and the background of social and political fields in which discursive "events" are embedded" (Wodak, 2014 p.3). DHA has a specific emphasis on identity construction, and the basic fundament of discourses of identity and difference are the discursive construction of 'us' and 'them' (Wodak, 2001, p. 73 in Aydin-Duzgit, 2014, p. 358). Ideologies shared by members of specific social groups functions as means of establishing and maintaining unequal power relations through discourse, either by hegemonic identity narratives or by "gate-keeping" (Wodak, 2014).

2.2 Method

This subchapter consists of an explanation of DHA method in practice and discursive strategies. I will further delve into the data and key concepts in a longitudinal study.

2.2.1 DHA in practice

The analytical apparatus of DHA consists of three main steps and is three-dimensional (Aydin-Duzgit, 2014, p. 358-359; Wodak, 2014). The first step outlines the main content of themes and discourses, and can be described as the "entry-level" analysis (Krzyzanowski, 2015). So in this step I will do a content analysis examining occurrences of sentences with the words "media", "corruption" and "rule of law". This would give a first impression of how these discourse topics and subtopics evolve over time in the reports. In order to conduct a systematic content analysis, establishing a "codebook" is key. A codebook is a term for the words or phrases which will be looked more closely at/or analysed in the empirical material (Lynggaard, 2019, p. 57-58). The decision behind choosing the three words – media, corruption and rule of law, is based on that they have been the most prominent indicators in the EUs discourse of Serbia and stabilization and association policy. In addition, they are also most salient in democratic theory, but more importantly they hold a particularly prominent place in the Copenhagen criteria (European Commission, 1993). As a part of this content analysis I will look at key characteristics and qualities in these sentences. How are the discourse topics and subtopics based on these words described, and how does the characteristics and qualities evolve over time?

In the second and third step, the so-called "in-depth" analysis (Kryzanowski, 2015), the focus is on analysing the discursive strategies and the linguistic means used by the discourse-setter to justify and legitimate the given portrayal in the reports (Wodak, 2014). A discursive strategy is a more or less intentional plan of practices adopted to achieve a particular social, political, psychological or linguistic goal (Reisigl & Wodak, 2017, p. 94). The third step explores the linguistic means that are used to realize the discursive strategies (Aydin-Duzgit, 2014). Linguistic means are examined as types, and the more specific, context-dependent linguistic realizations are examined as tokens (Reisigl & Wodak, 2017; Wodak, 2014).

By using the empirical questions shown in Table 1 (see appendices), it is possible to analyse in more detail the discursive strategies and the angle used in expressions, and if there are certain linguistic means that are used to realize the strategies. And also to look at if and how elements in the discourse are reinforced or mitigated over time.

As shown in Table 1, there are arrays of linguistic-analytical means that could be used examining different aspects of discursive representations. The systems of signification (i.e, metaphors, predicates) that are applied in texts are useful in tracing how subject identities are constructed though discourse (Aydin-Duzgit, 2014).

In addition to topics, discursive strategies and linguistic means in a text, DHA also involves the study of intertextual and interdiscursive relationships, extralinguistic social or sociological variables, the history of an organization or institution, and situational frames (Reisigl & Wodak, 2017, p. 90). These four levels of study shows that context is an inherent concept in DHA and contributes to it's principle of triangulation. The historical orientation allows reconstruction of how recontextualization functions as an important process linking texts and discourses intertextually and interdiscursively over time (Reisigl & Wodak, 2017, p. 95).

The strengths of DHA includes its interdisciplinary orientation, the principle of triangulation, the historical analysis and the focus on practical application of results (Reisigl & Wodak, 2017). The historical analysis allows the focus on diachronic reconstruction and explanations of discursive change (Reisigl & Wodak, 2017, p. 120).

2.2.2 Data: Progress Reports
The empirical evidence in this thesis builds on the annual progress reports on the Republic of Serbia from 2010 up until 2021. During this period the Commission published 11 reports. They did not publish any report in 2017, but both the 2016 and the 2018 report covers the missed period. These reports are a set of documents summarising and evaluating the current status and progress achieved by the respective countries in the accession process (Universität Duisburg-Essen: Institut für Politikwissenschaft, 2021).

For the most part the annual reports are structured in same way. A typical progress report on Serbia consists of five main chapters, with chapter five being the most extensive chapter. This is where they evaluate the process in all of the different political criteria. In terms of length, they have grown substantially from 2010 (59 pages) to 2021 (135 pages).

To conduct this critical discourse analysis, I have used the ATLAS.ti research tool. ATLAS.ti is a tool which lets the user locate, code and annotate findings in data material (ATLAS.ti). Computer-assisted text analysis is usually used when the researcher has a substantial amount of data to handle. These tools are being used for the purpose of mapping out what the discourse is about (see step one in chap. 2.1). It involves identifying themes, word categories and possibly relationships between categories observed in the empirical material (Lynggaard, 2019, p. 57). What is common for computer-assisted text analysis is that it can be used to supply the content analysis with numerical data and descriptive statistics about the research and present findings in a visual way. What computer assisted analysis does is just that, it assists the researcher in conducting the analysis (Lynggaard, 2019, s. 58).

When it comes to using documents as data material, Lynggaard (2019) classifies documents as being the most suitable for studying discourse over time. The progress reports can be characterised as a type of formal document, with a language very typical in the genre of EU-documents. The strength using EU-documents as data is the fact that they are typically "low-cost" data, in terms of the availability (internet) (Lynggaard, 2019, p. 51).

2.2.3 Longitudinal Study

This thesis can be characterised as qualitative longitudinal research based on the nature of CDA and DHA. For this research I use an inductive and explorative approach driven by the empirical data (Tjora, 2017, p. 259).

Time is a key factor in understanding and explaining political outcomes from the perspective of discourse analysis for at least two reasons: first, it gives us a discursive explanation of political outcomes, and secondly, the study of longer periods of times allows for temporal comparisons (Lynggaard, 2019, p. 31). Because we are studying a phenomenon over a longer period of time, we can characterise this study as a longitudinal study. Longitudinal studies offer multiple benefits in the field of political science and other scientific fields because they can highlight the development of policies or in this case identify how discourse have changed over time. These studies can uncover process and examine if there is continuity or change in the discourse (Neale, 2016; Lynggaard, 2019).

3 Deconstructing the European Commission´s discourse on Serbia

In this chapter I will present the analysis and the deconstruction of the European Commission´s discourse regarding rule of law, corruption and media development.

3.1 Rule of Law

Rule of law is an integral part of democracy and with that, also one of the core principles of the European Union. Rule of law can in its most basic form be defined as the mechanism or the process that supports equality of all citizens before the law. This mechanism secures a nonarbitrary form of government and more generally prevents the arbitrary use of power (Choi, 2019). In the perspective of the European Union, Rule of law is enshrined in Article 2 of the Treaty on European Union (European Commission, 1993). The rule of law is a legally binding constitutional principle, which is unanimously recognised as one of the founding principles inherent in all the constitutional systems of the Member States of the EU and the Council of Europe (European Commission, 2014, p. 1). The ability to control the power of the political and economic elites is one of the key features of the rule of law. In this regard, strengthening the rule of law is also fundamentally linked to the fight against corruption (Kmezic, 2019, p. 3).
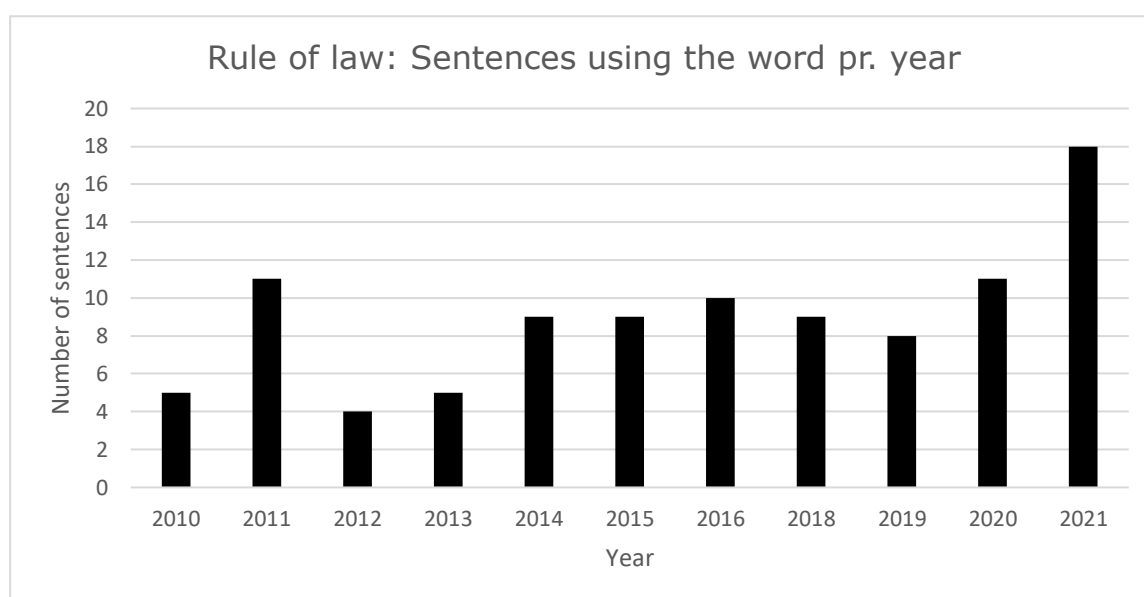
Figure 1 Rule of law: Sentences using the word pr. year

Figure 1 shows how often the word "rule of law" has been used in sentences in the yearly reports. It seems to be a topic of stable attention in the reports, but in the last year we can see a substantial increase in sentences which mentions the word "rule of law". This seems to be due to increased activity on EU related reforms in 2021.

Before we dive into the analysis on discourse on the rule of law in Serbia, we need to look closer at which concrete measures they have implemented.

In 2006, Serbia took its first steps into bringing its level of rule of law up to a European standard with its new constitution. In the progress reports the constitution is depicted as a Constitution that is largely in line with European standards and that it lays down the necessary principles for a parliamentary democracy based on the rule of law and the separation of powers (European Commission, 2011, s. 8 & 9). However, implementing the laws in the new Constitution has taken some time. For example, the parliament adopted in 2010 the Law on the national assembly. This law was required by the 2006 Constitution, that established parliamentary budgetary autonomy through a separate budget as opposed to the previous practice of government-decided allocations (European Commission, 2010, s. 6). In the 2012 report the Commission stated this:

> "Key laws are in place, but the rule of law remains weak" - (European Commssion , 2012, s. 27).

The discourse regarding the rule of law is largely characterized by two subtopics: firstly, how the weakness in the rule of law hampers the development in the private sector. This concern by the Commission has been a prominent part of the discourse revolving around the rule of law. In fact, many of the same statements are literally repeated across several years. This means that the progress reports reuse a lot of their statements, and this can be seen in the quotes below:

> "The private sector is underdeveloped and hampered by weaknesses in the rule of law" - (European Commission, 2015, p. 24;European Commission, 2016, p. 25)

> "The private sector is underdeveloped and hampered by weaknesses in the rule of law and the enforcement of fair competition" - (European Commission, 2018, p. 4; European Commission, 2020, p. 54; European Commission, 2021, p. 58)

Another subtopic that emerges and has been prominent from 2013 and up until 2021 is how the state has a strong footprint in the economy and how this effects the private sector. The commission describes in the 2013 report that the private sector is weak and unprotected as the rule of law is not systematically observed (European Commission, 2013, p.19). Additionally, we see that this discourse again that the Commission repeats itself and comes across with the same message again and again.

> "The state retains a strong footprint in the economy and the private sector is underdeveloped and hampered by weaknesses in the rule of law and in the enforcement of fair competition" – (European Commission, 2019, p. 4; European Commission, 2020, p. 54; European Commission, 2021, p. 58)

In the second subtopic the Commissions argument is put on Serbia´s progress. We see in the discourse that the Commission is constantly pushing for Serbia to speed up the process and that the pace of the negotiations is dependent on their progress on the reforms on rule of law.

> "The overall pace of negotiations will continue to depend on Serbia's progress in reforms and in particular on a more intense pace of reforms on rule of law and in the normalisation of its relations with Kosovo" - (European Commission, 2018, p. 3; European Commission, 2020, p. 4)

And it seems like Serbia finally put rule of law as its key priority in 2021, and future reports will show if adoption leads to implementation.

"The government prioritised EU-related reforms in the first half of 2021 and made the rule of law agenda one of its key priorities and fields of action" - (European Commission, 2021, p. 11)

As the progress reports both evaluates progress and focus on challenges, there is a clear use of predicative strategies in the reports. The progress on rule of law is described through the use of the predicative adjective "weak" and the predicative noun "weakness". These characteristics are repeated each year, and as shown above whole sentences are repeated in several reports. Also the description of private sector as "underdeveloped" assess predicative qualities, and has been stated the last four years. This shows a high degree of intertextuality between the yearly reports, both in the arguments, qualities and use of sentences. The perspectivization used by the Commission is characterized by formal and indirect language, even when the goal is to evaluate and give feedback to Serbia. In this field of action (genre) it is necessary to follow diplomatic manners, but there is some use of metaphors in the latest years that could be interpreted as rather direct. The description of a state with a strong "footprint" in the economy and enterprises that experiences "shadow economy" emphasizes and assess qualities without using explicit comparisons. The referential strategy uses formal names like Serbia and The Commission, and the report also refer to other Member states. So it seems like the discourse-setter want to be formal and minimize the creation of in-group or out-group descriptions.

An important part of the reports is to set out proposals for the way forward, and we can see that there has been more focus on the pace of the rule of law reforms in last four years (quote on page 10). An using the adjectives "more intense" to describe the needed pace in reforms illustrates the use of an intensification strategy in the period 2018-2021. The arguments used regarding the role of the state and underdevelopment of private sector are present during the whole period, but on the second topic the focus on pace of reforms has emerged in the last four years.

3.2 Corruption

Transparency International defines corruption as the abuse of entrusted power for private gain (Transparency International, 2022). Corruption undermines the rule of law and is a result of misuse of power performed by economic and political elites. The fight against corruption has a central place in the EUs internal and external policies (Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2020, p. 1). The relationship between democracy and corruption is a complex one. However, they are closely interweaved. Eliska Drapalova in Transparency International 2019, describes the relationship like this:

> "When democracy deteriorates, we can almost certainly expect an increase in corruption due to the erosion of institutional checks and balances, independence of courts and frequent restriction of the space for civil society actions and political rights of citizens" (Eliska Drapalova, 2019, p. 1).

Inside the EU the fight against corruption is prominent. In fact, 37% of EU businesses consider corruption to be a problem for them when doing business (Eurobarometer, 2017). As a part of a study carried out by the United Nations Office on Drugs (UNDOC) and Crime in 2011: Serbian citizens rank corruption as the third most important problem facing their country today, after unemployment and poverty/low standard of living (UNODC, 2011). This shows how prominent corruption has been in Serbia, but what EU

and EU-affiliated anti-corruption laws and policies has been implemented and adopted since?

In order to fight corruption EU has adopted several law and policies. The Commission has been given a political mandate to measure efforts in the fight against corruption and to develop a comprehensive EU anti-corruption policy, in close cooperation with the Council of Europe Group of States against Corruption (GRECO) (Directorate-General for Migration and Home Affairs).

One of the most important anti-corruption legislations that has been implemented is aligning Serbia with the GRECO recommendations. Additionally, Serbia established its own Anti-Corruption Agency in 2010 (European Commission, 2010, p. 11). The Serbian government said that that they were going to implement a national strategy for the fight against corruption, however as we will see in the discourse below, it has been going very slow. This national strategy had the timeframe for 2013-2018 (European Commission , 2014).
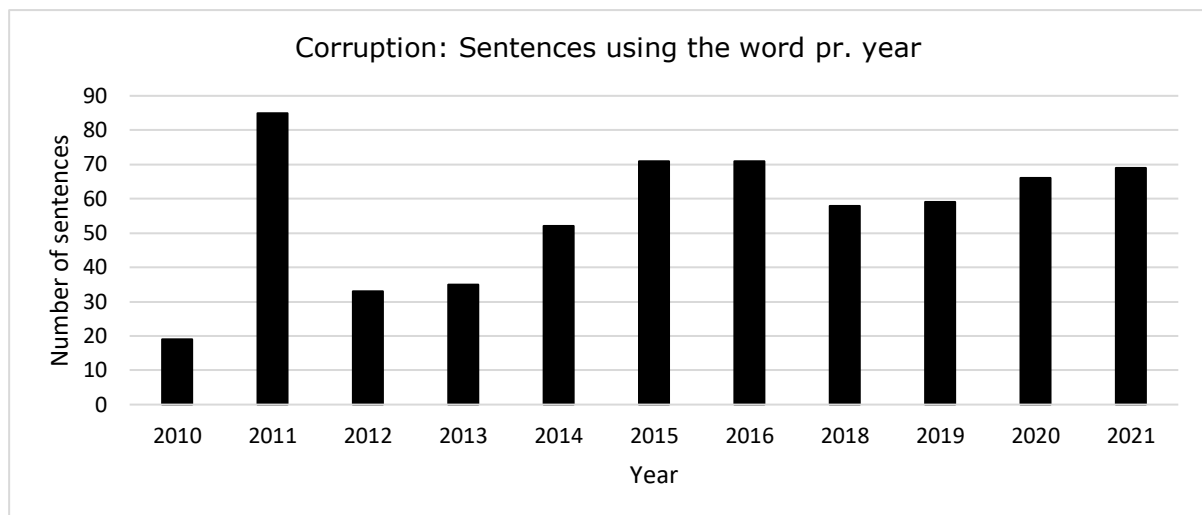
Figure 2 Corruption: Sentences using the word pr. year

Figure 2 shows how often the word "corruption" has been used in sentences in the yearly reports. Sentences containing "corruption" got a substantial increase in 2011, followed by a decrease in the following two years, but has been on a stable level since. The peak in 2011 seems to be partly due to the establishment of the Anti-Corruption Agency.

The discourse is subject to different subtopics. Firstly, a clear part of the discourse is the fact that the progress reports points out how big of a problem the corruption is in the Serbian society. This is a recurring statement annually from 2010 up until 2019. Below is an example of a quote from 2011 and 2018 with the exact phrasing.

> "Corruption remains prevalent in many areas and continues to be a serious problem" – (European Commission, 2011, p. 38;European Commission, 2018, p. 4)

Secondly, the discourse revolves around the implementation of the laws and strategies to tackle the prominent impact corruption has on the Serbian society. The common trait revolving this subtopic is characterized by how little change the Commission has seen. This includes; little follow up and indictments on high-profile corruption cases, experiencing delay in the adaptation on laws on the Anti-Corruption Agency (European Commssion , 2012; European Commission, 2016; European Commission, 2018). In terms of linguistic means we see that the progress reports contain a very clear language.

Words like "expired" and "no measurable impact" gives us a clear indication how the Commission sees the situation.

> "The previous national strategy for the fight against corruption for period 2013-2018 and its accompanying action plan expired"- (European Commission, 2021, p. 31)

> "There is as yet no measurable impact of anti-corruption reforms"- (European Commission, 2018, p. 19)

The third subtopic can be seen as an extension of the previous one, in terms of that its revolving around the institutions set to tackle corruption. With the most prominent in the discourse being the Anti-Corruption Agency. The earlier time period is affected by a sense of positivity, and where the Commission can see the progress and increased activity in the agency (European Commssion , 2012, p. 12). However, in between 2015 and 2018 a fundamental shift occurs. What comes forward is that new laws intended to strengthen the Agency is pending and that it faces obstacles in playing its role effectively in the form of lack of legal access to databases and records of other state bodies. On top of this, the Commission uncovers that the government does not follow up on and act on the recomendations carried out by the Anti-Corruption Council (European Commission, 2016, p. 16). Another trait in the description of the institutions is that they are understaffed. This is something that is repeated during 2019 to 2021.

> "The Higher Court in Belgrade dealing with corruption is also understaffed"- (European Commission, 2021, p. 30)

> "The Prosecutor's Office for Organised Crime, which has jurisdiction over high-level corruption cases, is understaffed" (European Commission, 2020, p. 28; European Commission, 2021, p. 30)

The first two subtopics mentioned does not change much over time, and can be portrayed as stable, but the third subtopic emerged in the later years.

When we dive into more details about discursive strategies and linguistic means used on corruption subtopics, the most visible characteristic is the combination of rather vague expressions and the more direct ones shown in the quotations above. In the six latest reports this phrase has been regularly used; "Serbia has some level of preparation in the fight against corruption". This is a rather vague and passive statement, and is kind of strange combined with utterances about "serious problems" and "no measurable impact". The use of both mitigating and intensification strategies at the same time creates an unclear message, and also affect the discourse-setter's perspective with both expressing distance and involvement. It seems to be a challenge both to motivate for further work, and also at the same time be direct about current status. There are a great deal of interdiscursivity on this topic, and we can see that numerous recommendations, plans and evaluations involves other actors like GRECO, Anti-Corruption Agency, Anti-Corruption Council, Agency for Prevention of Corruption and the Ministry of Justice and Public Administration. The involvement of all these actors in the prevention of corruption shows that implementation is complex, and that it is challenging to get the actors to work together.

In the last two years the reports has explicitly emphasized that Serbia had a negative development on the corruption perception index compiled by Transparency International as their rank has changed from 87th in 2018 to 94th in 2020. This negative development is used as a qualitative attribution in the predicative discursive strategy, and could also be said to intensificate the message written in the 2021 report that "Serbia should

increase its efforts in addressing these shortcomings and step up the prevention and repression of corruption" (European Commission, 2021, p. 26)

3.3 Media

The media sector, consisting of film, television broadcasting, music, publishing and related advertisement plays a vital role in our society with providing the public with information and communication. The freedom of speech and to be able to publish your thoughts and present your views without any repercussions can be described as the cornerstone of a functional democracy. Freedom of speech is one of EUs core values and is in fact a written law, Article 11 of the European Convention on Human rights (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights). The Union has an interest in addressing media freedom issues in Serbia for both normative and self-interested reasons. In other words, this is an essential topic for the EU because it is so closely related to its core values (Bajic & Zweers, 2020, p. 1).

The EU acquis on the information society and media aims to create a transparent, predictable and effective regulatory framework for audiovisual media services in line with European standards (European Commission, 2011, s. 72). In order to achieve this, Serbia has adopted and tried to implement several laws and strategies. In September 2011 the Strategy for the Development of the Media Sector (media strategy) was adopted. A package of three laws implementing the 2011 Serbian media strategy with the goal of further aligning Serbia's legal framework with the EU acquis was adopted in 2014 (European Commission , 2014, p. 29). The Serbian government also adopted the Strategy for the Development of Public Information System for the period 2020-2025. This new strategy was drafted by the EU and OSCE, in cooperation with the Norwegian Embassy in Belgrade (The Government of the Republic of Serbia, 2020).
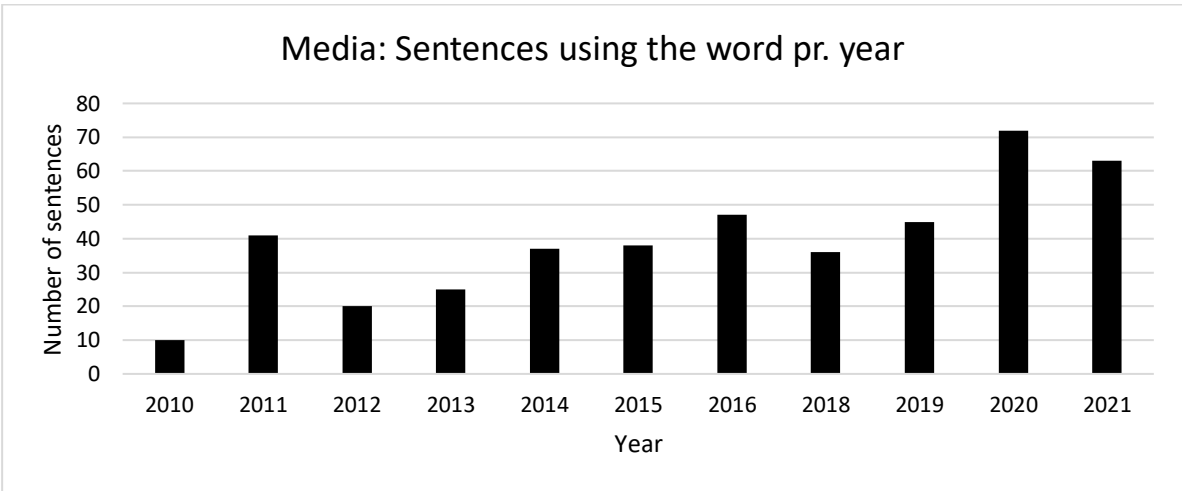
Figure 3 Media: Sentences using the word pr. year

Figure 3 shows how often the word "media" has been used in sentences in the yearly reports. It seems to be a topic of increased attention in the reports, especially the last two years, where we can see a substantial increase in sentences which mentions the word "media". This increase seems to be partly due to focus on the new media strategy and its implementation, and the focus on hate speech as a new topic in the discourse.

The discourse revolving media in Serbia is characterized by different sub-topics. Firstly, the report addresses the lack of transparency in the ownership structures in the media sector as a theme that repeats itself across all the progress reports. Prior to 2012 the media outlets were highly government funded and could be labelled as loyal to the government. This issue has been addressed in both the media strategy from 2011 and in the Strategy for the Development of Public Information System for the period 2020-2025 (European Commission, 2019; The Government of the Republic of Serbia, 2020). The problematic aspects with this are that it gives less media pluralism. This is reflected in reports in the years of election in Serbia. As comments on and the parliamentary elections in 2016 and 2020, the progress report stated:

> "In relation to the election campaign, biased media coverage, undue advantage taken by the incumbent parties and a blurring of the distinction between state and party activities caused distortions in the reporting of the campaign" - (European Commission, 2016, p. 61)

> "Voter choice was limited by the governing party's overwhelming advantage and the promotion of government policies by most major media outlets" – (European Commission, 2020, p. 9)

The reports also describe a working climate in the media sector where the journalists are being encouraged to self-censorship, which again leads to a media consisting of likeminded opinions, also known as less pluralism in the media sector. The concern regarding self-censorship comes across almost all of the annual progress reports and are being tied together with the political and economic influence over the media by the government (European Commission, 2016, p. 61). In fact, this exact sentence is repeated in both the 2020 and the 2021 report:

> "Political and economic influence over the media continues to be a source of concern" - (European Commission, 2020, p. 35; European Commission, 2021, p. 36)

The 2020 progress report points out the biggest problem revolving the issue around media pluralism in Serbia.

> "ODIHR (Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights) also found that most TV channels with national coverage and newspapers promoted the government policy and that the few media outlets which offered alternative views had limited outreach and provided no effective counterbalance, which compromised the diversity of political views available through traditional media, through which most voters receive information" – (European Commission, 2020, p. 5)

Secondly, the discourse revolves around the implementation of the laws and strategies mentioned above. For example, a common phrase that appears in the progress reports from 2012 up until 2016 is that the implementation of the 2011 media strategy needs to be stepped up. This indicates that the problems that the new media strategy in 2011 were set out to handle did not fulfil its role. We can see this clearly in the discourse:

> "There was little progress as regards audiovisual policy, particularly in the implementation of the Media Strategy which aims at aligning with the EU acquis in this area" – (European Commssion , 2012, p. 37)

> "The three new media laws are being implemented, but their impact and effectiveness in terms of achieving the goals of the 2011 Serbian media strategy remain to be seen" – (European Commission, 2015, p. 55)

The third sub-topic that emerges is something we see being more and more prominent in the later years from 2018 to 2021. The tolerance for hate speech and discriminatory

terminology in the media has been an issue the reports have mentioned. The issue with hate speech can be linked to a further polarisation of the public discourse. The 2019 report highlights that it is human rights defenders, together with LGBTI persons and national minorities that face hate speech and discriminatory terminology.

> "Hate speech and discriminatory terminology are often used and tolerated in the media and are rarely tackled by regulatory authorities or prosecutors" - (European Commission, 2019, p. 27; European Commission, 2020, 36; European Commission, 2021, p. 36)

The first two subtopics does not change much over time, and can be portrayed as stable, but the third subtopic emerged in the later years. However, it can be interesting to look at some of the linguistic characteristics the subtopics contain. As some of the quotes above show, they do not only show the arguments presented by the discourse-setter, but they also show that they are repeated. If we look more closely at a word like "progress", it doesn't mean anything alone, so we need to look at the connotations before it. Surprisingly enough, there are one positive connotation (good) in front of progress in sentences containing "media" across all the progress reports (European Commission, 2015). The rest were characterized by "little, some, limited and no". These came across annually from 2010 up until 2021. And in the 2021 report "limited progress" was repeated twice in the section of media, referring to limited progress in adopting the new media plan to improve freedom of expression in the country (European Commission, 2021). This is a common trait of the newer reports. We see that the discourse repeats itself in terms of sub-topics and themes but also some sentences come across repeatedly over time. There is overall more repetition in the discourse in the last years, 2018-2021.

When we look further into the discursive strategies and linguistic means used on media subtopics, we can see use of rhetorical devices with positive flag words like "freedom", "transparent" and "pluralism" and negative stigma words like "hate speech", "threats" and "attacks". This is more widely applied the last four years. There is more variation in the language use in the evaluation of media than for rule of law and corruption, and not so repetitive use of same sentences and arguments.

When we look at proposals for the way forward we can see that in 2021 there was an overtly increased focus on the lack of implementation of media strategy and action plans.

> "In addressing the persisting shortcomings, Serbia should implement, without delays, its media strategy and action plan in a transparent and inclusive manner, respecting the letter and spirit of the objectives of that strategy, …" - (European Commission, 2021, p. 34)

This clear use of direct speech as in "without delays" shows an intensification strategy and highlights the expectation that Serbia needs to implement both the media strategy and action plan as soon as possible. The media situation in Serbia as portrayed in the progress reports is overall characterized by the Serbian authorities´ unwillingness and/or inability to implement the necessary reforms in order to meet the requirements set out in the accession criteria.

3.4 Summary of analysis

My analysis has focused on the discourse on three central topics in the EU progress reports; rule of law, corruption and media development. These topics are not independent of each other, and the rule of law is also a foundation for discourse topics on both corruption and media.

The overall impression is that the discourse in the progress reports are repetitive and slowly changing for all three topics. The most interesting part of analysing all the 1151 sentences in the 11 reports is to see the high degree of intertextuality between the yearly reports. Both subtopics and main arguments are repeated, and it is even a lot of "copy and paste" of whole sentences from year to year. The high degree of intertextuality makes it difficult to spot changes over time, but the in-depth analysis with focus on discursive strategies and linguistic means uncovers more detailed nuances.

For rule of law, the use of discursive strategies shows mostly predicative elements with use of adjectives and metaphors in a rather formal manner. In the last four years we can notice use of an intensification strategy in describing the need for a "more intense" pace of reforms on rule of law. For corruption, we can see a clear lack of follow-up of the established institutions and recommendations, but the combination of both mitigating and intensification strategies gives unclear messages in the discourse. Use of objective criteria, like the corruption perception index, is introduced the last two years, and is a new way of intensificating the message about the negative development and the need for increased efforts. For Media much of the same development can be spotted, lack of implementation, more repetitive discourse and focus on the "limited progress".

4 Conclusions

The topic for this thesis is the European Commission's discourse on Serbia's EU accession process in the period from 2010 – 2021, with regards to rule of law, corruption and media development. My research question was: how has this discourse evolved during the said period, and to what extent does it feature patterns of continuity and/or change? To answer these two questions I've performed a CDA using DHA analysing the Commission's annual progress reports. This gave me the possibility to both do a content analysis on topics and subtopics, and a more in-depth analysis into the discursive strategies and linguistic means carried out in the progress reports. As a part of DHA it's important to also look at the broader institutional and social context in which the discourse is constructed. Due to limitations in scope of this thesis, I don't have the possibility to do a comprehensive analysis of the important contextual factors and will briefly include some reflections on this in my final conclusions.

So how has the EC's discourse on rule of law, corruption and media development evolved in the period from 2010 – 2011?
As presented in chapter 3.4 the discourse seems to be characterized by a lot of the same topics and subtopics throughout the period. The same challenges seems unresolved, and still only 18 of 35 chapters of the acquis has been opened – and only 2 provisionally closed (European Commision). The continuous challenge of adoption and implementation in Serbia seems to be persistent on all three topics, and that leads to a repetitive evaluation focusing on predicative characteristics about the same problems and intensified feedbacks suggesting Serbia should speed up. For rule of law we see a clear repetition with the lack of progress and the fact that even If key laws are in place, the rule of law is still weak. As for Corruption the discourse is repetitive but the discourse addresses a new problem with an Anti-Corruption Agency unable to perform its job effectively. The media situation in Serbia as portrayed in the progress reports is overall characterized by the Serbian authorities´ unwillingness and/or inability to implement the necessary reforms in order to meet the requirements set out in the accession criteria. However, new subtopics emerge with the prominent place hate-speech and discriminatory terminology has in the media.

So to the next part of the research question; to what extent does the discourse feature patterns of continuity and/or change?
This is a challenging question, and as described in Lynggard (2019, p.32) a discourse can at any point in time be characterized by both continuity and change. So when the exact same sentence is used in yearly reports, the context for discourse has also changed over time. So in addition to analyze the text in the reports, the text need to be interpreted in relation to the context where it is made and used. Discursive ruptures can occur through dynamics internal to a specific discourse, or could come about when different discourses affect each other or merge into a new discourse (Lynggard, 2019, p.33).

The results of my analysis of the progress reports shows patterns of both continuity and change. The topics and subtopics related to rule of law, corruption and media represents large patterns of continuity. Some new topics, mostly negative ones, have arisen during the period, but the criteria and form of evaluation seems stable. Reports are more

voluminous in later years with high degree of intertextuality to former reports, and it seems like the strategy is to continue with more of the same evaluative approach. At the same time we can also see a clear pattern of change in the discursive strategies and linguistic means. The lack of progress seems to have provoked an intensification strategy that includes more direct language, use of external benchmarks and predicative adjectives focusing on the need for action. This change can be observed most clearly in the last four years. Still we can see a referential tone that's formal and promotes respect for Serbia as an EU applicant.

Earlier research has used the description «autopilot mode» on the enlargement process towards the Western Balkans (Kmezic, 2015). The annual reports towards Serbia seems to have elements of being in "autopilot mode", the same arguments and sentences is repeated even if the context has changed substantially over the years. At the domestic level, the current President Alexandar Vucic won the elections in 2012 on the basis of promising an intensification in the integration process towards the EU. However, as this thesis has uncovered, Serbia has adopted key laws that looks good on paper but the actual effect of them remains to be seen. At the same time with new external actors coming into the WB, the newly created close ties with China and the strengthened everlasting ties with Russia and Putin, he has been able to balance these relations in order to get the most out of them. Vucic has been accused of "playing" with three different "faces" or "cards" (Economides, 2020, p. 8). At the same time, the Democracy Index issued by Freedom House recorded the lowest grade in 2022 since 2006. Additionally, we can see that Freedom House brings up the same problems regarding transparency, media pluralism, ineffective safeguards against corruption and independence of the judiciary is partly compromised by political influence in their country report (Freedom House, 2022).

So what does this development tell us about the power relations and the Commission's position as a gatekeeper? The continuing "autopilot mode", even if we can see a clear intensification strategy the last four years, could reflect that the Commission continue the top-down institutional approach evaluating accession criteria, while Serbia seems to have other alternatives to EU membership and "pretend" to be reformed in order to advance in the accession process (Kmezic, 2015). It seems like the current situation in Serbia needs a new and more transformative approach that could motivate and give new a momentum to their accession process. And if the Commission's old gatekeeper role doesn't work anymore and the discourse doesn't contribute to any progress – the progress reports as an evaluative mechanism needs to be changed.

As for future research I believe it would be very insightful to perform CDA on the rise of authoritarianism in Serbia. This could give us an insightful understanding on how the rise of authoritarianism has influenced the accession process, and also gives us the perspective from the accession state and not only the EU. Other future studies which could have been interesting to see is a comparative study between candidate countries. For example, a CDA/DHA study on Serbia, North Macedonia and Bosnia & Herzegovina would be very interesting. This study could uncover not only how the discourse have evolved in the respective countries but also shown us if or how the EUs discursive strategies differ in-between the WB-states.

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6 Appendices

Strategy and objectives	Empirical questions	Examples of linguistic means
Referential/Nomination: discourse constructions of social actors, objects/phenomena/events and processes/actions	How are persons, objects, phenomena/events, processes and actions named and referred to linguistically?	• membership categorization • tropes • substitutions • metaphors • metonymies
Predication: discourse qualification of social actors, objects/phenomena/events and processes/actions	What characteristics, qualities and features are attributed to social actors, objects, phenomena/events and processes?	• attributes • collocations • predicative nouns/adjectives • various other rhetorical figures
Argumentation: Justification and questioning of claims of truth and normative rightness	What arguments are employed in the discourse in question?	• topoi (formal or more content-related) • fallacies
Perspectivization, framing or discourse representation: positioning speaker's or writer's point of view and expressing involvement or distance	From what perspective are these nominations, attributions and arguments expressed?	• deictics • direct, indirect or free indirect speech • quotation marks, discourse markers/particles • metaphors
Intensification/mitigation: Modifying (intensifying or mitigating) the illocutionary force and thus the epistemic or deontic status of utterances	Are the respective utterances articulated overtly; are they intensified or mitigated?	• diminutives or augmentatives • (modal) particles, tag questions, subjunctive, hesitations, vague expressions, etc. • indirect speech acts (e.g., question instead of assertion) • verbs of saying, feeling, thinking

Table 1 Discursive strategies, empirical questions and linguistic means (adapted from Reisigl & Wodak, 2017, p. 95; Wodak, 2014, p. 8; Aydin-Duzgit, 2014, p. 359)