Visual Metaphors of Peace, Prosperity and Security in European Union Enlargement Discourse

მშვიდობის, კეთილდღეობისა და უსაფრთხოების ვიზუალური მეტაფორები ევროკავშირის გაფართოების დისკურსში

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Abstract

Introduction. This study examines how the concepts of peace, prosperity and security are represented through visual metaphors in European Union enlargement discourse. The research focuses on selected visual materials published by European Union institutions and official communication platforms related to the EU. **Methods.** Methodologically, the study employs qualitative visual content analysis and visual metaphor analysis. Six visuals were examined under three thematic categories: peace, prosperity and security. The analysis was conducted according to six criteria: dominant visual element, metaphorical meaning, symbolic code, use of colour, compositional hierarchy and rhetorical function. **Results.** The findings show that the theme of peace is represented through metaphors of unity, solidarity, harmony and shared belonging. Prosperity is visualized through images of modernization, connectivity, quality of life, sustainability and future generations. Security, on the other hand, is represented through metaphors of geopolitical rapprochement, institutional integration, completion and stability. **Conclusion.** The study demonstrates that visuals used in EU enlargement communication are not merely informative or decorative elements; rather, they function as rhetorical tools that structure political meaning and guide the viewer’s perception of Europe. In conclusion, European Union enlargement discourse visually constructs a continuity narrative that connects the historical project of peace, the present promise of prosperity and the future-oriented expansion of security. From the perspective of graphic design and visual communication, the study contributes to understanding how abstract political concepts are transformed into visually readable and symbolically powerful messages.

Keywords: European Union enlargement, visual metaphor, visual communication, political communication, peace-prosperity-security.

აბსტრაქტი

შესავალი. კვლევაში შესწავლილია, თუ როგორ არის წარმოდგენილი მშვიდობის, კეთილდღეობისა და უსაფრთხოების ცნებები ვიზუალური მეტაფორების მეშვეობით ევროკავშირის გაფართოების დისკურსში. კვლევა ფოკუსირებულია ევროკავშირის ინსტიტუტებისა და ევროკავშირთან დაკავშირებული ოფიციალური საკომუნიკაციო პლატფორმების მიერ გამოქვეყნებულ შერჩეულ ვიზუალურ მასალებზე. **მეთოდები.** მეთოდოლოგიურად კვლევა იყენებს თვისებრივ ვიზუალურ კონტენტ-ანალიზსა და ვიზუალური მეტაფორის ანალიზს. ექვსი ვიზუალური მასალა შესწავლილია სამი თემატური კატეგორიის მიხედვით: მშვიდობა, კეთილდღეობა და უსაფრთხოება. ანალიზი ჩატარდა ექვსი კრიტერიუმის მიხედვით: დომინანტური ვიზუალური ელემენტი, მეტაფორული მნიშვნელობა, სიმბოლური კოდი, ფერის გამოყენება, კომპოზიციური იერარქია და რიტორიკული ფუნქცია. **შედეგები.** კვლევის შედეგები აჩვენებს, რომ მშვიდობის თემა წარმოდგენილია ერთიანობის, სოლიდარობის, ჰარმონიისა და საერთო კუთვნილების მეტაფორებით. კეთილდღეობა

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ვიზუალიზებულია მოდერნიზაციის, დაკავშირებულობის, ცხოვრების ხარისხის, მდგრადობისა და მომავალი თაობების გამოსახულებებით. უსაფრთხოება კი წარმოდგენილია გეოპოლიტიკური დაახლოების, ინსტიტუციური ინტეგრაციის, დასრულებულობისა და სტაბილურობის მეტაფორებით. **დასკვნა.** კვლევა ცხადყოფს, რომ ევროკავშირის გაფართოების კომუნიკაციაში გამოყენებული ვიზუალური მასალა არ არის მხოლოდ საინფორმაციო ან დეკორატიული ელემენტი; პირიქით, ის ფუნქციონირებს როგორც რიტორიკული ინსტრუმენტი, რომელიც პოლიტიკურ მნიშვნელობას აყალიბებს და მაყურებლის მიერ ევროპის აღქმას წარმართავს. დასკვნის სახით, ევროკავშირის გაფართოების დისკურსი ვიზუალურად აგებს უწყვეტობის ნარატივს, რომელიც აკავშირებს მშვიდობის ისტორიულ პროექტს, კეთილდღეობის დღევანდელ დანაპირებსა და უსაფრთხოების მომავალზე ორიენტირებულ გაფართოებას. გრაფიკული დიზაინისა და ვიზუალური კომუნიკაციის პერსპექტივიდან კვლევა ხელს უწყობს იმის გაგებას, თუ როგორ გარდაიქმნება აბსტრაქტული პოლიტიკური ცნებები ვიზუალურად წაკითხვად და სიმბოლურად ძლიერ გზავნილებად.

საკვანძო სიტყვები: ევროკავშირის გაფართოება, ვიზუალური მეტაფორა, ვიზუალური კომუნიკაცია, პოლიტიკური კომუნიკაცია, მშვიდობა-კეთილდღეობა-უსაფრთხოება.

1. Introduction

European Union enlargement is not merely an institutional and legal process referring to the accession of new countries to the Union. It also constitutes a powerful field of communication concerning how the idea of Europe, shared values, political belonging and future imaginaries are conveyed to different societies. The European Commission defines enlargement as one of the key instruments for long-term security, peace, stability and prosperity in Europe, emphasizing that this process supports shared values such as democracy, the rule of law and fundamental rights (European Commission, n.d.). In this context, enlargement is not only a political orientation, but also relates to how Europe narrates itself, how it positions candidate countries and how it constructs a shared image of Europe for the future.

One of the areas in which enlargement discourse becomes visible is visual communication. European Union institutions employ various visual codes when communicating issues such as relations with candidate countries, reform processes, joint projects, democratization, economic development and security to the public. Images such as the European flag, stars, blue background, maps, bridges, roads, doors, light, shields, networks and human figures contribute to the clearer and more effective representation of abstract concepts related to the enlargement process. These visual elements do not merely transmit information to the viewer; they also generate emotional, cultural and political associations. Therefore, EU enlargement communication should be examined not only through textual explanations and official documents, but also through visual discourse and visual metaphors.

Metaphor is a fundamental mode of meaning-making that enables one concept to be understood through another. According to Lakoff and Johnson, metaphors are not merely decorative expressions used in language; rather, they are mental tools that structure modes of thinking and the conceptual world (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003). Visual metaphors establish this conceptual transfer through visual signs. Forceville states that visual metaphor produces meaning by associating an image with another conceptual domain (Forceville, 1996). From this perspective, the visuals used in EU enlargement communication become metaphorical structures that represent abstract political concepts such as peace, prosperity and security through concrete visual images.

The main aim of this study is to examine through which visual metaphors the concepts of peace, prosperity and security are represented in European Union enlargement discourse. The study approaches the enlargement process not from a political science- or law-centred perspective, but within the framework of graphic design, visual communication and visual rhetoric. In this respect, the study argues that EU enlargement is constructed not only through political decisions, negotiation chapters and institutional reforms, but also through visual images, symbols and metaphorical narratives.

The main research question of the study is formulated as follows: Through which visual metaphors are the concepts of peace, prosperity and security represented in European Union enlargement discourse? In line with this main question, the study seeks to answer three sub-questions. First, with which visual codes is the concept of peace associated in EU enlargement communication? Second, through which metaphorical images are prosperity and economic progress made visible? Third, how are security and stability discourse visually

represented? In addressing these questions, the study aims to demonstrate that visual metaphors in EU enlargement communication are not merely aesthetic elements, but rhetorical tools that structure political meaning and guide the viewer's perception of the idea of Europe.

In this context, the study aims to make an interdisciplinary contribution by examining the European Union enlargement process from the perspective of visual discourse. From the standpoint of graphic design and visual communication, EU enlargement visuals are not merely institutional promotional materials. They are also symbolic carriers of European identity, the system of shared values and the political proximity sought to be established with candidate countries. Therefore, examining how concepts such as peace, prosperity and security are represented through visual metaphors will contribute to a better understanding of both European Union communication and the meaning-making mechanisms of political visual culture.

2. Visual Metaphor and Political Communication

Metaphor is one of the fundamental tools of thought and meaning-making. Although traditional approaches have often regarded metaphor as a linguistic ornament, contemporary metaphor theory demonstrates that metaphor is not limited to words alone. According to Lakoff and Johnson, metaphor is a cognitive structure that enables one conceptual domain to be understood through another (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003). This approach moves metaphor beyond being merely a literary or rhetorical form of expression and positions it as one of the basic tools through which thinking, perception and social reality are understood. Therefore, metaphor functions as an important mechanism of meaning-making that enables abstract concepts to be grasped through concrete experiences.

Visual metaphor refers to the construction of this conceptual transfer through visual signs. Forceville states that visual metaphor produces meaning by associating a visual element with another conceptual domain (Forceville, 1996). In this context, a bridge can be read not merely as an architectural structure, but as a metaphor of transition that connects two different domains. Similarly, the image of a road may signify progress, a door may signify access, light may signify hope, a shield may signify protection and a circle of stars may signify unity. The effectiveness of visual metaphor depends on the viewer's ability to establish relationships between these images and to read abstract meaning through a concrete visual structure.

In addition to visual metaphor theory, studies on European integration discourse show that the European Union is frequently conceptualized through broader metaphorical frames. Drulák (2006) identifies three dominant metaphors in discourse on European integration: motion, container and equilibrium of containers. These metaphors are useful for understanding enlargement as a process of movement toward Europe, incorporation into a shared institutional space and the stabilization of relations among political units. From this perspective, EU enlargement visuals can be read not only as institutional images, but also as visualizations of movement, inclusion and balance within the European political order.

The ways in which visuals produce meaning are not limited to the meanings carried by individual symbols. Colour, composition, framing, visual hierarchy and the relationships between elements also play a decisive role in the construction of the visual message. Kress and van Leeuwen's (2020) visual grammar approach demonstrates that visual arrangements produce meaning at the levels of representation, interaction and composition. From this perspective, elements such as the flag, the circle of stars, the blue background, collage and puzzle forms used in European Union enlargement discourse are not merely symbolic signs, but politically meaningful structures organized compositionally. In addition, Forceville and Urios-Aparisi's (2009) approach to multimodal metaphor shows that metaphors can be constructed not only in spoken or written language, but also through the combination of visual, typographic and contextual elements.

Visual metaphors have an important function in graphic design and visual communication, particularly in terms of persuasion, orientation and the intensification of meaning. Phillips and McQuarrie argue that metaphorical images in advertising and visual communication activate the viewer's interpretive process and contribute to stronger recall of the visual message (Phillips & McQuarrie, 2004). This indicates that visual metaphor is not merely an aesthetic choice. It is also a rhetorical tool that involves the viewer in the process of meaning-making, enables the message to be implied rather than stated directly and strengthens the persuasive power of visual communication.

In the context of political communication, the function of visual metaphors becomes even more apparent. Political concepts are often abstract, complex and multilayered. Concepts such as peace, prosperity, security, democracy, belonging, unity and the future are not easy to visualize directly. For this reason, visual

metaphors in political communication represent abstract concepts through concrete images that viewers can easily recognize. The concept of unity may be conveyed through circles, rings or stars. The concept of security may be made visible through images of shields, borders, maps or protective spaces. Prosperity may be represented through images of roads, rising lines, light, cities, markets and networks. Such images transform complex political processes into a visual language that is more understandable, memorable and emotionally effective.

From the perspective of visual rhetoric, images do not merely reflect reality. They also offer a framework for how reality is to be perceived. Barthes states that visual signs operate at the levels of denotation and connotation and that images carry cultural and ideological meanings (Barthes, 1977). This approach shows that political images are not merely tools that provide information, but also visual structures that make certain values, beliefs and ideological orientations visible. Therefore, images used in political communication should be considered symbolic structures that shape the viewer's perception of a given issue. The political function of images in EU communication can also be understood through Lynggaard's (2021) framework, which conceptualizes images as emblems, representations, means of domination and ordering devices. This approach is particularly relevant for analysing EU enlargement visuals, because such images do not merely illustrate policy priorities; they also organize meanings of belonging, inclusion and exclusion. In this study, the examined visuals function mainly as emblems of shared European values and as representations of collective meaning-making around peace, prosperity and security.

Poster archives related to the European Union also support this point. The European Union Posters Collection prepared by the University of Bath Library shows that posters concerning European integration represent various political and social issues, such as the environment, migration, consumer rights, freedom of expression and shared identity, through visual communication. The fact that the posters in the collection aim to communicate complex and abstract messages to broad audiences demonstrates that, in the context of the European Union, visual materials function not only as informative tools, but also as instruments that produce cultural and political meaning (Nardone, 2018).

European Union enlargement discourse provides a strong field of visual analysis in this respect. The enlargement process is built around abstract concepts such as candidate countries, shared values, European identity, democracy, economic development, security and stability. Visual metaphors play an important role in communicating these concepts to the public. While the stars on the European flag represent the idea of unity and shared belonging, the blue background reinforces institutional continuity and a sense of trust. The image of the map makes geographical proximity and geopolitical position visible, while bridge and road images symbolize the transition, alignment and progress between candidate countries and the European Union.

In this context, visual metaphors should be regarded not merely as decorative or supportive elements in European Union enlargement discourse, but as fundamental communication tools that structure political meaning. Concepts such as peace, prosperity and security are transferred to the viewer's perceptual world through visual metaphors, and the enlargement process is interpreted within the framework of a shared future, institutional rapprochement and accession to the European family. Therefore, the analysis of visual metaphors is important for understanding which values are emphasized in EU enlargement communication, how candidate countries are positioned and through which visual codes European identity is constructed.

3. European Union Enlargement as Visual Discourse

European Union enlargement is one of the most important policies of the European integration process. This process is not limited to candidate countries fulfilling certain legal, political and economic conditions for membership. It is also related to how the European Union communicates its own identity, value system and vision for the future to candidate countries and the international public. The European Commission defines enlargement policy as one of the key instruments for long-term security, peace, stability and prosperity, emphasizing that this policy supports shared values such as democracy, the rule of law, fundamental rights and economic growth (European Commission, n.d.). Therefore, the enlargement process can be considered not only as an institutional mechanism of accession, but also as a field in which the idea of Europe is reproduced discursively and visually.

European Union enlargement discourse is shaped especially through concepts that make sense of the relationship candidate countries establish with Europe. Among these concepts, democracy, reform, stability, shared values, economic development, security and accession to the European family come to the fore. The Council of the European Union's identification of Montenegro, Serbia, Albania, North Macedonia, Bosnia

and Herzegovina, Türkiye, Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia as candidate countries within the current enlargement framework shows that enlargement policy constitutes a multilayered political field in the contexts of both the Western Balkans and Eastern Europe and the Caucasus (Council of the European Union, n.d.). This multilayered structure requires enlargement communication to be supported not only by textual documents, but also by visual signs. From the perspective of visual discourse, European Union enlargement communication makes abstract political goals visible through recognizable images. Visual elements such as the European flag, the circle of stars, the blue background, maps, bridges, roads, doors, light, networks, human figures and protective circles become metaphorical structures representing the core concepts of the enlargement process. The circle of twelve stars on the European Union flag is officially associated with the ideals of unity, solidarity and harmony (European Union, n.d.). Therefore, the circle of stars functions not merely as an institutional emblem, but as a central visual code that carries the idea of European identity and shared belonging.

In EU enlargement discourse, the concept of peace is often constructed through images of unity, rapprochement and mutual understanding. Signs such as bridges, shared tables, handshakes, human figures and the circle of stars frame enlargement in terms of post-conflict reconciliation or the reduction of geopolitical tension. In this visual language, the European Union is represented not only as a political organization, but also as a space of peace united around shared values. Thus, enlargement becomes not merely a membership objective for candidate countries, but also a metaphor for transition toward a more stable and conflict-free future.

The concept of prosperity is generally associated with images of progress, development, economic integration and a shared future. Visual elements such as roads, light, rising lines, cities, networks, markets and infrastructure represent the integration process of candidate countries with the European Union along the axis of development and transformation. The European Commission's framing of the enlargement perspective as a strong incentive for democratic and economic reforms provides the institutional basis for this visual discourse (European Commission, n.d.). In this context, prosperity is visualized not only in terms of economic growth, but also together with the ideas of modernization, mobility, opportunity and a shared future.

Security has become another increasingly visible dimension in EU enlargement discourse. In particular, the membership perspectives of countries such as Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia have strengthened the geopolitical meaning of the enlargement process. Georgia's acquisition of candidate country status in December 2023 increased the political and symbolic significance of EU enlargement in the context of the Caucasus (European Council, 2023). In this context, images of maps, borders, shields, blue spaces, protective circles and geopolitical positioning represent enlargement as the expansion of security and stability toward Europe's surrounding regions. Security metaphors position the European Union as a protective space and candidate countries as actors approaching and seeking integration with this space.

Therefore, European Union enlargement communication should not be regarded merely as an informative form of institutional communication. It is also a discursive field in which European identity, shared values and political belonging are visually constructed. Visual metaphors make the complex legal and political structure of the enlargement process more understandable and emotionally accessible for the viewer. Abstract concepts such as peace, prosperity and security are concretized through visual images, and the enlargement process is interpreted as participation in a shared European future.

For this study, approaching European Union enlargement as visual discourse provides a specific basis of inquiry for the fields of graphic design and visual communication. This is because visuals related to the enlargement process are not merely carriers of political messages. They are also design objects that show how Europe represents itself through composition, colour, symbol, typography, hierarchy and metaphorical narration. Therefore, examining the visual metaphors used in EU enlargement communication makes the relationship between political communication and graphic design visible and contributes to understanding the forms through which the European integration process is represented within visual culture.

4. Methodology

This study was designed as a qualitative research study aiming to examine through which visual metaphors the concepts of peace, prosperity and security are represented in European Union enlargement discourse. Qualitative visual content analysis and visual metaphor analysis were used together in the study. Qualitative visual content analysis allows for the systematic examination of signs, symbols, compositional

choices and thematic meanings in visual materials. Visual metaphor analysis was used to evaluate through which concrete images abstract concepts are represented and what kind of rhetorical function these images perform.

Rose's (2016) approach to visual methodologies was also employed in the analysis of visual materials. This approach makes it possible to evaluate visual materials through their contexts of production, visual contents and the meaning possibilities they offer to the viewer. Therefore, in this study, visuals were considered not merely as aesthetic objects, but as communication materials that carry particular political and cultural meanings.

The field of inquiry consists of official institutional visual communication materials related to the European Union enlargement process. In this context, visual materials published between 2022 and 2026 by European Union institutions and official communication platforms associated with the EU were considered. The scope of the analysis may include website visuals, social media announcements, report covers, informational posters, campaign visuals, map-based visuals and digital communication materials representing the enlargement process. The sample was determined through purposive sampling. Accordingly, visuals directly related to European Union enlargement, candidate countries, European integration, shared values, peace, prosperity, security and stability were selected.

The visuals examined in the study were classified under three main themes: peace, prosperity and security. Under the theme of peace, visual metaphors carrying meanings of unity, dialogue, reconciliation, shared future and cultural rapprochement were evaluated. Under the theme of prosperity, visual elements representing economic development, progress, growth, connectivity, mobility and opportunity were examined. Under the theme of security, metaphorical structures visualizing protection, stability, borders, geopolitical positioning, resilience and the idea of a secure space were analysed.

Six main criteria were used in the analysis of the visuals: dominant visual element, metaphorical meaning, symbolic code, use of colour, compositional hierarchy and rhetorical function. The dominant visual element refers to the primary image first perceived by the viewer in the visual. Metaphorical meaning indicates the abstract concept with which this image is associated. Symbolic code covers the cultural and political connotations of signs such as the European flag, the circle of stars, the blue background, maps, bridges, roads, light, shields and human figures. The use of colour was considered particularly in relation to the EU's institutional blue and the association of yellow stars with unity, trust and institutional belonging. Compositional hierarchy reveals how visual elements guide the viewer's perception. Rhetorical function was used to explain which political meaning, emotional effect or sense of belonging the visual strengthens in the viewer.

The aim of the research is not to make a quantitative generalization, but to interpret the ways in which visual metaphors used in European Union enlargement communication produce meaning. Therefore, the study aims to present an in-depth and descriptive analysis based on the selected visuals. The findings were evaluated comparatively under the themes of peace, prosperity and security, and the study discusses how European Union enlargement discourse is structured through visual communication.

5. Results

Visual communication materials related to European Union enlargement discourse show that the concepts of peace, prosperity and security are represented through various metaphorical images. These concepts are abstract, multilayered political fields of meaning that are difficult to visualize directly. For this reason, the visuals used in enlargement communication concretize these concepts through symbols, spatial relations and visual metaphors that viewers can easily recognize. Elements such as the European flag, the circle of stars, the blue background, bridges, roads, maps, light, human figures, networks and protective circles indicate that the enlargement process is not merely an institutional accession procedure, but also a discursive field associated with the production of a shared future, stability and belonging.

In this section, the findings are evaluated under three main themes. The first theme concerns the representation of peace through metaphors of unity, dialogue, mutual rapprochement and shared belonging. The second theme concerns the construction of prosperity through images of progress, movement, economic growth and connectivity. The third theme concerns the association of security with metaphors of protection, stability, borders, geopolitical positioning and secure space. These themes demonstrate that visual metaphors in EU enlargement discourse are not merely aesthetic complements, but fundamental rhetorical tools that structure political meaning.

Table 1. Thematic and metaphorical analysis framework of the examined visuals

Figure	Theme	Dominant visual element	Metaphorical meaning	Rhetorical function
Figure 1	Peace	Circle of stars, blue background, number 12	Unity, solidarity, harmony, shared belonging	Positions the European Union as a space of peaceful coexistence and shared values.
Figure 2	Peace	Large EU flag, human gathering, national flags	European family, common framework, collective belonging	Represents enlargement as the gathering of different national identities around a shared European symbol.
Figure 3	Prosperity	Tram line, rails, station, urban transport	Modernization, connectivity, everyday development	Makes prosperity visible through infrastructure, accessibility and the improvement of urban life.
Figure 4	Prosperity	Children, AirBubble playground, clean-air system	Quality of life, sustainability, future generations	Represents prosperity beyond economic growth, through health, environment and social improvement.
Figure 5	Security	Collage forms representing candidate countries, EU blue background	Geopolitical rapprochement, integration into the common European space	Presents enlargement as the inclusion of different regions surrounding Europe into a shared institutional and strategic framework.
Figure 6	Security	Puzzle pieces, star form, blue tones	Completion, integration, institutional stability	Constructs security not through military imagery, but through the completion of European unity and the expansion of stability.

5.1. Visual Metaphors of Peace

This subsection examines how the concept of peace is represented in European Union enlargement discourse through images of unity, solidarity, harmony and shared belonging. Within the scope of the analysis, Figure 1 and Figure 2 were evaluated.

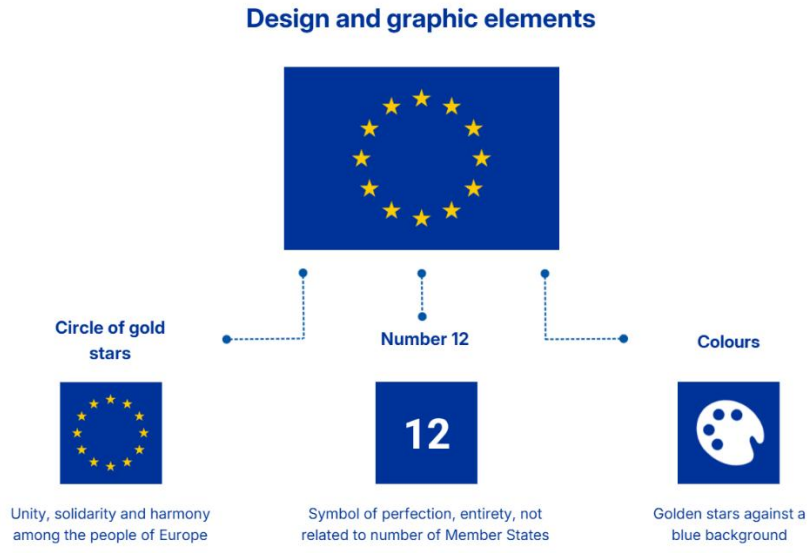


Figure 1. Design and graphic elements of the European Union flag.

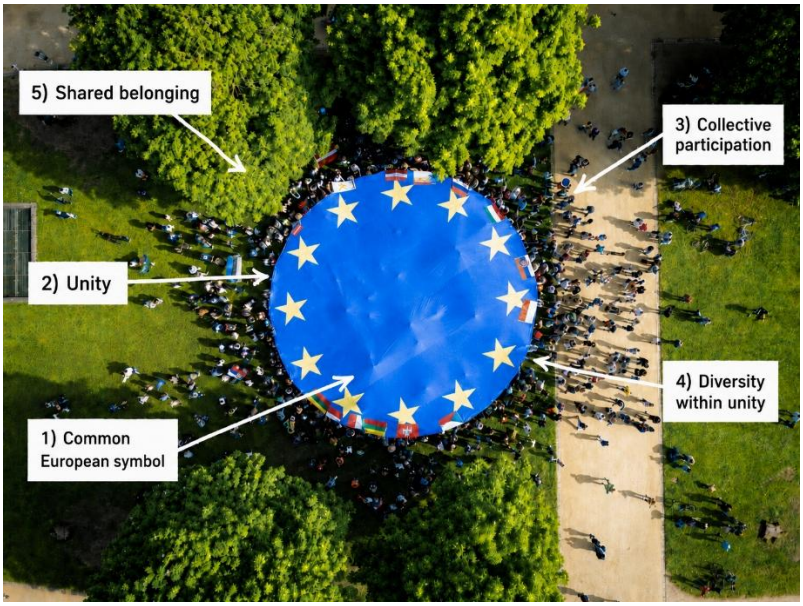


Figure 2. The large European Union flag and the flags of the countries that joined the EU in 2004, in the context of the 20th anniversary of the 2004 enlargement.

The first two visuals examined under the theme of peace show how the concepts of unity, solidarity, harmony and shared belonging are visualized in European Union enlargement discourse. In Figure 1, the graphic structure of the European Union flag is explained through the circle of stars, the number twelve and the colour scheme. In Figure 2, the large European Union flag and the flags of the ten countries that joined the Union in 2004 are presented together in the context of the 20th anniversary of the 2004 enlargement (European Commission, 2024a). These two visuals construct the concept of peace not directly through the absence of conflict, but through metaphors of unity around shared values and inclusion in the European family.

The circle of stars in Figure 1 is one of the most powerful visual symbols of the European Union. According to the official explanation of the European Union, the twelve golden stars on a blue background represent the ideals of unity, solidarity and harmony among the peoples of Europe (European Union, n.d.). In this context, the circular arrangement of the stars produces the idea of a non-hierarchical and integrative partnership. Since the circular form creates a closed structure without a beginning or an end, it reinforces meanings of continuity, completeness and shared belonging. Therefore, the circle of stars in Figure 1 represents the theme of peace through the metaphors of "living together" and "integration in harmony."

The emphasis on the number twelve in Figure 1 is also significant. The twelve stars do not represent the number of European Union member states; rather, they symbolically express the idea of completeness and harmony. This makes the EU flag a value-based and continuous institutional symbol independent of the changing number of member states. In terms of enlargement discourse, this symbolic structure shows that candidate countries are oriented not merely toward a technical accession process, but toward a broader idea of Europe defined around shared values. Thus, the flag functions less as a sign representing existing members than as a visual expression of the desire to belong to Europe.

Figure 2 concretizes the metaphor of peace through the historical experience of enlargement. The visual shows a large European Union flag positioned at the centre of an open public space, people gathered around it and the national flags of the countries that joined the EU in 2004 made visible within the composition. This arrangement represents the European Union not only as an institutional structure, but also as an integrative space that brings different national identities together under a shared symbolic framework.

The large circular EU flag in the visual functions as the central element that strengthens the sense of unity and shared belonging. The gathering of people around the flag in a circular formation makes the concept of peace visible through social participation, collective celebration and shared belonging, rather than as an abstract political principle. In this respect, the visual presents enlargement not merely as the institutional accession of new countries, but as a symbolic process associated with inclusion in the European family and the idea of a shared future.

When these two visuals are considered together, it becomes clear that peace in European Union enlargement discourse is constructed not directly through opposition to war, but rather through metaphors of unity, solidarity, harmony and shared belonging. While Figure 1 presents the symbolic identity of the EU as a value-based union, Figure 2 shows how this union is transformed, within the historical experience of enlargement, into a European family that includes different national identities. From this perspective, peace becomes visible not only as a political objective, but also as a European discourse constructed through shared symbols, flags and integrative compositions in visual communication.

5.2. Visual Metaphors of Prosperity

In the analysis of the theme of prosperity, two visuals selected from the European Commission’s institutional communication materials on the benefits of enlargement were evaluated (European Commission, 2024b). While Figure 3 highlights the development and connectivity dimensions of prosperity through infrastructure and transport modernization, Figure 4 makes the concept of prosperity visible through clean air, children and sustainable quality of life.



Figure 3. Indicator of modernization through the tramline and transport infrastructure.



Figure 4. Children in the AirBubble playground: An indicator of clean air, quality of life and sustainability.

Figure 3 and Figure 4, examined under the theme of prosperity, show that the concept of prosperity in European Union enlargement discourse is represented not only through indicators of economic growth, but also through everyday quality of life, infrastructure, sustainability and future generations. In Figure 3, the urban tramline and transport infrastructure highlight the modernization and connectivity dimensions of prosperity, while in Figure 4, the presence of children in the AirBubble playground, which provides clean air,

shows that prosperity is visualized in relation to quality of life, sustainability and future generations. When these two visuals are considered together, it becomes clear that prosperity in enlargement discourse is metaphorically constructed through both infrastructural modernization and human-centred quality of life.

In Figure 3, the tramline, rails, station, waiting passengers and urban transport system represent the concept of prosperity through modernization and connectivity. The image of the tram evokes not only a means of transportation, but also broader fields of meaning such as mobility, accessibility, infrastructure development and the organization of urban life. While the linear structure of the rails strengthens the sense of progress and direction, the passengers waiting at the station show that this infrastructural development is directly related to everyday life. Therefore, Figure 3 makes prosperity visible in European Union enlargement discourse by moving it beyond an abstract economic concept and associating it with public services, transport networks and modern urban life.

The modern tram and urban infrastructure in Figure 3 contribute to representing the enlargement process, for candidate or new member countries, not only as a process of political alignment, but also as a development process that transforms everyday life. In this context, transport infrastructure becomes a metaphor symbolizing the spatial and social circulation of prosperity. The European Commission's emphasis on economic growth, investments, integration into the single market and the improvement of living standards in enlargement discourse strengthens the institutional context of this visual metaphor (European Commission, 2025; European Commission, n.d.).

Figure 4 represents the concept of prosperity from a social and environmental perspective. The presence of children in the clean-air playground called AirBubble constructs prosperity not directly through income growth or economic expansion, but through a healthy environment, sustainable living and future generations. While the child figure represents hope and continuity regarding the future, the playground stands out as a safe, healthy and public living space. In this visual, prosperity is associated not only with individual economic opportunities, but also with collective quality of life and environmental standards.

The spatial arrangement and sense of movement in Figure 4 strengthen the feeling of vitality and openness to the future. The movement of children in the playground suggests that prosperity is not a static outcome, but a dynamic process of improvement experienced in everyday life. The relationship of the AirBubble system with clean air and environmental improvement shows that prosperity in European Union enlargement discourse can be considered together with the concepts of sustainability, health and environmental protection.

When these two visuals are considered together, it becomes clear that the theme of prosperity in European Union enlargement communication is constructed through two main metaphorical axes. The first is the metaphor of modernization defined through infrastructure and transport. The second is the metaphor of sustainable quality of life constructed through children, clean air and public living space. Thus, prosperity is not limited to macroeconomic growth or market integration; rather, it is represented as a broader field of social improvement through transport, environment, health, children and everyday life practices.

5.3. Visual Metaphors of Security

In the analysis of the theme of security, the study evaluates how the European Union enlargement process is visualized through geopolitical rapprochement, institutional integration and the expansion of the area of stability. While Figure 5 represents the integration of candidate countries into the common European space through a collage structure, Figure 6 associates enlargement with the metaphors of completion, integration and institutional stability.



Figure 5. Collage visual representing the integration of candidate countries into the common European space within the European Union enlargement process.



Figure 6. Puzzle-star visual representing European Union enlargement through the metaphor of integration, completion and institutional stability.

Figure 5 and Figure 6, examined under the theme of security, show that security in European Union enlargement discourse is represented not directly through images of military power, border protection or defence, but through metaphors of geopolitical rapprochement, institutional integration, stability and incorporation into the common European space. Figure 5, as a visual communication material published by the European Commission in the context of the 2025 enlargement reports, presents candidate countries and enlargement regions within a shared visual order. Figure 6 represents enlargement through puzzle pieces and a star form, associating it with the completion of European unity and the inclusion of missing pieces into a common institutional structure.

In Figure 5, images representing the cities, cultures and geographies of candidate countries are presented within a fragmented collage structure placed on the institutional blue background of the European Union. This composition interprets enlargement not merely as the admission of new countries to membership, but as the bringing together of different geographical and cultural areas within a common European order. The fragmented forms in the visual suggest that candidate countries preserve their distinctive identities while also becoming part of a shared political and institutional framework. In this respect, Figure 5 constructs the concept of security not through images of threat or defence, but through metaphors of approaching the European space, integration into a common order and the expansion of geopolitical stability.

The fact that the European Commission’s 2025 enlargement reports address the accession processes of Montenegro, Albania, Ukraine, Moldova, Serbia, North Macedonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo,

Türkiye and Georgia shows that the visual is not merely an aesthetic collage, but an institutional communication object representing the current geography of enlargement. In this context, the fragmented structure in Figure 5 enables the different regions surrounding the European Union to be considered within the same strategic framework. Thus, security is represented not only as the protection of existing borders, but also as the expansion of the area of political and institutional stability around Europe.

In Figure 6, puzzle pieces and the star form make the enlargement process visible through the metaphor of completion and integration. The puzzle metaphor represents the European Union as a structure that becomes more complete when its missing pieces are added. Within this structure, candidate countries are positioned not as external elements, but as pieces that contribute to the completion of the common European order. While the star form refers to the institutional identity of the European Union, the coming together of the puzzle pieces around this star associates enlargement with shared identity, common values and institutional alignment.

The significance of Figure 6 in relation to the theme of security lies in its representation of security not through a directly military or crisis-oriented sign, but through the metaphor of integration and stability. The joining of puzzle pieces symbolizes the alignment of candidate countries with the European Union's normative, political and institutional order. Therefore, the visual allows enlargement to be interpreted as the completion of the European security area and the expansion of stability. Here, security is represented not through a protective wall or a border line, but as an integrated order formed by the harmonious joining of parts.

When Figure 5 and Figure 6 are considered together, it becomes clear that the concept of security in European Union enlargement discourse is constructed through two main metaphorical axes. The first is the metaphor of the integration of candidate countries into the common European space and geopolitical rapprochement. The second is the metaphor of completion, integration and institutional stability embodied in the puzzle-star visual. These two axes make security visible not as a field limited to defence policies, but as a process related to the expansion of Europe's political, institutional and value-based unity. Thus, in European Union communication, enlargement is represented not merely as an accession process, but as the strengthening of a common area of security and stability.

6. Discussion

The findings of this study show that the concepts of peace, prosperity and security in European Union enlargement discourse are structured not only through political or institutional statements, but also through visual metaphors. In the examined visuals, European Union enlargement is represented through fields of meaning such as unity, solidarity, modernization, quality of life, geopolitical rapprochement and institutional integration. This indicates that visual metaphors are not merely explanatory or decorative elements; rather, they function as rhetorical tools that make political messages more understandable, emotionally accessible and symbolically powerful.

From the perspective of metaphor theory, the findings are consistent with Lakoff and Johnson's (2003) view that metaphor is a cognitive tool that structures thought. In the examined visuals, abstract concepts such as peace, prosperity and security are not conveyed directly, but are made comprehensible through concrete visual structures. The circle of stars on the European Union flag represents unity and harmony; the tramline represents modernization and connectivity; the AirBubble playground represents sustainable quality of life; and the collage and puzzle-star structures represent enlargement, integration and institutional stability. In this context, the visuals transform abstract political concepts into everyday, recognizable and visually readable metaphorical structures.

Another important function of visual metaphors is that they involve the viewer in the process of meaning-making. As emphasized in Forceville's (1996) approach to visual metaphor, when a visual element is associated with another conceptual domain, the viewer does not merely receive the given message, but also establishes a connection between visual structure and conceptual meaning. In this study, the circle of stars functions not only as a graphic element, but also as the visual counterpart of the idea of unity, solidarity and harmony among the peoples of Europe. Similarly, the puzzle-star visual, beyond being a simple illustration, evokes the completion of European unity and the expansion of the area of stability.

These findings also show that EU enlargement discourse has a noteworthy structure in terms of temporality. In the examined visuals, enlargement discourse is represented not only as a membership process related to the present, but also as a continuity narrative established between the past, the present and the future. The visuals under the theme of peace, especially in the context of the 20th anniversary of the 2004

enlargement, foreground the idea of overcoming past divisions and bringing different national identities together around a shared European symbol. In this respect, the message of peace is presented not only as a future-oriented ideal, but also as a historical achievement produced by European integration.

The findings also correspond to studies that interpret EU enlargement as a security-related discourse. Higashino (2004) argues that security in EU enlargement is not necessarily constructed in military terms, but may operate as a speech act that legitimizes enlargement as a way to secure peace and stability in Europe. Similarly, Cebeci's (2020) discussion of the EU's temporal selves helps explain why the visuals examined in this study construct a continuity narrative between Europe's past peace project, present prosperity and future-oriented security. In this sense, visual metaphors do not only represent enlargement; they also help legitimize it as a historical, political and symbolic continuation of the European project.

Under the theme of prosperity, temporality is constructed more through the relationship between everyday life in the present and quality of life in the future. The tramline and transport infrastructure make prosperity visible through the improvement of urban life, accessibility and the development of public services rather than through macroeconomic indicators. The presence of children in the AirBubble playground associates the concept of prosperity with future generations, a healthy environment and metaphors of sustainable life. Thus, the message of prosperity does not remain limited to economic growth or integration into the single market; rather, it becomes a human-centred, environmental and future-oriented narrative of quality of life.

In the visuals under the theme of security, the future orientation becomes more explicit. While the collage structure representing candidate countries shows the bringing together of different geographical and cultural areas within a common European order, the puzzle-star visual represents enlargement through the completion of European unity and the inclusion of missing pieces into a common institutional structure. In these visuals, security is constructed not through images of military power, border protection or crisis, but through metaphors of integration, institutional stability, normative alignment and participation in the common European space. This shows that, in European Union enlargement discourse, security is visualized not only as a matter of defence policy, but also as the expansion of an area of stability and the strengthening of political-institutional unity.

At this point, the ideological and cultural function of visual messages also becomes important. Considering Barthes's (1977) view that images produce connotative meanings beyond denotation, it can be argued that the examined visuals do not merely provide information, but also establish a particular order of meaning about European identity. The EU flag, the blue background, the circle of stars, collage forms and puzzle pieces represent the European Union as a space of shared values, harmony, prosperity, security and stability. In this way, visual communication transforms the enlargement process from a technical accession procedure into a symbolically and emotionally stronger European narrative.

The findings also show how candidate countries are positioned within visual discourse. In the examined visuals, candidate countries are not represented as distant, foreign or excluded elements, but as parts that approach the common European space, become integrated into it and contribute to the completion of European unity. The collage and puzzle metaphors in particular produce a message in which different identities can be preserved while also being brought together within a common institutional framework. In this respect, visual discourse establishes a balance between difference and unity and presents candidate countries not as outside European identity, but as its potential components.

Overall, the discussion shows that visual metaphors perform three main functions in European Union enlargement communication. First, they make abstract political concepts understandable by transforming them into concrete visual structures. Second, they position the concepts of peace, prosperity and security within a continuity narrative extending across the past, the present and the future. Third, they represent candidate countries not as actors outside the common European order, but as contributors to the completion of that order. Therefore, European Union enlargement discourse, through visual communication, does not merely announce existing policies; it produces a symbolic narrative that legitimizes the past, interprets the present and constructs a shared European imagination for the future.

7. Conclusion

This study examined how the concepts of peace, prosperity and security are represented through visual metaphors in European Union enlargement discourse. Within the scope of the research, six visuals published

by European Union institutions and official communication platforms associated with the EU were evaluated under the themes of peace, prosperity and security. The findings show that visuals in EU enlargement communication are not used merely as informative or decorative elements; rather, they function as rhetorical tools that concretize abstract political concepts, guide the viewer's perception and give symbolic meaning to enlargement discourse.

The findings related to the theme of peace show that the European Union represents itself through the values of unity, solidarity, harmony and shared belonging. The circle of stars, blue background and number twelve in the European flag construct peace not directly in the sense of the absence of conflict, but through the metaphor of living together around shared values. The visual related to the 2004 enlargement associates enlargement with inclusion in the European family and collective belonging by bringing different national identities together around the large European Union flag. In this respect, peace is visualized through the overcoming of past divisions and the strengthening of a shared European identity.

The findings related to the theme of prosperity show that prosperity in enlargement discourse is not presented only in terms of economic growth or market integration. The tramline and transport infrastructure represent prosperity through the metaphors of modernization, connectivity and the improvement of everyday life. The AirBubble playground constructs prosperity through clean air, children, a healthy environment and a sustainable future. Thus, prosperity becomes visible both in relation to the improvement of present quality of life and in relation to the creation of a healthier and more sustainable living space for future generations.

The findings related to the theme of security reveal that security in European Union enlargement discourse is represented not through direct images of military power, border protection or defence, but through metaphors of geopolitical rapprochement, institutional integration, stability and the completion of the European space. The collage visual representing candidate countries symbolizes the integration of different geographical and cultural areas into a common European order. The puzzle-star visual represents enlargement through the completion of missing pieces, the strengthening of European unity and the expansion of a common area of stability. In this respect, security gains meaning not only as the protection of existing borders, but also as the expansion of political and institutional stability around Europe.

The overall conclusion of the study is that visual metaphors in European Union enlargement discourse create a narrative of continuity between the past, the present and the future. The visuals of peace refer to the overcoming of past divisions and the construction of shared belonging; the visuals of prosperity point to present everyday quality of life and a sustainable future; and the visuals of security refer to future institutional integration and an expanding area of stability. Therefore, through visual communication, EU enlargement is represented not only as the accession process of candidate countries, but also as the future-oriented expansion of Europe's peace project, promise of prosperity and area of security.

This study offers an interdisciplinary evaluation of European Union enlargement discourse from the perspective of graphic design and visual communication. Its contribution lies in approaching visual materials in EU enlargement communication not merely as institutional promotional objects, but as visual metaphor structures that produce political meaning. Nevertheless, the study was conducted on a limited number of official visuals. Future research may examine the visual representation forms of EU enlargement discourse more comprehensively through a broader visual dataset, communication materials from different candidate countries, social media campaigns or comparative period analyses.

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Figure 1. Design and graphic elements of the European Union flag. https://european-union.europa.eu/principles-countries-history/symbols/european-flag_en

Figure 2. The large European Union flag and the flags of the countries that joined the EU in 2004, in the context of the 20th anniversary of the 2004 enlargement. https://ec.europa.eu/avservices/avs/files/video6/repository/prod/photo/store//06/37/71/P-063771_00-25_02-HIGH-753400.jpg

Figure 3. Modernization indicator through tramline and transport infrastructure. https://commission.europa.eu/sites/default/files/styles/oe_theme_medium_no_crop/public/2024-04/P063558-520312.jpg?itok=FW19-bFx

Figure 4. Children in the AirBubble playground: An indicator of clean air, quality of life and sustainability. https://commission.europa.eu/sites/default/files/styles/oe_theme_medium_no_crop/public/2024-04/GettyImages-1234259628_0.jpg?itok=MGUBjUJH

Figure 5. Collage visual representing the integration of candidate countries into the common European space within the European Union enlargement process. https://commission.europa.eu/sites/default/files/styles/oe_theme_medium_no_crop/public/2025-11/Enlargement_Package.jpg?itok=6bZjeOUL

Figure 6. Puzzle-star visual representing European Union enlargement through the metaphors of integration, completion and institutional stability. https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/topics/eu-enlargement/