

Politicisation of the EU's communication to citizens in times of crisis: mission impossible or secret weapon of European institutions?

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Abstract

This article presents selected aspects of the change in the way the EU communicates with its citizens during the numerous crises faced by it recently. The study fills in a gap regarding the impact of the EU institutions' communication activities, including influence on the resilience of the citizens of the Member States to the anti-European narrative of populists. Cases of the *European Green Deal* (in particular communicating it in Poland) and the situation in Ukraine were selected for the study. The analysis also includes selected statements by top EU officials, pointing out politicisation of the EU's communication. The used research methods are: elements of the system method (for the analysis of the communication activities related to the EU policies within the EU political system), discourse analysis (to understand the main themes appearing in the EU leaders' and officials' statements), as well as a case study method (to analyse two cases of the EU's communication strategies implementation). The latter method will be related to key cases as presented by Yin (see: Yin 2003). The research results confirm that the efficiency of the EU's communication actions is limited mainly due to a lack of the unified approach supported by the determination to cooperate with the Member States in this regard, as well as due to a lack of coherent counter-narrative to the story that the right-wing populists talk about the EU. In contrast, the general paradigm shifts in EU's communication to citizens, evident in recent years, has been to make the message increasingly political instead of communicating administration and to place increasing emphasis on values instead of communicating the economic benefits of membership. To some extent, this shift is the result of the need to respond to the anti-European narrative of populists.

Keywords: communication, European Union, anti-European populism

Polityzacja komunikacji Unii Europejskiej z obywatelami w czasach kryzysu: misja niemożliwa czy tajna broń instytucji europejskich?

Streszczenie

Niniejszy artykuł przedstawia wybrane aspekty zmiany sposobu komunikowania Unii Europejskiej jej obywatelom, jaka zaszła w kontekście licznych kryzysów mających miejsce w UE w ostatnim czasie. Jednocześnie badanie wypełnia lukę dotyczącą wpływu działań komunikacyjnych instytucji UE, w tym na odporność obywateli państw członkowskich na antyeuropejską narrację populistów. Do badania wybrano przypadki *Europejskiego Zielonego Ładu* (w szczególności jego komunikowania w Polsce) i sytuacji w Ukrainie. Analiza obejmuje również wybrane wypowiedzi najwyższych urzędników UE, które pokazują polityzację komunikowania UE obywatelom. Wykorzystane metody badawcze to elementy metody systemowej (do analizy działań komunikacyjnych związanych z politykami UE w ramach systemu politycznego UE), analizy dyskursu (w celu zrozumienia głównych tematów pojawiających się w wypowiedziach liderów i urzędników UE), a także metody studium przypadku (w celu przeanalizowania dwóch przypadków wdrażania strategii komunikacyjnych UE) o charakterze przypadków kluczowych w ujęciu Yina (zob. Yin 2003). Wyniki badań potwierdzają, że skuteczność działań komunikacyjnych UE jest ograniczona głównie ze względu na brak jednolitego podejścia wspartego determinacją we współpracy z państwami członkowskimi w tym zakresie, a także ze względu na brak spójnej kontrnarracji do historii, jaką pravicowi populiści opowiadają na temat UE. Natomiast generalna zmiana paradygmatu w komunikowaniu UE obywatelom, widoczna w ostatnich latach, polega na coraz większej polityczności przekazu kosztem informowania o administrowaniu oraz coraz większym nacisku na wartości kosztem informowania o korzyściach z członkostwa (wyłącznie ekonomicznych). W pewnej mierze przesunięcie to jest wynikiem konieczności odpowiedzi na narrację antyeuropejskich populistów.

Słowa kluczowe: komunikacja, Unia Europejska, antyeuropejski populizm

It is said that former U.S. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger once requested a direct telephone number of „Europe”, but no one was able to tell him whose number should be indicated. It is likely that this story never happened, but if it happened today (and it was Marco Rubio, for example, who was looking for a number of “Europe”). Despite the systematically announced leadership crisis in the EU (Van Esch 2017: p. 34–35), probably Ursula von der Leyen would be indicated. Alternatively, it could be Donald Tusk, Antonio Costa or Kaja Kallas. Not that likely Emmanuel Macron, still less Friedrich Merz or his predecessor Olaf Scholz¹ (we are leaving aside for the moment the question of more or less intentional actions by the United States' authorities that undermine the unity of the European Union). Some things have changed since Henry Kissinger's alleged search for a European leader, and it is already clearer who in the EU has a really important influence on decision-making. That is a representative of the institution, but not a leader of one of the Member States. Importantly, this is no one with a frenetic or

¹ On the contrary, Lucas Schramm and Ulrich Krotz see the Franco-German tandem as a real stabiliser of European integration and an effective catalyst for managing European crises (see: Schramm, Krotz 2024).

even more self-serving zeal to decide without being solidly rooted in the system of European liberal democracy.

However, a question far more interesting from the point of view of this article: what is the message the EU might send about itself in the uncertain times of the second decade of the 21st century (again, forgetting for the moment the U.S. ambiguous signal sent to the EU)? What seems to be certain is that the EU is in a multi-crisis, which ranges from a security crisis through uncertainty about the EU's economic future to a crisis linked to the rise of anti-European populists, who – supported by the American president and his advisors – are threatening European integration (Tostes 2024).

This article presents a number of issues related to the EU's communication with its citizens, with a focus on the content and form rather than the institutional context of the communication strategy (although it will indicate what place it has in the EU system). This will be followed by both an analysis of the shift in EU's communication from a technocratic style to a political one, as well as an investigation of the effectiveness of this communication – showing some of the incoherence of the messages of the EU's main leaders. The latter aspect contributes to chaos exploited by anti-EU populists and exposes a lack of counter-narratives of the EU to the populist message. The anti-European populists are understood in this article very broadly as all parties with a populist slant that criticise the EU in its current systemic form. In the third part, two case studies will be presented, both demonstrating the problematic nature of the EU's communication strategy and the deficits of its effectiveness. While the example of the *European Green Deal* (hereinafter: EGD) presents embodying of this problem and highlight the lack of coherence and cooperation with the Member States (leading to a loss of resilience against populism in European societies), the case of the situation in Ukraine demonstrates how the attempt to develop a counter-narrative and make the actions of the EU and the Member States coherent can counter anti-European populism and give European societies some resilience. The two examples also point out the shift in communication of the EU institutions from the one based on technocratic assumptions to the political one.

The study fills in a gap regarding the impact of the EU institutions' communication activities on the resilience of the citizens of the Member States to the narrative of anti-European populists. This article goes beyond the headlines to explore the forces at work behind the scenes that produce the communication chaos over some of the EU's flagship projects – or rather elements of crisis-management turned into ambitious projects, like the EGD (Dekeyrel et al. 2024: p. 13–20). The existing literature has difficulty accounting for the scope and the significance of the challenge of building European narratives over the EU's activities and counter-narratives fighting populist anti-European discourse. Although some analysts deal with a significant topic of the EU top officials' narratives in times of crises (Heinrichs 2020), the analysts seem to overlook a visible paradigm shift in EU's communication to citizens, evident in recent years, namely: (1) making the message increasingly political at the expense of communicating administration, as well as (2) increasing emphasis on values at the expense of communicating the economic benefits

of membership. To some extent, this shift is the result of the need to respond to the narrative of anti-European populists.

The used **research methods** are: elements of the system method (for the analysis of the communication activities related to the EU policies within the EU political system), discourse analysis (to understand the main themes appearing in the EU officials' statements), as well as a case study method (to analyse two cases of the EU's communication activities). The latter method will concern key cases as presented by Yin (see: Yin 2003). *Desk research* was applied to analyse the data on perception of the EU's actions by the citizens and their resilience towards the populist anti-European narrative.

The question might arise at this point: why so many issues related to EU's communication to citizens were covered in one study? The answer is quite simple: examining only a selected aspect would distort the result, as communication activities are horizontal in nature, and their real impact is difficult to study if we refer to only one slice of reality. This is why it is so difficult for researchers to answer the question of what support for the EU actually looks like in European societies and how populists are actually changing this support (in particular, why genuinely pro-European societies support anti-European populists). Analysing only at the macro level obscures the real impact of communication in relation to issues relevant at the micro level.

The EU's communication in times of crises

In David Easton's political system theory, for a political system to persist, the implementation of sectoral policies must be communicated to the public, so that the public has a good understanding of the policy outcomes, and votes for politicians who want to maintain the system (Easton 1964). The EU as a political system (even though *sui generis*) needs to do the same in order to last in the shape given to it by the Treaties (Däubler, Hix 2018: p. 1802). Meanwhile, problems with the EU's communication to its citizens by European institutions have been reported by various stakeholders for years. For example, Jose Manuel González-Paramo, executive director of Banco Bilbao Vizcaya Argentaria, said at the Investment Forum in Rome that "improving communication between EU institutions and citizens should be a priority on the political agenda of European leaders" (Alvarez 2017). Communication issues, though particularly evident after the peak of the EU migration crisis in 2013, have been recognised as significant since the EU's enlargement in 2004 and even earlier, following the rejection of the EU Constitutional Treaty (Świeboda 2007: p. 27). Discussions on effectively informing citizens about the EU have almost always been linked to debates on the democratic deficit in the EU. The convergence of multiple crises within the EU and their impact on national elections – often empowering anti-EU populists – has prompted academics, experts, and politicians to propose ways to enhance the EU's efficiency using existing Treaty provisions (De Schoutheete, 2014: p. 2–7). At the same time, there is a growing recognition of the need for greater transparency and democracy in the EU to prevent

populists from leveraging anti-European narratives, such as claims of excessive bureaucracy and governance by unelected officials. Meanwhile, citizens have the capacity to acknowledge that, despite not being fully democratic, EU institutions possess the necessary tools to address large-scale crises, including economic challenges. This perspective is supported by findings from *Eurobarometer* surveys. In June 2024, *Eurobarometer* findings on perception of EU crisis management pointed out that majority of respondents (54%) felt the EU is better prepared to deal with major crises today than five years ago (Eurobarometer 2024). Moreover, 82% of EU citizens „totally agree“ or „tend to agree“ that the EU should be more involved in preparedness efforts for future crises, through actions such as raising awareness, organising training and crisis simulation exercises. The share agreeing varies between 72% in Austria and 93% in Cyprus, 79% of respondents agree that, in addition to communication by national authorities, the EU should play a more active role in providing timely information and guidance to citizens in a major crisis. At the individual country level, agreement with this statement ranges from 66% in Austria and Denmark to 92% in Cyprus (Eurobarometer 2024). The data presented above clearly indicates that the anti-European narrative is not convincing for EU citizens as regards their general impression on the EU's efficiency in crisis management. Hence, even though many authors point out that both right-wing and left-wing populist leaders and political parties use “similar politicisations of grievances and emotions” and they “aim to rupture exclusionary institutional systems to give power back to the people” (de la Torre 2019: p. 68; Tostes 2024: p. 11), and nationalist-oriented right-wing populists attack the EU institutions particularly harshly here, this applies to the EU when it comes to the overall effectiveness of the EU as a unified crisis management force. Here, EU societies are quite immune to general emotional anti-European narratives undermining EU democracy or the legitimacy of power. This, moreover, is also an answer to frequent questions about how it happens that in EU countries governed by anti-European populists (or where such populists are really strong), societies remain pro-European and occupy the top of the charts in *Eurobarometer* surveys (to cite just the example of Hungary or Poland). However, when we consider the issue of individual concrete EU actions, clearly separable and divisive within the EU, the situation is quite different, and anti-European populists have a different impact. Examples include the issues at the heart of this study, namely the *European Green Deal* and the situation in Ukraine, but one can also cite the issue of the EU's migration pact, the link between the disbursement of funds and respect for the rule of law.

For the sake of research robustness, it is important to indicate how crisis is framed in this study. Its definition is borrowed from Boin and captures crisis as “a situation where political-administrative elites perceive a threat to the core values of a society and/or lifesustaining systems in that society, that must be addressed urgently under conditions of deep uncertainty” (Boin et al. 2013: p. 6). So, in a sense, we are back to scientific fathers of political systems, and to seeing the EU as a political system, which has to overcome crises – including under conditions of great uncertainty – and communicate its actions to the society to get the support.

In this regard, it is rather paradoxical, but the EU is equipped with little real power to build a resilient and sustainable crisis management system, additional or even complementary to those in the Member States (Szymańska 2020; Antoń 2016: p. 9–22). The Treaties do not provide for flexible and responsive crisis management mechanisms and rely on the deliberative nature of decision-making on the most relevant issues, which makes crisis management difficult. However, in recent years the European institutions have demonstrated their prowess in initiating consensus among the Member States on absolutely key issues for crisis resolution, such as taking on a common debt for the Next Generation EU or imposing sanctions on Russia (Pertiwi 2024: p. 61–86).

Having said that, it should not be underestimated that it is necessary for the EU to properly evaluate its own existing communication strategies and to prepare a coherent, well-designed vision for a reformed communication policy in order to both respond to the expectations of the citizens, as well as to win the battle of narratives against populists, who often use the tools of disinformation (Pérez-Curiel, Rivas-de-Roca 2022: p. 144–156). It is also important for the EU institutions to lay the foundations for efficient and easily coordinated mechanisms based on tools adapted to social reality (social media are important here, in particular taking into account in their use the fact that attempts to influence public opinion through trolls, fake news, bots, etc. are widespread; see: Gainous, Wagner 2013). Moreover, in the reality of Donald Trump's second term in the U.S., which the owners of the big social media platforms have paid fief tribute to and will undoubtedly serve (in particular the very ambitious Elon Musk), it is not just trolls and bots that are a threat, but the very algorithms that distort social media communication (Fenoglio 2024).

The last decades of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century can be characterised as a period of passivity in terms of the EU's communication policy. In fact, there was a lack of a coherent strategy for communicating the EU's activities. It was only after the strengthening of the Directorate-General for Communication (DG COMM) and the press service of the European Commission that a more intensive effort was made to create new channels of communication with citizens. These channels included: the Permanent Representations of the European Communities and audiovisual media such as *Euronews TV*, radio *EuranetPLUS*, and Internet portals allowing citizens to access information about the EU, report infringements of EU law and use archives of legislation, such as *EurLex*. In 2002, a new inter-institutional EU Information Group was set up, and since then communication networks such as *Europe Direct*, *Team Europe* or European Documentation Centres have developed dynamically (Jas-Koziarkiewicz 2015: p. 45).

The key document establishing the EU's communication strategy – in fact mainly concerning the European Commission – was published in 2006. It set out the main objectives, tools and expected outcomes of communication activities in the EU. Since then, subsequent publications, even those of recent years, have largely referred to this strategy. This demonstrates that the foundations of the EU's communication policy

are now almost twenty years old. In the context of dynamically changing media, the emergence of social media, fake news, bots and trolls, this strategy – at least formally – seems outdated. Since 2006 the EU has put a lot of effort into effective and targeted communication, but these efforts have not resulted in a fundamental increase in trust in the European institutions and integration (e.g. rejection of the Lisbon Treaty in Ireland), although on *ad hoc* basis various surveys demonstrate at one time declining, at another time – increasing support for the EU and trust in its institutions depending on the circumstances. What clearly unites the situations, in which this confidence grew,² is the consistency of communication by the EU and individual Member States, i.e. consistent signals about why, how and with what purpose the anti-crisis measures were taken. For example, all European institutions spoke with one voice on the issue of anti-pandemic measures, just as all Member States agreed on the anti-crisis measures even despite enormous differences in their approaches³ (Jones 2021: p. 4–14).

Although populist communication style may have damaging impact on liberal democracy (Runciman 2018) and the EU is undoubtedly a liberal-democratic system, the effectiveness of the European institutions in taking anti-crisis measures, the unity of all EU bodies in communicating their legitimacy and the need for the Member States' governments to be involved in explaining to the public the positive expected effect of the measures taken, provide a counterweight to anti-European populism, particularly when populists are ruling or co-ruling in the Member States. Paradoxically, the requirement for consensus (*de facto* unanimity) reinforces the pro-European narrative when anti-crisis measures are taken, as political leaders have to present their own decisions positively. This was the situation after all countries, including Poland and Hungary, accepted the principles of the EGD despite initial political opposition to it, which was only later voted on in the Council and the EP (Witajewska-Baltvilka et al. 2024). This was also evident in the unanimous adoption of successive sanctions packages on Russia, despite significant political differences between EU countries. Probably because of this, the results of the November 2024 survey demonstrate that a record number of EU citizens trust the European institutions and want to see the EU grow in importance (Flash Eurobarometer 2024). This suggests that even without an up-to-date communication strategy, EU institutions possess anti-crisis tools. When these tools are used alongside a coherent narrative from all EU institutions, leaders, and Member States' authorities, they can foster trust in the EU and support its functioning as a unique political system in its current form – the very goal of the communication strategy. Examples such as the EGD and the situation in Ukraine illustrate that achieving this effect also requires a shift within the institutions themselves. Specifically, they need to move from seeing themselves merely as administrative bodies operating within frameworks set by Member States to acting as political actors. This transformation demands strong leadership and a clear, consistent political

² One can infer that as a result of knowledge of the measures taken by the EU.

³ Including the so-called "frugal five" as well as Poland and Hungary – the countries, which at the time were governed by very populist parties using anti-European rhetoric.

message communicated to citizens through as many channels as possible. However, the author emphasizes that adopting a more overtly political role also exposes EU institutions to attacks from other political actors, including the rise of anti-European populists (Buzogany, Mohamad-Klotzbach 2021; Buzogany et al. 2022).

The EU as a political actor against anti-European populists

As a political system, the EU acts within all three areas of what “the political” means, namely polity, policy and politics. A polity can be understood as the philosophical foundation, on which a political system is constructed. Hansen and Sørensen claim: “The polity is perceived as the framework for governance processes rather than its outcome” (Hansen, Sørensen 2005: p. 93–94). This approach is rooted in Aristotelian, Hobbesian, and Rousseauian deliberations on sources of power, and is also connected to the Weberian idea of legitimacy and the idea of political culture. The high orientation of Donald Trump’s actions towards the transactional nature of human relations and the assumption of a Darwinian necessity to fight for resources rather than cooperate in the area of the social contract, sharpens the relevance of “polity” in transnational reality. An effort to define what polity is provokes discussions over the dominance or inferiority of certain values in a specific political community, and when deciding which values should be combated in creating a normative-institutional system of governance. Policy is an area of redistributing budgetary resources and contributing to social order (e.g., economic policy, social policy) and politics classically, as a fight to gain or maintain power. The EU can be perceived as a political entity in all of the three areas of “the political” presented above. Moreover, at least since 2009, when a famous text on the EU’s road of politicisation from “permissive consensus and constraining dissensus” by Hooghe and Marks appeared (Hooghe, Marks 2009: p. 9), a number of authors have analysed the growing shift of the EU from technocracy and administration towards a variegated political picture of the EU (Grande, Hutter 2015; Haapala, Oleart, Beyer 2022). The typical for the beginning of the attempt to replace ideology-based politics with purely economic relations between states and to spread globalisation as a means of democratic homogenization ultimately led to an ideological void following the economic crisis of 2008–2012 (Mukand, Rodrik 2020: p. 765–766). This void was quickly filled by populist movements advocating a return to ideology, fuelled by visible economic disparities and the perceived greed of elite-associated groups. Despite the extensive efforts undertaken by the European Union to address the crisis – efforts widely appreciated by EU citizens in numerous opinion polls – populist political groups in various EU nations have sown doubts about the economic principles underpinning liberal democracy. These doubts have since taken root and are now flourishing.

However, the juxtaposition of high support for the EU’s anti-crisis actions and, at the same time, high support for anti-European populists, although at first glance seems like

a mystery, results precisely from the fact that European institutions, in particular the European Commission, are not only politicising in terms of understanding the impact of citizens on them, but are also moving away from communicating about the EU mainly in technocratic categories (what we are doing and why) and economic categories (what results will it bring and in what indicators will it be visible) to the political narrative (what values will it strengthen, how will citizens feel about it in three aspects: polity, policy and politics). However, this shift is still quite slow and steadily faces strong resistance from populists.

The findings from discourse analysis (applied to speeches of Jean-Claude Juncker of 2015, of Ursula von der Leyen from 2020 and 2024, as well as of Donald Tusk of 2025) illustrate the shift. The analysis provides a snapshot of the change in the way the EU's actions are presented from one focused on economic benefits to one focused on political ones. The aforementioned speeches have, moreover, also received a reaction from the populist important actors on the EU political scene, which will also be highlighted.

The coding of the speeches concerns four issues, namely:

- 1) dominance in scope and intensity of references to EU values, while presenting the strategic projects over references to the economic interest (it is worth mentioning that this code does not refer to general remarks on the European values – usually symbolic and general),
- 2) framing the EU's international cooperation as values-based,
- 3) presence of clear reference to the people of the EU,
- 4) presence of clear references to political matters regarding politics (including fight for rule of law, fight with populism, fight for honest political competition, fight for more power for EU institutions *vis-à-vis* EU Member States).

As regards the speech of Jean-Claude Juncker of 2015, it was his first SOTEU and it was presented in the time of the "refugee crisis". Regarding two speeches of Ursula von der Leyen, in her speech of 2020 (SOTEU) she presented the state of the EU at that time (when pandemic crisis had its peak) and in her speech of 2024 she referred to the Hungary's EU presidency programme. The choice of these two speeches is not coincidental as they present very different approaches to how the EC's President distributes the accents in the discussion on the EU, its state and its challenges. By the way, the latter speech was called by Euractiv von der Leyen's best speech, and it has provoked a major European media debate (Gotev 2024). The speech of Donald Tusk was selected, because it launched the Polish presidency of the EU, and Donald Tusk – as a former President of the European Council – referred to the aspects significant in the light of cooperation between EU institutions and the Member States.

Table 1. Analysis of the speeches of the top EU's and Poland's officials.

Speech	Dominance of references to the EU values over references to the economic interest	Framing the EU's international cooperation as values-based	Presence of clear reference to the people of the EU	Presence of clear references to political matters regarding politics
Jean-Claude Juncker (2015)	<p>Reference to refugee crisis and to fleeing wars (also to solidarity within relocation mechanisms) but focus on numbers and mechanism.</p> <p>Reference to economic crisis (integrity of the Euro area)</p> <p>Reference to political aspects of the Commission's actions ("...it is not a technical question whether you increase VAT (...) It is a political and social question (...) Or whether you cut military expenditure (...)</p> <p>It is certainly not a technical question whether you reduce the pensions of the poorest in society").</p> <p>But main focus on economic aspects and numbers.</p> <p>In climate policy - focus mainly on numbers.</p>	<p>„If we want to promote a more peaceful world, we will need more Europe and more Union in our foreign policy. This is most urgent towards Ukraine”.</p> <p>- „We need unity when it comes to the security of our Eastern Member States, notably the Baltics. The security and the borders of EU Member States are untouchable. I want this to be understood very clearly in Moscow (...) I do not want a Europe that stands on the sidelines of history. I want a Europe that leads. When the European Union stands united, we can change the world”.</p>	<p>“We Europeans should remember well that Europe is a continent where nearly everyone has at one time been a refugee. Our common history is marked by millions of Europeans fleeing from religious or political persecution, from war, dictatorship, or oppression”.</p> <p>„Let it read that together we made European history. A story our grandchildren will tell with pride.”</p>	<p>„I wanted to lead a political Commission. A very political Commission. I said this not because I believe we can and should <i>politicise</i> everything. I said it because I believe the immense challenges Europe is currently facing – both internally and externally – leave us no choice but to address them from a very political perspective, in a very political manner and having the political consequences of our decisions very much in mind. Recent events have confirmed the urgent need for such a political approach in the European Union”.</p>

<p>Ursula von der Leyen (2020)</p>	<p>„It showed us just how fragile our community of values really is – and how quickly it can be called into question around the world and even here in our Union". Main focus on human economy, stability, prosperity, building agencies, strengthening management, setting up a framework for minimum wages, healthcare. Focus on 3trillion EUR on companies and industry and a strong focus on Next Generation EU with numerous economic indicators. Focus on EUR currency, on Schengen, European Green Deal (with indicators). Focus on projects (digitalisation, e-identity). "We will take a human and humane approach. Saving lives at sea is not optional. And those countries who fulfil their legal and moral duties or are more exposed than others, must be able to rely on the solidarity of our whole European Union". "I am proud to live in Europe, in this open society of values and diversity." "European values are not for sale."</p>	<p>„Be it in Hong Kong, Moscow or Minsk: Europe must take a clear and swift position. I want to say it loud and clear: the European Union is on the side of the people of Belarus (...) To those that advocate closer ties with Russia, I say that the poisoning of Alexei Navalny with an advanced chemical agent is not a one-off. We have seen the pattern in Georgia and Ukraine, Syria and Salisbury – and in election meddling around the world. This pattern is not changing – and no pipeline will change that". "So whatever may happen later this year, we are ready to build a new transatlantic agenda. To strengthen our bilateral partnership – be it on trade, tech or taxation".</p>	<p>„This will show Europeans that our Union is there to protect all. And this is exactly what we have done when it comes to workers. When I took office, I vowed to create an instrument to protect workers and businesses from external shocks" – this reference is clearly economic and social, not political. "We want a set of rules that puts people at the centre. Algorithms must not be a black box and there must be clear rules if something goes wrong. The Commission will propose a law to this effect next year". Actually, no direct references to the „people of Europe" as a sovereign.</p>	<p>So I want to be crystal clear – LGBTQI-free zones are humanity free zones. And they have no place in our Union. It is anchored in our founding values, our democracies and in our Community of Law – as Walter Hallstein used to call it. This is not an abstract term. The rule of law helps protect people from the rule of the powerful. It is the guarantor of our most basic of every day rights and freedoms. It allows us to give our opinion and be informed by a free press. Before the end of the month, the Commission will adopt the first annual rule of law report covering all Member States. It is a preventive tool for early detection of challenges and for finding solutions.</p>
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<p>Ursula von der Leyen (2024)</p>	<p>„But what we also see is that one government in our Union is heading in the exact opposite direction, drifting away from the Single Market.”</p>	<p>„We must continue to empower Ukraine’s resistance with political, financial and military support”. “Instead of looking for alternative sources, one Member State in particular just looked for alternative ways to buy fossil fuels from Russia. Russia has proven time and again, it is simply not a reliable supplier. There can be no more excuses. Whoever wants European energy security, first and foremost has to contribute to it. That is the rule we have to follow”. “I heard your words over the weekend. You said that Hungary is „protecting its borders”, and that „criminals are being locked up” in Hungary. I just wonder how this statement fits with the fact that last year your authorities released from prison convicted smugglers and traffickers before they did their time. This is not fighting illegal migration in Europe. This is not protecting our Union. This is just throwing problems over your neighbour’s fence. We all want to better protect our external borders.</p>	<p>“And how can a government be trusted by European businesses if it targets them with arbitrary inspections, blocks their permits, if public contracts mostly go to a small group of beneficiaries? This creates uncertainty and undermines investors’ trust. All of this, at a time when Hungary’s GDP per capita has been overtaken by its Central European neighbours. Hungary is at the heart of Europe, and it should also be at the heart of our economy. The Hungarian people should enjoy the full benefits of our Single Market”.</p>	<p>Not a single direct reference, however, the whole speech is about pointing out Orban’s political hypocrisy (underlining that there is a discrepancy between what he says and what he does). Reference to political (next to financial and military) support to Ukraine.</p>
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		<p>But we will only be successful if we work together against organised crime and show solidarity among ourselves. And speaking about whom to let in: How can it be that the Hungarian government invites Russian nationals into our Union without additional security checks? This makes the new Hungarian visa scheme a security risk, not only for Hungary but for all Member States. And how can it be that the Hungarian government would allow Chinese police to operate within its territory? This is not defending Europe's sovereignty. This is a backdoor for foreign interference".</p>	<p>"Europe must stand united. This was true back then. And this is still true today. So let me conclude by addressing the Hungarian people. We are one family. Your story is our story. Your future is our future. 10 million Hungarians are 10 million good reasons to keep shaping our future together".</p>	
<p>Donald Tusk (2025)</p>	<p>„I'd like the traditional democracy based upon traditional democratic values such as individual freedoms, respect for minority rights, freedom of speech, rule of law, public life free from corruption, politics free from the omnipotence of oligarchs.</p>	<p>„When we talk about the threat posed by Russia today (...) to me it is pathetic that some people in Europe have complexes against the demographic potential or economic potential of Russia. We need to believe again in our power".</p>	<p>"...it cannot happen so that people will associate democracy with helplessness, with the lack of force". "...pro-environmental actions are going to be effective if people subscribe to them, if people endorse those changes.</p>	<p>Reference to European „political civilisation". "We can be competitive, not only in the economy, also in politics". "Democracy needs to become strong again.</p>

	<p>I would like all of those who profess those values to show the power and their force when we need to defend our borders and our security". Framing democracy and its values and requiring a context of power.</p>	<p>"We cannot be helpless against lies and disinformation, especially now when lies and disinformation have become a tool, have become a weapon in the hands of those who have attacked Ukraine and who are a threat for the whole of the EU." "The future is in our hands, not in the hands of the Chinese or the American people."</p>	<p>The EU institutions should have positive associations with regard to agriculture and energy policy. If people think the EU equals burden, obligations, red tape, we are going to lose the army of people whom we need to protect our environment".</p>	<p>The EU needs to become a synonym of power, of force, ethics, morality, laws, but also power. In politics, if you do not have power, you are worth of contempt. You are pathetic". "It will be a very bad, disastrous political impact if the energy prices continue to rise."</p>
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Source: own elaboration based on transcripts of statements of the EU leaders (European Commission 2015, 2020, 2024; Polish Presidency 2025).

The above-mentioned juxtaposition demonstrates not so much a chronological "shift" toward greater politicisation of the EU's actions and its institutions, but a process of intensification in the narrative of European leaders of the emphasis on European values in real action and responsibilities (not just symbolic reference) and the need for increased political, not just legal and economic, action to achieve the EU's political (and not just economic) goals. In Juncker's speech the word "political" in relation to the EU appeared multiple times, but not in any specific context – more as an abstract symbol of a general ambition and understanding that the EU should become more and more political. In the speeches of von der Leyen or Tusk it wasn't the claim for more "political" actions, but an actual informing about the political responsibilities and political consequences of actions. Analysing the above statements, we can clearly see the path of European leaders toward a viable political union, in essence the *finalité politique* of European integration. It seems that in an era of enormous security challenges, which European states individually are unable to meet (European Policy Centre 2025), the EU has a chance to pursue its political anti-crisis agenda. The odds are high that citizens will once again rate the EU's anti-crisis actions better than those of individual states.

The European Green Deal and the EU's reaction to the situation in Ukraine

The examples chosen to illustrate the ways, in which the EU communicates to its citizens, are fundamentally different as regards the way that the EU communicated the main aspects of the two themes to the European public. First of all, the first example of the EGD demonstrates the ineffectiveness of communication and the surrender of the narrative field to populists (which is typical in situations where the EU focuses on tech-

nocratic and economic messages instead of using politically oriented language, imbued with elements of polity, policy and politics). The second one shows a rather effective convincing of the Europeans about how much responsibility Russia has for the war, inflation, the EU's economic problems, and what measures should be taken to increase the EU's security towards Russia.

Both cases will be presented as follows: (1) the main areas presented by the EU institutions; (2) the main channels of communication and the receivers; (3) the counter-narrative of the anti-European populists (the "damage", the "victims", the "interests behind", the "solutions"); (4) the response of the EU institutions; (5) the presence or lack of the unity of the Member States; (6) the impact on the people.

The European Green Deal

The aspects, on which the EU institutions placed the main impact regarding presenting the EGD to the EU citizens, have been mainly related to the following areas: limiting greenhouse gas emissions by 2050, economic growth decoupled from resource use and enigmatic "no person and no place left behind" (EC European Green Deal 2019). The European institutions in case of the EGD used exactly the same communication tools as usual: official websites of the institutions, press releases and media outreach, social media platforms, dedicated information campaigns with audiovisual appeal – usually carried out by subcontractors – and finally through incentives to Member States to inform citizens⁴ (European Commission WWW). As long as there was consensus among the EU and the Member States' leaders on the need for the EGD, and as long as there was talk of saving the climate and the need for international cooperation, Europeans expressed high support for the programme. In contrast, once the values-based and policy-based discourse was replaced by technocratic issues (IEEP 2023), the field opened up for populist discourse, reinforced by the agricultural problems.

The counter-narrative of the anti-European populists contained arguments that the *European Green Deal* caused problems of the European Farmers, even though the EGD hadn't started causing any consequences back then yet (Sobiesiak-Penszko, Banul-Wójcikowska 2024: p. 10). The EGD was framed by the populists in a clear opposition to traditional (meaning "decent") farming, as an administrative burden and in some aspects of the narrative as a conspiracy of some "foreign" powers (Ukrainian oligarchs, Germany, EU lobbyists etc.) (Sobiesiak-Penszko, Banul-Wójcikowska 2024: p. 64). Moreover, the narratives of the anti-European populists were supported by the mainstream media that mainly focused on covering protests and quoting protesters against the EGD (Sobiesiak-Penszko, Banul-Wójcikowska 2024: p. 10). Unfortunately, the EU's response here was not pointed towards specific audiences, limited, focused on certain aspects of very general nature (without taking into consideration specificity of countries opposing the

⁴ It is usually quite politically risky, because Member States' authorities do not always properly highlight "EU merits", where they can claim them for themselves. Tools to engage the public meaningfully were relatively few (*Have Your Say, Conference on the Future of Europe, Citizens' Dialogue Panels, social media webinars, Q&A sessions, Green Weeks and Sustainable Energy Weeks*).

EGD). The answer wasn't bound to values, but more focused on data and general idea of making quality of farming and food better (while the populists referred to dignity of farmers, their role of those who "feed and defend").

Regarding the presence or lack of unity of the Member State, Poland might seem to be specific as there has been a permanent electoral campaign since mid-2023, however, this does not fully explain the fact that the Polish government instead of supporting the EU (Polish authorities contributed to the EGD creation) presented mainly criticism towards it. Arguably, the Polish government wanted to take advantage of the fact that the EU Agriculture Commissioner (who co-created the EGD) was from an option that criticised this programme and the government. In face of such emotional narrative from anti-European populists, the Polish government did not find a way to change the communication framework of the EGD issue and found it easier to hit the programme. Moreover, the presence of protests in countries like France or Spain probably emboldened the Polish government (Notes from Poland 2024). As a result, although Poles overwhelmingly supported the EU's climate protection measures and approved the EGD at first (Eurobarometer 2023), their attitudes changed after the agricultural protests and populist campaign. Their fear of the programme and belief that it may bring more costs than benefits simply got catalysed by the narrative they were surrounded by. Such a change has occurred while the belief that climate change requires activity and reform, including by the EU, has persisted (Rogojsz 2024).

The case of communicating the *European Green Deal* by the EU institutions points out how lack of value-based and political (or rather politically significant) approach to informing citizens about the programme and how a lack of cooperation with the Member States in this area have left too much floor to the anti-European populists and politically motivated reluctant leaders of the Member States and, by this, undermined the success of the programme. At the same time, however, many assumptions regarding the EGD have been quietly changed, and several actions (for example, afforestation) have been postponed. In this case, the silence of European institutions, especially the European Commission, can also be considered a communication strategy, and what's more, a very "political" one – paradoxically, as noted by German SPD politician Tiemo Wölken. The German politician stated: "The Commission obviously wanted to fulfill the wishes of the right, and this is what is so scandalous. The EPP is again working with the far right to get rid of Green Deal files, but are pretending they are still in the middle and working with pro-European democratic forces" (Niranjan 2025).

It stays unclear if more politicisation of the EGD on the side of the EU institutions would bring a successful implementation of the programme (Witajewska-Baltvilka et al. 2024). In this case it seems that not only European societies did not appear to be resilient as regards negative impact of the populists, but also the European Commission demonstrated its fear of them.

The situation in Ukraine

The case of the EU's response to the situation in Ukraine is fundamentally different communicatively than the *European Green Deal*, as the EU could not prepare for this

crisis, and had to react quickly and relied on a bipartisan vote with the Member States from the outset. The very nature of the threat (a specific attacker, i.e., Russia, much easier to pinpoint than harmful carbon dioxide), as well as the fact that European states immediately recognised Russia as a threat, meant that – despite the bipartisanship – the general approach to this crisis in its initial phase was fairly uniform across the EU. This does not change the fact that – while climate change threatens the EU as a whole in a similar way – in relation to Russia, EU Member States had very different economic relationships, degree of dependence on Russian fuels, and sense of Russian threat. It was therefore difficult to speak with one voice. And yet it turned out that the relatively quick and clear coherent messages formulated by the leaders of the EU institutions and Member States, oriented to values and political issues rather than economic interests, meant that it was not easy for anti-European populists with anti-Ukrainian and pro-Russian attitudes to push their own narrative and change public attitudes. Additionally, it is worth including that linking agricultural protests against the EGD with grain imports from Ukraine could translate into anti-Ukrainian attitudes and anti-EU attitudes due to the clearly declared pro-Ukrainian nature of EU institutions.

Regarding the EU's communication actions, they focused on clearly emphasising who the aggressor is (Russia), and why it deserves symbolic and actual punishment from the EU and the Member States; who the victim is (Ukraine) and why it deserves support (as well as war refugees), and finally why the EU needs to change its economic relations with Russia and build its defence potential. As Giselle Bose states in her article: "Following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the EU has taken dozens of decisions, on which agreement had hitherto been unthinkable due to differences between member states [...] EU actions arising from moral obligations based on rights-based norms have been linked closely to values-based norms pertaining to EU solidarity, identity, and ethical obligations vis-à-vis fellow Europeans. These preliminary findings matter as they suggest an inextricable linkage between rights-based norms and values-based norms to trigger effects on EU foreign policy" (Bosse 2022: p. 531). All this was communicated to EU citizens through official announcements, but also through meetings with citizens, posts on social media platforms, press conferences. It is worth noting that the media were very interested in the official communiqués, as they addressed issues that evoke strong emotions. EU leaders, on the other hand, did not shy away from referring to these emotions either, from talking about values, about good and evil, about aggressors and victims. A few days after the war started, von der Leyen declared that Ukraine is „one of us, and we want them in" (Jack 2022). It was broadly present what the EU leaders talked about Ukraine defending values of the Western World, among them von der Leyen, who said in her press statement on 9 May 2023: "Ukraine has been fighting for the ideals of Europe that we celebrate today, to create lasting unity and peace, to represent the values of freedom, diversity and humanity that Europe is built on". (European Commission 2023b).

The counter-narrative of the anti-European populists was rather "tricky" taking into consideration a clear unity of the EU Member States and EU institutions in naming the aggressor and the victims as well as a quick reaction based on values and emotions to

express solidarity and prove it in action (by accepting refugees, providing humanitarian aid and sending military equipment to Ukraine). This unity and communicates based on values and emotions (presenting benefits of supporting Ukraine in political categories of security, safety and solidarity, also in categories of changing paradigms of neutrality, as it was the case in Sweden and Finland) have caused some confusion and inconsistency in the narrative of anti-European populist parties in different EU countries (albeit with varying degrees of intensity). This aspect is well-analysed by Liesbet Hooghe, Gary Marks and authors following them⁵ (Hooghe et al. 2024). Even Victor Orban was initially very restrained after the aggression. Despite the strong identified influence of disinformation, anti-European parties could not count on high political benefits from pro-Russianism, hence in the specific context of the EU's response to Russian aggression, the anti-European counter-narrative was rather subdued (Bujdei-Tebeica 2023). Moreover, the hitherto alliances of the anti-European populists have cracked in many places (Holesch, Zagórski 2023). In response to any anti-European populist elements in the narrative, European leaders have sought to counter in official statements at major events eagerly covered by mainstream media and commented on social media. For example, von der Leyen did so when opening membership negotiations with Ukraine (European Commission 2023b), she also stated she would never work with anti-European and anti-Ukrainian far-right populists (O'Caroll, Tondo, Conolly 2024).

As a result, even despite the anti-European populist narrative questioning support for Ukraine, *Eurobarometer* research results point out broad support for Ukraine in 2022, in 2023 and in 2024. In 2022 the survey results demonstrated that a majority of respondents in all Member States agreed that there was a solidarity in the EU concerning Ukraine, that there is a necessity to strengthen military cooperation, even that the EU was fast in responding to the war (Flash Eurobarometer 2022). Scientific analyses also confirm that there is a strong correlation between the EU's political narrative, the media coverage of it and the support of the EU citizens for strengthening the EU's military capacities (Fernández et al. 2023). Acceptance for the EU's actions to strengthen Ukraine (in all aspects of the EU's support – from humanitarian aid to financing military equipment), always a majority of respondents selected "totally agree" or "tend to agree" option (*Standard Eurobarometer 100*, 2023). Of course, the societies in the EU Member States get tired of the war, and the difficult economic situation resulting from it (inflation and energy prices) has an impact on frustration and political sympathies (CBOS 2024). This is causing a decline in unconditional support for Ukraine in various domestic aspects, but this support is still very high – higher in countries with a high sense of threat of Russian attack. In this case, the key aspect is the European unity which – strengthened by the U.S. president Donald Trump's approach to Ukrainian president and the EU – acts positively on the interest in the EU's message concerning Ukraine and EU security, and weakens the populists' narrative.

⁵ They claim, however, that anti-European populism – manifesting in low solidarity with Ukraine and tolerance of Russia's actions – characterised the narratives of mainly parties that are not part of EU governments and is rather marginal due to the sense of external threat generally uniting societies, which would also justify high European unity in this context.

Conclusions

This article is not devoted to what one can read in documents, but what comes out of the narrative of the EU leaders (even if it is hidden between the lines and is visible only in the way certain topics are framed). It is also about the counternarrative of anti-European populist in certain aspects, which the EU communicates as important to its citizens. Last but not least, it is about which EU's communication actions bring the positive response from the citizens (even if they are contested by the populists), which do not and why. The analysis of the four speeches of the EU leaders and two cases of the EU's communication activities having faced anti-European populist challenges clearly demonstrate that the EU is efficient in communicating broad and value-related picture of the citizen's benefits (while cooperating with the Member States' authorities). However, it is not really efficient when it focuses mainly on economic and technocratic aspects of those benefits. Moreover, the process of shifting in the EU's communication actions from focusing on economic benefits and technocratic language towards political narrative and value-related discourse has been visible and accompanies the process of politicisation of the EU's actions in many areas. Moreover, as Håkansson stated, the European Commission has emerged as a geopolitical actor also due to the challenges that the EU has to face in new international surroundings, which requires dealing with politics and maybe even polity in order to establish a new framework for the EU to act and be legitimised (Håkansson 2024a,b). The focus on values, political aspects and presenting benefits of the EU's actions for and by both the EU and national leaders strengthens trust of the EU citizens towards the EU and maintains their overall support for the EU even despite support for anti-European populists in national electoral fights. Value-based and political rather than technocratic narratives of the EU officials make the EU citizens more resilient towards anti-European populist counter-narratives. The examples of the communication about the *European Green Deal* on the one hand, and the EU's sanctions on Russia give evidence of the phenomena described above.

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