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## Deconstructing Polish Euro-Enthusiasm: The Illusory Incongruence of Party Narratives With Public Opinion

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### Abstract

Over 20 years have passed since Poland’s accession to the EU. While the EU is no longer perceived by Poles as the “promised land,” Eurobarometer surveys still indicate that Poles remain among the most pro-European societies. However, similar to other European countries, Poland has encountered growing support for Eurosceptic parties, increasing criticism of the EU across the political spectrum, and a general shift towards the right in its political discourse. This article applies salient theory and utilises a method of deductive thematic analysis to examine the narratives of relevant political parties regarding the EU across three electoral campaigns in Poland: the parliamentary campaign in 2023, the European Parliament campaign in 2024, and the presidential campaign in 2025. The study aimed to explore how the political parties framed the EU in their electoral narratives and identify the key themes they employed. The findings revealed that, while in the 2023 elections the parties in opposition to the then-ruling United Right presented their own pro-EUness as one of the key elements of their political image, in the subsequent 2024 and 2025 elections almost all of the parties incorporated elements of Eurosceptic narratives in their campaigns or took more critical stands on some of the EU’s policies. These findings suggest that even when they adopted different frames—either presenting the EU as an opportunity or a threat—the parties were strategically responsive to voter expectations and evolving public sentiment.

### Keywords

Euroscepticism; congruence; Poland; political parties

## 1. Introduction

Until the country's accession to the EU in 2004, all of the liberal-democratic political parties in Poland—irrespective of their ideological orientation on the left–right spectrum—shared a strategic consensus centred on European integration that was often framed in political discourse as a “return to Europe.” This orientation of the political elites reflected not only a geopolitical realignment but also a broader civilisational and normative aspiration to distance the country from its communist past. Moreover, it was perceived as essential for consolidating the young democracy by anchoring Poland within the Western institutional order, thereby securing at the same time its economic development (Góra & Mach, 2010, pp. 227–234).

This pro-European stance was the course of action for successive cabinets (De Waele & Paczeński, 2012; Zuba, 2021, pp. 397–398) even when public opinion was becoming doubtful, fearful of, or impatient with the difficult accession process. Indeed, Poland's accession to the EU in May 2004 constituted the achievement of a crucial objective in the country's foreign policy and, at the same time, marked the end of a consensus that had existed on this matter among major political actors (Zuba, 2009). From then on, Poland's policies regarding the EU and attitude to the EU would become issues that polarised partisan rivalry while also being a matter of broad consensus among the public.

For years, all of the public opinion polls (e.g., from the Polish Public Opinion Research Centre [Centrum Badania Opinii Społecznej, CBOS] and from Eurobarometer) had seen 70–80% approval ratings for Poland's membership in the EU—even reaching over 90% in 2022 and coinciding with Russia's attack on neighbouring Ukraine. Poles were also strongly aware of the benefits of European integration. This is why Polish politics, especially between 2015 and 2023, was often analysed in the context of a paradox: Eurosceptic elites under the umbrella of the United Right cabinets had governed a society in which levels of support for the EU had consistently been among the highest in all of Europe (Paczeński, 2025).

However, in Poland, as in other European countries, voters increasingly supported Eurosceptic parties and politicians in elections (Kotwas & Kubik, 2019; Pareschi et al., 2024, p. 57; Szczerbiak & Taggart, 2024). A general shift to the right in political discourse was observed (Cianciara, 2022; O'Neal, 2017; Styczyńska & Meijer, 2023), and visible criticism towards the EU was seen across the political spectrum (Gherghina et al., 2025; Hobolt & de Vries, 2016). Furthermore, Markowski and Zagórski (2023) identified a new group of “Eurodisappointed” citizens who, although not Eurosceptic, were frustrated by the EU's inadequate response to democratic backsliding in countries such as Poland and Hungary. Although the liberal European media and EU institutions described the 2023 Polish parliamentary elections—which resulted in the formation of a pro-EU coalition cabinet—as Poland's return to Europe (Bill & Stanley, 2025), in fact, the Eurosceptic Law and Justice (PiS) party gathered the most votes in these elections. However, it lacked the coalition potential to govern for a third consecutive term. A year later, in the 2024 European Parliament (EP) elections, two Eurosceptic formations (PiS and Confederation) won almost 50% of the vote. Finally, in the 2025 presidential election, with 13 candidates, Eurosceptic politicians were collectively supported by more than 50% of voters in the first round. The Eurosceptic candidate Karol Nawrocki, fielded by PiS, won the second round and became the president of Poland.

The aim of this article is to examine the last three election campaigns—the parliamentary campaign in 2023, the EP campaign in 2024, and the presidential campaign in 2025—to explore how relevant EU issues were

in these elections and how the political parties framed the EU in their electoral narratives. Our goal was to answer the research question: How congruent were the political parties' narratives on the EU with the EU-related attitudes of their electorates?

In what follows, we first describe the theoretical perspectives concerning the nature of the links between voters' opinions and national political parties' positions on European integration. Next, we present our methodological approach and propose an analytical matrix for the thematic analysis of the party discourse on the EU. We then delve into the case of Poland, starting with the results of opinion polls before proceeding to our own analysis of party narratives in three electoral campaigns from 2023 to 2025. Finally, we compile the electorates' positions on EU-related issues alongside the parties' narratives and offer conclusions.

## 2. Theoretical and Research Background

There is an ongoing debate in the literature on the nature of the links between voters' opinions and national political parties' positions on European integration, i.e., the extent to which political parties lead or follow public opinion on this issue. The evidence regarding elite–mass linkages in the context of European integration has been contradictory (Costello et al., 2012; Müller et al., 2012; Ray, 2003). Whereas some scholars have argued that political elites respond to the changing preferences of their electorates, others have suggested that party elites shape public opinion through a process of information and persuasion (Gabel, 1998; Hobolt & de Vries, 2016; Hooghe & Marks, 2005).

This discussion is embedded in two competitive perspectives on the relationship between political parties and their voters: the mass- and elite-driven approaches. On the one hand, according to the mass-driven approach, parties are responsive to voters, and the issue-related content of their politics reflects social conflicts (Green-Pedersen, 2019), from which the parties originate and in which they are rooted (see Lipset & Rokkan, 1967). However, this perspective is not at odds with parties making tactical changes, especially on secondary and less important issues (Elias et al., 2015), to respond to modifications in voters' policy preferences (Adams, 2012). Indeed, political parties are adaptive organisations that constantly and strategically update their platforms and policy narratives to maximise electoral support (Koedam, 2022).

The elite-driven approach, on the other hand, claims that parties and their leaders influence the political debate by introducing and shaping public opinion and support of the issues (Arndt, 2016; Paczeński & Winclawska, 2024). They do so to strengthen the strategic competition between parties and structure social conflicts (Carmines & Stimson, 1986). Moreover, as salient theory asserts, political parties emphasise the issues that are most favourable to them and downplay others (Budge, 2015; Budge et al., 2001). Thus, they prioritise different topics to maximise their support while omitting others that could diminish this support. As Neumayer (2008) showed, political parties utilise their attitudes towards European issues not only to differentiate themselves from one another and define the field of rivalry but also to shape their electorates.

Therefore, the parties' stance towards the EU may be ideological (Hellström, 2008), but it may also be influenced by strategic and contextual factors. Indeed, political parties respond to issues raised, introduced, or defined by their competitors (Laver, 2005). Thus, we find in the electoral campaigns some overlapping issues in the narratives that are addressed by most of the parties in the campaign.

As part of the discussion on the mutual influence of political parties and their electorates, there is a scientific debate on the congruence/discrepancy and convergence/divergence of the policy positions between the masses and elites (Pareschi et al., 2024; Shim & Gherghina, 2020), including in the Eastern and Central Europe context (Ibenskas & Polk, 2021; Rohrschneider & Whitefield, 2012). With the politicisation of European integration in all of the EU member states (Hutter & Kriesi, 2019; Wellings, 2023)—which has become one of the drivers of electoral behaviour (Rapp, 2025; Vasilopoulou & Zur, 2024)—the issue of congruence takes on a greater significance.

Previous comparative studies based on mass and elite survey data from 2016, such as that by Pareschi et al. (2024), showed a relatively high level of congruence between Polish elites and the electorate on certain subdimensions of European integration, measured on the level of the party system. However, our study goes a step further and addresses the gap in the literature by concentrating on a single-country case, Poland, whose political context is well known to the authors and which, as advocated by Pareschi et al., sheds light on the “EU issue congruence and the impact of the European dimension within member states’ domestic politics” (Pareschi et al., 2024, p. 80). This focus provides the analytical depth needed to trace congruence not so much at the systemic level but among single political parties.

By situating this finding in a concrete national setting, our study was able to capture the nuances of how congruence and incongruence unfold in practice (Sanders & Toka, 2013) while also revealing how EU-related issues were strategically employed during electoral campaigns to mobilise voter support. In this way, the single-country perspective complements broader comparative approaches by highlighting mechanisms and dynamics that might otherwise remain obscured.

Poland is a suitable case study for research on congruence and incongruence due to its shifts in public sentiment regarding EU-related issues and the spread of Eurosceptic party narratives. Although the level of satisfaction with EU membership remains one of the highest among member states—and still not many voters in Poland would agree to Polesxit, which is an extreme case of hard Euroscepticism (Szczerbiak & Taggart, 2008)—the level of soft Eurosceptic attitude is quite high in Polish society compared to other European countries (Csehi & Zgut, 2020; Gherghina et al., 2025). Moreover, Poland was the first EU country against which the European Commission (EC) initiated, in 2017, the procedure described in Article 7 of the Treaty on European Union, which is triggered if there is “a clear risk of a serious breach by a Member State of the values [of the EU] referred to in Article 2” (Treaty on European Union, 2012). The main issue was the violation of the rule of law in the justice system during the rule of the United Right coalition led by PiS.

This fact dramatically increased the importance of EU issues in the internal debate and became one of the main lines of division between the government and the opposition. Although the United Right government (2015–2023) officially denied that it was considering leaving the EU, some PiS politicians suggested that after the end of the 2021–2027 financial perspective, Poles should be asked in a referendum whether they wanted to remain in or leave the EU, knowing that in the next perspective (2028–2034) Poland could become a net contributor to the EU budget. There are, therefore, many “althoughs,” which suggests the existence of the paradoxes announced in the title of this article.

### 3. Methodological Approach

This study aimed to examine the consistency or mismatch between the electorates' positions on European integration in Poland and the political parties' positions on the issue. Although research on the congruence between political parties or political elites and the voters is more often quantitative than qualitative in nature (Costello et al., 2020; Real-Dato, 2017; Shim & Gherghina, 2020; Walczak & van der Brug, 2012), this study adopted a mixed-method approach. This approach is utilised especially in situations when the availability and comparability of quantitative data on the parties' or elites' positions presents a challenge (Bankov & Gherghina, 2020, p. 564) due to a lack of reliable databases. To investigate voters' expectations of various parties regarding the EU, the study employed a secondary data analysis of the opinion polls conducted by the well-established CBOS on the issues related to European integration. The reliance on CBOS data, which use representative probability samples, ensured a high degree of methodological consistency, credibility, and comparability across multiple and regular waves of polling. Nonetheless, recognising the limitations inherent in relying on a single source, the study's findings are contextualised within broader empirical patterns and interpreted with appropriate analytical caution.

To reconstruct the political parties' narratives on European integration during the three electoral campaigns between 2023 and 2025, the study used a deductive thematic analysis with predefined codes. First, four frames of analysis of the political narratives on the EU were identified: (a) sovereignty, (b) legitimisation, (c) cultural issues, and (d) socioeconomic issues (Caiani et al., 2024; Pirro & van Kessel, 2018). Then, the study determined whether the frames and the themes within them were used by the political parties in their electoral campaigns and in what context—as an opportunity or a threat—to reveal the parties' positions on European integration within the predefined frames. An analytical matrix for the thematic analysis of the parties' discourses is presented in Table 1. As a result of this analysis, a set of dominant frames and themes was assigned to each of the parties under study, which were then compared to the frames and themes found among the electorate based on survey data. Then, using discourse-attitude congruence analysis (Bankov & Gherghina, 2020; Gherghina et al., 2024), areas of high congruence and areas of tension or divergence were identified.

**Table 1.** Analytical matrix for the thematic analysis of the party discourses in electoral campaigns.

Frame of analysis	Opportunity	Threat
Sovereignty	EU as a security provider in the context of regional instability	Erosion of Polish sovereignty, including pressure from Brussels on the rule of law and governance issues
Legitimation	Poland's influence on European decision-making	EU institutions holding too much power and illegally extending their competences at the cost of the national governments
Cultural issues	EU as a protector and guarantor of human rights	Erosion of Polish traditional values
Socioeconomic issues	Economic prosperity, funding, and modernisation	Overregulation and economic dependency

Traditionally, party positions and their changes have been researched through the analysis of parties' electoral manifestos (e.g., Braun & Schmitt, 2020). Therefore, this article includes such an analysis whenever a party presented a manifesto. However, since it is not uncommon for parties and candidates to either not publish

party platforms at all or to confine their message to a few slogans or merely a few pages of text (see Paczeński & Winclawska, 2024, p. 6), the analysis also included the content of debates among candidates organised by the public television broadcaster, speeches of party leaders or presidential candidates at party-organised rallies and campaign events, and candidates' leaflets and party footage as used in their electoral campaigns (see the Supplementary File). The analysis did not include content from social media, which may be perceived as a limitation of the study. However, this choice was intentional as the study, by design, analysed more official sources of communication that captured the formal positions of the actors articulated in a less affective and customised style than typically found on social media.

The five political parties that were chosen for the analysis were the Civic Coalition (Koalicja Obywatelska [KO]), Law and Justice (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość [PiS]), Third Way (Trzecia Droga [TD]), New Left (Nowa Lewica [NL]), and Confederation (Konfederacja). They all participated in the three elections that were analysed, crossed the threshold for parliamentary and European elections, and fielded candidates in the 2025 presidential election. More details about the analysed parties are presented in Table 2.

**Table 2.** The political parties analysed relative to the 2023–2025 election campaign period.

Political party/ European political family	General election 2023		EP election 2024		Presidential election 2025			
	Status	% of vote	Status	% of vote	Status	Candidate	1st round % of vote	2nd round % of vote
KO/European People's Party	Opposition	30.7	Government	37.1	Government	Trzaskowski	31.4	49.1
PiS/European Conservatives and Reformists	Government	35.4	Opposition	36.2	Opposition	Nawrocki	29.5	50.9
TD/Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe	Opposition	14.4	Government	6.9	Government	Hołownia	5.0	—
NL/Party of European Socialists	Opposition	8.6	Government	6.3	Government	Biejat	4.2	—
Confederation/ divided into Patriots for Europe, and Europe of Sovereign Nations	Opposition	7.2	Opposition	12.1	Opposition	Mentzen	14.8	—

Source: Authors' elaboration of the election results based on Państwowa Komisja Wyborcza (2023, 2024, 2025).

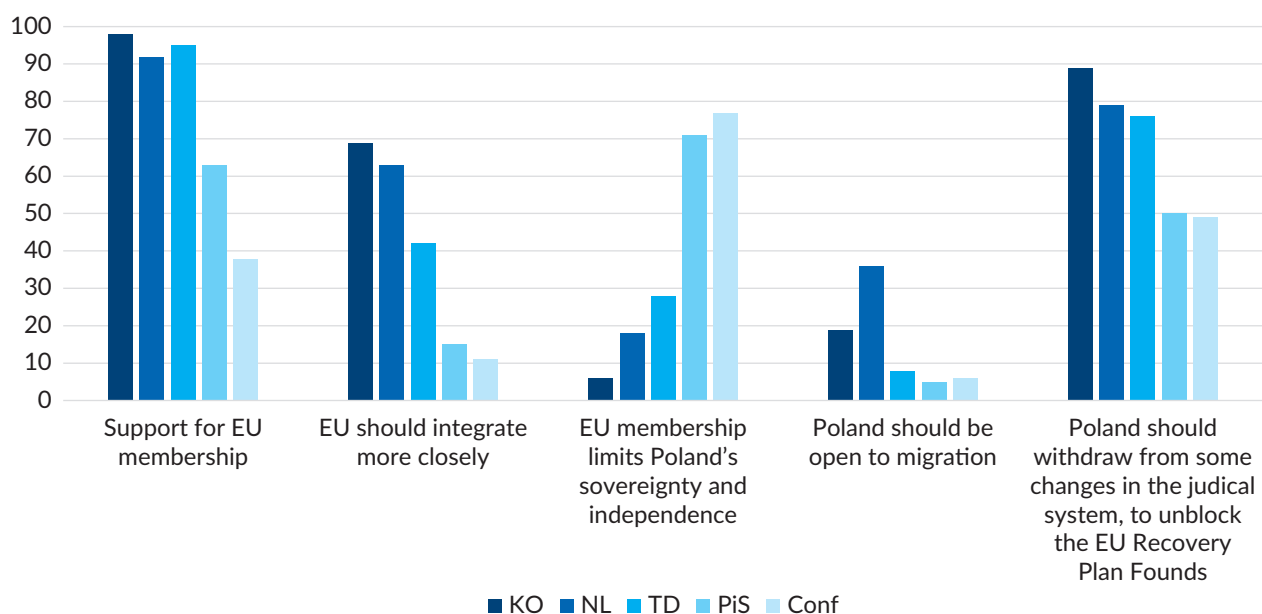
#### 4. Voters' Attitudes Toward the EU and Their Influence on Electoral Decisions

When Poles are asked the general question of whether they support Poland's membership in the EU, the vast majority answer in the affirmative. The highest support was recorded by CBOS in 2022, when more than 90% of respondents gave a positive answer (CBOS, 2024a). Attitudes towards EU membership are mainly determined by political orientation. Twenty years after accession, EU membership was supported by 94% of

respondents who identified with the left, yet only 64% of those declaring right-wing political views supported it. A respondent's support for a specific political party was also an important factor. Support for Poland's presence in the EU was declared by 98% of KO voters, 95% of TD's, and 92% of NL's. Two-thirds of PiS supporters also expressed acceptance of Poland's membership in the EU, while one-third were against. By contrast, among Confederation voters, opponents of EU membership (51%) outnumbered supporters (38%).

The picture became slightly more nuanced when Poles were asked more specific questions related to the EU. The question of whether EU membership limits Poland's sovereignty and independence divided public opinion almost in half: In 2023, 45% of respondents believed that EU membership restricted state sovereignty, while 44% held the opposite opinion (CBOS, 2023). This issue very clearly divided the parties' electorates. Confederation and PiS voters were convinced that Poland's sovereignty within the EU was too limited, whereas this position was not shared by most supporters of KO, NL, or TD. When the respondents were asked about a specific situation, i.e., how Poland should respond to the EC's blocking of funds from the EU Recovery Plan as a consequence of the judicial changes introduced earlier by the United Right government (CBOS, 2023), the majority of respondents (63%) supported the right-wing conservative government's withdrawal of some of these changes so that they would be accepted by the EC and payments to Poland could be released. Only 16% of respondents were against it (mainly Confederation voters and half of PiS voters), which meant that supporters of the ruling parties were also open to concessions if EU money were to follow.

What greatly differentiated the party electorates was the assessment of responsibility for the blocking of the disbursement of the Recovery Plan funds. The supporters of KO blamed the ruling parties (94%). Similarly, the voters of NL (81%) and TD (63%) placed blame on the ruling parties. However, the supporters of PiS saw the culprits in both the opposition parties, which, in their opinion, had lobbied at the EU level for the freezing of European funds (47%), and in the EU itself (23%). Confederation voters blamed the party in power, namely PiS (44%), and the EU (23%), for the lack of funds (see Figure 1).



**Figure 1.** Opinions of the political parties' electorates on the EU. Source: authors' elaboration based on data from CBOS (2023, 2024a, 2025).



The party electorates' perceptions of the EU were reflected in their pre-election declarations (CBOS, 2024b). In 2024, prior to the EP elections, respondents were asked about their voting motives. Sympathisers of the governing parties (which, after the 2023 elections, were KO, NL, and TD) who believed that EU membership did not unduly limit Poland's sovereignty mostly declared that in the EP elections they would vote for a candidate who supported the deepening of European integration (85% of KO voters, 66% of NL's, and 54% of TD's). The majority of the electorates of the opposition parties—PiS and Confederation—expressed the feeling that presence in the EU excessively limited Poland's independence. They wanted to vote for candidates who emphasised Poland's independence in the EU (75% of Confederation voters and 74% of PiS voters).

Although party electorates in Poland are characterised by rather stable views on many important sociopolitical issues, their attitudes towards the EU and EU-related migration issues, such as the relocation mechanism, changed between 2023 and 2025 (CBOS, 2025). The overall percentage in favour of closer integration within the EU decreased from 39% to 35% between 2023 and 2025, while the percentage in favour of retaining as much sovereignty as possible within the EU increased from 39% to 45%.

In 2023, the groups in favour of and against deeper European integration were equally numerous, while in 2025, those in favour of preserving the independence of nation-states within the EU had gained the upper hand. The percentage of such people was the highest since Poland's accession to the EU. Another issue was the attitudes towards migration. In 2023, 68% of all respondents were against the relocation to Poland of refugees from Africa and the Middle East. In 2025, a broader question about migrants was asked, and the majority of respondents (78%) said they would like to see a reduction in the number of migrants, with only 11% believing that Poland should be open to accepting them.

The KO electorate was clearly pro-European, with more than two-thirds (69%) believing that Poland should strive for close integration with the EU. Supporters of this party were slightly less reluctant than average to accept migrants, although most of them (63%) believed that immigration should be restricted (CBOS, 2025). There were several similarities between the voters of KO and NL on these issues. The electorate of NL was also pro-European: Nearly two-thirds of its declared voters (63%) believed that Poland should strive for close integration with the EU. Supporters of NL were more open than others to accepting immigrants to Poland, although the conviction that immigration needs to be limited also prevailed among them (55% were against migrants, and 35% declared openness towards them). The views of TD voters were similar to those of the general public.

On the other side, however, were the PiS and Confederation voters. The belief that Poland should strive to preserve as much independence as possible within the EU was shared by 70% of PiS voters and 76% of Confederation voters. Supporters of those parties were unequivocally in favour of limiting the admission of immigrants: 91% of PiS supporters and 87% of Confederation voters.

In summary, it can be observed that the electorates of the analysed political parties were divided in their assessment of the EU, its policies, and its actions towards the Polish government, especially under the United Right coalition. Whereas voters supporting KO, NL, and TD largely perceived the actions of the EU as legitimate, compatible with the principle of state sovereignty, and even conducive to safeguarding democracy in Poland, considerable segments of the PiS and Confederation electorates viewed the EU as



exceeding its competencies and encroaching upon national sovereignty. However, there were some issues on which the electorates' views were more similar: These concerned EU migration policies, the allocation of irregular migrants, and European Green Deal policies.

## 5. The Political Parties' Narratives on the EU in Their Electoral Campaigns

This section examines how the major Polish political parties framed the EU in the three electoral campaigns that were analysed for this study by focusing on the narratives they constructed to legitimise or contest the European policies and the balance of power between Brussels and national governments. The analysis shows how the parties framed their narratives and what themes they utilised or omitted. It also demonstrates the deep divisions in terms of how the EU was portrayed and employed on the domestic political stage. The titles of the subsections for every party analysed are direct quotations either from the party leaders' speeches or the parties' programmes.

### 5.1. KO: *"Poland's Place Is in the European Union"*

Two leading frameworks were evident in KO's discourse: viewing the EU as a security provider in the context of regional instability, and as a guarantor of economic development, prosperity, funding, and modernisation. Thus, sovereignty and socioeconomic issues were emphasised as opportunities, never as a threat. As all three election campaigns took place after Russia's attack on Ukraine, the EU was presented by the KO in the context of providing military security and protecting the Eastern border. In its election programme "For the first 100 days" in government, the party declared: "We will urgently join the allied European Sky Shield programme. It is in the interest of Poland's security to use all possible tools to protect the Polish and European sky" (KO, 2023). It also said, "We will provide EU funding for the defence of the Polish border with Belarus. We will eliminate the route of smugglers passing from the Middle East through Belarus to Poland and on to the EU" (KO, 2023).

In the campaign before the EP elections, a message about the non-alternative to EU membership was repeated:

There is no alternative to the European Union in this part of Europe. If anyone doubts this today, they do not understand the world as it is today. The alternative is to be in Putin's embrace. And what that looks like, look at what is happening across our eastern border. (TVP 1, 2024, Borys Budka)

In 2024, the KO was already a member of government. Thus, its election leaflet emphasised the following:

It was not without difficulty that we managed to convince the member states to engage more in defence cooperation. This is not only about increasing funding, but also supporting research projects aimed at state-of-the-art defence products. All this with the support and in full complementarity with NATO. The more such undertakings, the greater the security of citizens. (KO, 2024b)

The close cooperation between the EU and NATO was repeatedly emphasised by KO politicians and referred to as "two insurance policies" (TVP 1, 2025a, Rafał Trzaskowski). The KO presidential candidate also boasted

of Poland's influence on European decision-making, which fits within the legitimisation frame, by saying the following during the presidential debate:

The European Union has finally started to speak our language. They want to spend more on the defence industry and on our defence. They want to spend money on borders and on our borders. And that is what it is all about, that the Europeans say exactly what we say to them. (TVP 1, 2025b, Rafał Trzaskowski)

As in the discourse on sovereignty, this narrative depicted the EU primarily as an opportunity. Moreover, the themes of security and EU money were often intertwined, as if the party felt it needed to boost the message about the benefits of EU membership.

Although we did not conduct a quantitative analysis of the election materials' content, the dominance of socioeconomic issues and the portrayal of the EU as a means to achieve economic prosperity were evident in the KO narrative. The KO pointed to how the EU money was already absorbed on "co-financing roads, new schools, kindergartens, cultural institutions, and investments in environmental protection" (KO, 2023a) and presented a long list of further needs: "low-emission trams and buses, cycle paths, revitalisation of green spaces" (KO, 2023b), "increasing the availability of geriatricians and long-term care" (KO, 2023), and "youth programmes and mental health support, investment in greater availability of diagnostics and therapies" (KO, 2024a). In a debate before the EP elections, the representative of KO boasted straightforwardly, "The great success of the first months of our government was the unblocking of huge financial resources for the Polish economy. Never before had such a huge transfer from the European Union flowed into a Polish bank account" (TVP 1, 2024, Borys Budka). This statement demonstrated that the party felt that the financial argument appealed most strongly to voters. In contrast, cultural issues were almost absent from the party's narrative during the analysed period.

## 5.2. PiS: "Poland First, Poles First"

The EU as a subject was strongly present in PiS's 2023–2025 election narrative. The party focused mainly on the threats posed to member states by an increasingly centralising and federalising EU that was usurping further competences not derived from the treaties. The party expressed this in a condensed way on one of its 2023 election leaflet:

We oppose the construction of a superstate out of the European Union, that is, plans for federalisation. Today, we are witnessing the slow erosion of EU member states' sovereignty. More decisions are to be made by EU officials, not by representatives elected by the people. (PiS, 2023b)

The portrayal of the EU as a threat appeared in PiS's narrative within three of the four frameworks we applied to this analysis. First, it was evident in relation to the broadly understood sovereignty of the nation-state. Second, PiS depicted the EU as undermining traditional cultural values and constraining the developmental potential of the member states through overregulation. Third, PiS questioned the legitimacy of EU actions by interpreting, for instance, the EC's decision to withhold National Recovery Plan payments for Poland not as an effort to uphold treaty-based values such as the rule of law, but as an attempt to influence the outcome of the 2023 parliamentary elections by undermining the ruling party.

At a party rally in front of the Turów lignite mine, which was to stop mining by a decision of the Court of Justice of the EU, PiS Chairman Kaczyński said:

The attack on this mine is nothing less than an attack on our sovereignty. In 1989, when we regained independence, it seemed obvious to us that we would be hosts in our own country. And we want to be those hosts! No one will decide for us who is to work in Poland and who is to be unemployed. (PiS, 2023a)

The migration pact was positioned at the centre of PiS's narrative attack. In every election that was analysed for this study, it was presented as a significant threat to Poland's security and a consequence of the "German policy of encouraging the arrival of immigrants" (PiS, 2023c). Illegal immigrants to be forcibly relocated from Western European countries to Poland were portrayed as a source of violence, chaos on the Polish streets, and criminal behaviour. Thus, PiS positioned itself as a defender of the security of the whole of Europe when it said the following:

The European Union is our great common project, and we must defend it against the deluge of millions of unknown, unidentified people who threaten our security. We have burnt cars, attacked women, and looted shops in Western Europe today. People in Paris or Brussels are afraid of going out into the streets after dark. I [Prime Minister Morawiecki] will maintain a very strong Polish veto on forced relocation. You too can do something: Go to a referendum and say NO to forced relocation. Let's set an example for Europe. Poland will be the first to reject it in a referendum, and other EU countries will follow. Only PiS can stop Tusk from accepting illegal immigrants! (PiS, 2023d)

The European Green Deal and the package of EU regulations known as Fit for 55 were equally contested in PiS election messages. According to PiS, the entry into force of these regulations would inevitably lead to an increase in energy prices, the cost of living felt by individual households, and a decline in the competitiveness of Europe, including the Polish economy, all under the pretext of concern for the climate. During a programme convention ahead of the 2024 EP elections, Kaczyński conducted an exegesis of the effects of the Green Deal, which he said struck at the values that Poles hold dear:

We are the kind of nation that enjoys various freedoms, from the political to the everyday. We want to drive what we can afford and what we like. We want to travel around Europe, including by plane, and on budget airlines. We want to eat what we like. We want, in short, to live according to the model we know, and we want to strengthen it. We want to be richer. And how can this be obtained? It can be obtained in a way that allows us to grow faster. And the Green Deal hammers this; it limits our development opportunities. It harms not only farmers but also other groups. It harms almost everyone, except the elite. So, it can be said that it harms all Poles....We must stop it. And this is our commitment. (PiS, 2024)

The negative protagonist in the PiS narrative was often the EC President Ursula von der Leyen, who was referred to as Donald Tusk's "crony," and the "European bureaucrats." This was a clear signal by PiS that it denied the democratic legitimacy of EU actions. It was "Brussels bureaucrats" who were preparing a change to the European treaties "to give some states even more power within the EU" (PiS, 2024a).

PiS's politicians drew clear red lines in their election speeches by stating that the EU could not cross them as it would represent the usurpation of the powers of nation-states. In a debate before the 2024 EP elections, the former PiS prime minister said, "Social and welfare programmes should be the responsibility of nation states, as they are at the moment" (TVP 1, 2024, Beata Szydło). Even the EU's turn toward greater defence spending was contested by the party leader:

Today, we are being offered a concept that is basically to lower our security. It proposes some kind of European army, a European dome. No, our security is our own forces, and we need to expand them and NATO as the great, greatest alliance in history. The foundation of this alliance is the partnership with the United States. (PiS, 2024)

PiS portrayed the EU as a threat in all four of the frames described in this article. It accused the EU of limiting the state's sovereignty, of expanding political control over issues that should not be regulated by the EU, and of stifling the European economy through excessive regulations. It also accused the EU of having a negative impact on traditional Polish values.

However, if anyone was under the impression that PiS is a Eurosceptic party, they would be mistaken. According to the party's assertions:

We appreciate the importance and achievements of the European Union, while at the same time expect reforms and changes that will give this international community the shape of a "Europe of homelands." We do not accept the erosion of the sovereignty of European states. (PiS, 2023)

### 5.3. TD: *"We Want to Renew Europe"*

While TD did not focus extensively on the EU during its campaigns, several distinct EU-related narratives can be identified in its discourse. What needs to be emphasised is that it presented a strongly pro-European stance and advocated for further reinforcement of a united Europe while also highlighting the need for change and reforms in the evolving environment. Within the frame of sovereignty, the party saw the EU as "a great chance and a great provider of Poland's development and security" (TD, 2023a); it characterised Poland as being as powerful as the alliances of which it was a member—NATO and the EU (TVP 1, 2024, Michał Kobosko).

The security narrative of TD in the European context was limited to two aspects. First, the military aspect was present in all three analysed campaigns in the context of the war in Ukraine and the need for preparedness to deter a potential Russian attack on other European countries (TD, 2024). Second, the environmental aspect resonated strongly in the EP campaign, but it was diminished in the presidential campaign, with TD candidate Szymon Hołownia calling for a reform of the EU's Green Deal in order to adapt it to contemporary challenges, such as the war in Ukraine (TD, 2025). Thus, the EU was depicted by the party as a security provider in the context of regional stability.

The narrative about Poland's position and influence on the EU decision-making process was utilised by TD mainly in the EP debate of 2024. At that debate, the party representative underlined that Poland "returned to being active within the Community" and that it has a role in promoting the EU's enlargement. Moreover, the TD representative said that Poland could act as a bridge between the "old EU" and the new countries that were needed by the community (TVP 1, 2024, Michał Kobosko).

The next two analytical frames were either not identified (the cultural frame) or represented by only isolated statements (the socioeconomic frame) in the TD's campaign narratives. In the latter case, the electorate learnt that the party appreciated the role of the EU in the economic development of Poland (TVP 1, 2023, Szymon Hołownia; TD, 2024). TD also expressed that the competitiveness of the EU economy must be improved and investments in new technologies, including AI, must be made at the European level (TVP 1, 2025a, Szymon Hołownia).

#### **5.4. NL: *"The Situation Is Serious. Either the Union Is Consolidated, or It Will Fall Apart"***

The narrative of NL on the EU was much more developed and profound than that of TD. It was, next to PiS, a party that addressed all the issues defined in our analytical framework. However, contrary to PiS, its narrative was strongly pro-European. It conceptualised the EU as an opportunity—a vital security provider in an increasingly unstable regional and global environment. "Poland's interest," as Magdalena Biejat said in the presidential debate, "lies in our alliance with the European Union, as this is where we are united by common interests and...a shared understanding of the threat posed by the Kremlin" (TVP 1, 2025a, Magdalena Biejat). And indeed, against the backdrop of Russia's invasion of Ukraine and uncertainties surrounding transatlantic relations, the EU was portrayed by the party as an actor capable of responding to collective threats.

In its narrative, NL consistently emphasised the importance of military and strategic cooperation within the EU framework, as the Union, alongside NATO, was the most significant guarantee of Poland's and Europe's security (NL, 2024). The EU's ability to deliver decisive action during the Covid-19 pandemic and its response to Russia's aggression were cited as evidence of its evolving capacity for crisis management (TVP 1, 2023, Joanna Scheuring-Wielgus) as well as a convincing argument to deepen the integration to provide the member states with a more cohesive and effective Union with enhanced democratic accountability and equitable burden sharing.

Concurrently, NL articulated EU membership as a geopolitical necessity, thereby positioning the Union as a foundational anchor of Poland's—and other member states'—security and democratic stability. And security, in the understanding of NL, was not limited to military strength but was tied to broader concepts of resilience—energy security, climate preparedness, socioeconomic stability, and the capacity to negotiate effectively, for instance, in response to President Trump's tariff proposals or the growing influence of American big tech companies. As the party's presidential candidate warned social media platforms:

In the hands of an American billionaire [Elon Musk] have become a tool for manipulating Europe's public debate and electoral processes. Neither Musk nor Zuckerberg will tell us what our democracy should look like. We need strong European laws to put an end to this. (NL, 2025a)

The dispute over the rule of law between Poland and the EC during the PiS government was widely discussed in Poland. NL, alongside KO and TD, supported Brussels's stance on this issue, accused the government of breaching the rules, and went into the 2023 elections with narratives about resolving this "harmful" dispute (NL, 2023) and strengthening Poland's role in EU structures. As the party stated in one of its leaflets, "Poland, instead of being a problematic member of the European Union, should be a leader of reforms within it" (NL, 2023a).

The leading role of Poland within the EU and the country's influence on EU policies were underlined and even strengthened in the three consecutive electoral campaigns. In its 2023 programme, the party declared that "by repairing relations with its European partners, Poland will have a real influence on the direction of the European Union" (NL, 2023). In the EP debate a year later, the NL representative stated that "Poland must be a powerful player at the EU table who secures Poland's sovereignty and interests" (TVP 1, 2024, Joanna Scheuring-Wielgus). Moreover, "weaker France and Germany present a greater opportunity for Poland to take the lead much more boldly than we have so far. This means prioritising our regional security through joint armaments, joint manoeuvres and joint investments" (TVP 1, 2025a, Magdalena Biejat).

Human rights and cultural issues were key programme values for the NL. The party saw the EU as a protector and provider of these rights to its member and candidate states. It stated that the EU:

Must guarantee, for example, mutual recognition and transcription of birth and marriage certificates issued by another member state, regardless of the gender of the spouses or parents, [and] to every woman in Europe the right to legal, safe, accessible, and affordable abortion care and services provided without discrimination. (NL, 2024)

Regarding migrants and asylum seekers, NL was the only party that advocated for their protection, including irregular migrants, since "everyone has the right to be treated with dignity" (NL, 2024).

NL had no doubts about the economic benefits of EU membership (NL, 2024). It appreciated the EU's impact on economic development, innovation, and crisis management. As Magdalena Biejat said in the presidential debate of 2025, "When we introduced the European Recovery Fund, a common debt, in response to the coronavirus crisis, none of us lost our ability to self-determine, and we gained additional potential for recovery, another tool to combat crises" (TVP 1, 2025a, Magdalena Biejat ).

At the same time, in the economic sphere, NL emphasised the need to align with the EU's core values and to protect the EU-wide labour market by promoting good practices across the EU, including those concerning wage levels, working time and time off, wage transparency, equal pay, the right to benefits, and protection against discrimination at work on the basis of, among others, gender, as well as protection against harassment. The programme further called for immediate legislation on the right to be offline (NL, 2024).

### **5.5. Confederation: "EU Laws Are Not Laws of Physics"**

In Confederation's narrative, the EU and its institutions were portrayed as illegitimate, politically biased, and overreaching actors that systematically exceeded their treaty-based competences at the expense of national sovereignty by expanding their authority into areas that Confederation viewed as exclusive domains of member states, such as climate policy, judiciary systems, and forced migration quotas (Confederation, 2023; TVP 1, 2023, Krzysztof Bosak). This critique of the EU was embedded in a broader narrative of delegitimisation that portrayed the EU as a technocratic, ideologically captured structure that undermined democratic self-determination and imposed harmful policies in the interests of the mighty states, i.e., Germany and France (TVP 1, 2025a, Sławomir Mentzen). Confederation asserted that the EU had transformed from a free trade zone into a centralised political project dominated by left-liberal elites. Thus, the party declared that it would "not allow any further relocation of competences of the Polish government

to Brussels” because, in such a case, “we may cease to be an independent state at all” (TVP 1, 2025a, Sławomir Mentzen). It also explicitly rejected mechanisms that would limit Poland’s veto rights (Confederation, 2025a) because “Polish national interests are far more important than the welfare of the European Union” (TVP1, 2025a, Sławomir Mentzen). Although Confederation claimed that it did not advocate Poland’s leaving the EU, it was the only party that, in their narratives, admitted that Polesxit was an option, at least as a “negotiation tactic” with the EC (TVP 1, 2024, Konrad Berkowicz).

In the narratives of Confederation that were analysed for this study, there was not much attention devoted to cultural issues in the context of EU membership. However, the presidential candidate, Sławomir Mentzen, stated in a debate in 2025, “We cannot replace our culture with the leftist, truth-denying, reason-denying, beauty-denying, gender-denying, leftist ideology that the Polish government, the European Union and the large multinational corporations are trying to instil in us here” (TVP 1, 2025a, Sławomir Mentzen). Nor were economic issues a major part of the narratives on the EU in the analysed campaigns. They were limited to underlining the “excessive regulations” and bureaucratic burdens imposed on economic actors and the “destructive” role of the EU policies, such as the Fit for 55, which Confederation threatened in its narrative would trigger inflation and “climatic poverty” (Confederation, 2025).

## 6. Congruence Between Voters’ Positions and Parties’ Narratives

Opinion polls indicated that the electorates of the five analysed parties held different views on the opportunities and threats arising from Poland’s membership in the EU. Additionally, the importance attributed to particular issues by the electorates of the parties varied. Political parties finance research on their electorates for their own use before elections and do not rely solely on publicly available research results when constructing their electoral narratives. This approach allows them to more accurately identify priority issues relevant to each party’s target groups, those that evoke positive or negative emotions, and to test the effectiveness of specific phrases, expressions, rhetorical tricks, and metaphors. However, the juxtaposition of the publicly available results of electorate preference surveys and the dominant frames of electoral narratives we identified showed that the parties’ narratives on the EU were congruent with the attitudes of their electorates. Only a few of the identified themes could be classified as areas of tension, and there were no major divergent themes between the electorate and the parties’ narratives.

The two most right-wing parties, PiS and Confederation, consciously constructed a narrative about the EU either almost entirely negative (as was the case with Confederation, more than half of whose voters were opposed to Poland’s membership in the EU) or ambivalent—as was the case with PiS. PiS had to address both the smaller segment of its electorate which was sceptical about EU membership, and the two-thirds of PiS voters who, although they did not want to leave the EU, were critical of many decisions of EU institutions. In particular, they criticised the blocking of Recovery Plan funds for Poland and policy proposals such as the Migration Pact and Green Deal.

Reassuring voters that the EU posed a threat to Poland’s economic, political, and cultural sovereignty, as was presented in the PiS and Confederation narratives, corresponded with the belief of party supporters that Poland’s sovereignty within the EU was in danger. The EU was often portrayed as a tool in the hands of powerful states, mainly Germany and, less frequently, France. Indeed, exploiting the anti-German resentment present among supporters of PiS and Confederation was a hallmark of the narratives of both political parties.



In several of the PiS politicians' statements and election materials, the party depreciated and questioned even the intentions behind EU decisions to increase joint defence spending. However, contestation and scepticism were not dominant, probably because fear of the Russian threat was omnipresent in the PiS electorate, and there was a danger that pushing such a narrative could be interpreted as a display of mismatch and tension.

Voters of KO, TD, and NL were in no doubt that EU membership brought economic and security benefits to Poland; concerns about limiting sovereignty were alien to them. It is therefore not surprising that these three parties framed their narratives in terms of opportunity rather than threat. There were, however, "uncomfortable" topics, such as the European Green Deal, which was presented as an example of overregulation and a policy proposal that would undermine the competitiveness of the European community. The issue dominated the 2024 election campaign and re-echoed in the 2025 presidential campaign. In this case, it was not only Confederation and PiS supporters who were critical of the EU proposals but also voters of the centrist and left-wing parties who expressed their concerns. The issue was avoided in the narrative of NL, and it also did not appear in KO's footage and leaflets. However, during election debates and rallies, the topic was pushed by right-wing parties and could not be escaped. As a result, attempts to downplay the importance of the Green Deal were present in the statements of KO politicians. And TD went even further by advocating a deep reform of the policy proposal to adapt it to the challenges of the present day and the convictions of the public. In 2025, on the other hand, the KO candidate reassured voters that the Green Deal, in practice, no longer existed, as the threat of war in Europe had influenced a shift in EU priorities.

The second incongruent topic for KO, TD, and NL was the issue of migration. Even the most migration-friendly electorate of NL declared in polls that they supported the introduction of immigration restrictions and limits. It was also difficult to find supporters of the migration pact and the concept of relocation. The topic was therefore exploited by PiS and Confederation, while KO politicians argued that, with their experience in the EU and their ability to build coalitions, they would be able to block decisions unfavourable to Poland at the EU level, which was likely a response to the concerns of the party's electorate. NL, even against its electorate, was the only party that underlined the EU's obligations towards migrants and asylum seekers in the framework of human rights during the electoral campaigns.

## 7. Discussion and Conclusion

At first glance, it may seem a mismatch that the pro-European Polish society supports in elections and votes into office Eurosceptic political parties and their candidates. However, the illusory incongruence between public opinion and political parties' narratives becomes more understandable when we delve into the individual parties' narratives and analyse the electorates' opinions and beliefs on particular EU decisions and policies rather than integration *per se*. Moreover, as some research has indicated (Szczerbiak & Taggart, 2024), in most cases, it is not only Euroscepticism that makes these parties attractive but also their radicalism, anti-establishment orientation, and populist discourse. However, according to van Kessel (2024), the interrelation between these categories is not straightforward and requires further research.

Our analysis revealed that the political parties framed the EU in different ways and offered their electorates divergent narratives on the EU that reflected both ideological orientations and strategic priorities as well as contextual factors that were often raised in response to each other's messages (McMahon & Kaiser, 2021). Parties such as KO, TD, and NL opted for deeper integration, perceiving the EU as a widely understood security

provider and guarantor of democratic resilience in turbulent times. These narratives corresponded with the generally pro-European attitudes of their electorates.

In contrast, PiS and Confederation presented a much more Eurosceptical attitude. They framed EU–Poland relations as “they” versus “us”: “They” want to pursue their interests at “our” expense by illegitimately expanding “their” competences and interfering in “our” national interests, e.g., by attempting to subordinate “our” judicial system to supranational courts or by breaching “our” cultural cohesion through the imposition of liberal and leftist values. This narrative confirmed the direction of change in the dominant hegemonic narrative about the EU that had been initiated by the PiS government in 2015, in which Germany, identified as the leader of the EU, was a particular object of resentment (O’Neal, 2017).

The critiques often resonated with voters who were sceptical of EU bureaucracy, concerned about national identity, or frustrated with specific EU policies, such as those related to migration, climate, or the rule of law. Moreover, these critiques gradually began to resonate with voters in Poland, and a gradual normalisation of right-wing framings of the EU in the public sphere was observed, both in Poland and in other European countries (Zajak et al., 2025). Even the parties that were openly pro-European occasionally drew on sovereignty-focused (e.g., by expressing opposition to the extension of majority voting in the EU), security-oriented (e.g., migration issues and border control), or technocratic critiques of the integration process (e.g., the EU’s extensive bureaucracy). In this way, they framed the EU as a site of both opportunity and, if not a threat, as the right-wing parties framed it, a constraint on pursuing national politics.

This rightward drift reflected broader dynamics in Polish and European politics, where concerns about national identity, the imposition of external pressure (Pasquinucci, 2022), and the narrative of regaining control had gained salience. As a result, while the EU remained broadly supported by Polish society, the terms of EU membership were being redefined, not so much related to the question of “in or out,” as was the case in the narratives of the British political parties before the Brexit referendum (Bale, 2022), but rather related to who controls the agenda, how the integration should be shaped (McMahon, 2021), and what ends integration should serve.

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## Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the authors (unedited).

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