Converging Narratives on the European Green Deal: Polarised Homogeneity in Central European MEPs' Facebook Discourse

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Abstract: *This study examines political narratives surrounding the European Green Deal (EGD) in seven Central European countries, revealing four separate dominant framings of the EGD, as well a pattern of strategic narrative convergence and interpretative polarization. Analysing 351 Facebook posts from 82 MEPs from 2019 to 2024, I identify four distinct meta-narratives: a strongly anti-EGD narrative, an uncritical pro-EGD narrative, a critical pro-EGD narrative advocating for greater ambition, and an opportunistic, pragmatic pro-EGD narrative that strategically co-opts populist and far-right themes. Despite varying national contexts, all narratives converge within these four dominant framings, indicating a strategic focus on mobilization rather than intergroup engagement and dialogue. The method used was an original synthesis of framing analysis, narrative analysis and affective analysis, focused on the general stance towards the EGD, the characterizations used, and emotional appeals of the posts. This research contributes to understanding the nuanced dynamics of climate policy discourse and the challenges of fostering constructive debate.*

Keywords: *European Green Deal, political narratives, framings, Central Europe, political communication, emotions*

Introduction

The European Green Deal (EGD) is a milestone policy project that has numerous political challenges yet to overcome (Thalberg et al. 2024). At the same time, it is also a subject of competing narratives just like any other environmental

policy (e.g. Tyagi, Uyheng & Carley 2021; Falkenberg et al. 2022). Different narrators, or storytellers, roughly fall into two distinct camps – proponents and opponents of the EGD. They employ distinct narrative strategies and framings, constructing the EGD as either a source of opportunity and progress or a threat to established values and interests. While one might expect distinct political cultures of different countries to significantly diversify the debate on the EGD, this article reveals a striking convergence in the narratives employed by both proponents and opponents across seven Central European (CE) countries. Despite the widely varying socio-economic conditions and political landscapes of Austria, Czechia, Germany, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia, the online public discourse of Members of European Parliament (MEPs) from these countries reveals a surprising degree of uniformity. It seems that supranational challenges and interconnectedness of political actors lead to a convergence of political narratives across diverse political and cultural contexts.

The analysis was designed to investigate the extent to which EGD narratives from different CE countries converge or diverge. The seven chosen countries have enough of a common geographic, historical and cultural context, as well as contemporary economic and geopolitical significance, that a comparative analysis of narratives originating there should provide significant conclusions. It resulted in the formulation of four broad meta-narratives – one strictly supporting the EGD, one strictly opposing and two others that are mostly supportive, yet critical in their own ways. This revealed a significant overlap, suggesting strong strategic convergence of narratives and the transnational character of interpretive polarisation, particularly concerning EU climate policy. These interconnected political phenomena, explored through the lens of political narratives, offer novel insights relevant to political science.

The study draws on or complements some closely related research. Existing studies have extensively examined online debates around climate change and climate policy as both causes and effects of increasing polarisation (Tyagi, Uyheng & Carley 2021; Van Boven & Sherman 2021; Falkenberg et al. 2022). There is also important research on the efficacy of narratives of supporters and opponents of climate policies and shifting the focus from communicating climate science to communicating specific policies and addressing public needs and concerns (van Eck 2024; Haas 2024; Davies 2020). Because the data for the analysis comes from politicians, it builds on the assumption that their narratives have actual electoral or policy impact (Van Boven & Sherman 2021; Hahnel, Mumenthaler & Brosch 2020).

This analysis is founded on a theoretical and methodological framework synthesising different approaches to analysing political narratives within their cultural and material contexts (Feindt & Oels 2005; Finlayson 2007; Johnstone 2001; Poletta 2015; Schlaufer et al. 2022; Stibbe 2015). By focusing on recurring features rather than individual narratives, this study shifts the focus from

the individual agency of single storytellers to broader structural factors (Fairclough & Fairclough 2012). It follows a transparent, qualitative, interpretive and critical methodology with strict orientation and organisation in order to identify, demonstrate and interpret significant themes emerging from the source material (Montesano Montessori 2014). The analysis examines overarching EGD framings, narrative elements and embedded emotional appeals to identify convergent and divergent narrative strategies across the seven countries. The corpus consists of Facebook posts published from the official accounts of MEPs from the chosen CE countries in specific time-frames relevant to important steps of implementing the EGD.

The author hopes to contribute to political science and offer practically significant insights in light of numerous challenges to pro-EGD narratives (Thalberg et al. 2024). The narrative analysis serves as a tool to identify whether the stories of the politicians relate to structural and cultural conditions and constraints present in their countries. The aim is to enhance understanding of the construction, strategic use and efficacy of broad meta-narratives on climate policy, ultimately contributing to a more informed and productive debate by exploring the links between narrative strategies and polarisation in different political and cultural contexts (Lockwood 2018; Margalit 2019).

Theoretical framework and methodology

The study of narratives, discourse and framings has become increasingly prominent in political science, offering valuable insights into how meaning is constructed and transferred or how power is exercised through non-material relations. Several key developments in late 20th and early 21st century social sciences – including the argumentative, interpretive, narrative and affective 'turns' (Fischer & Forester 1993; Finlayson 2007; Kułakowska 2020; Rhodes 2018; Czarniawska 2004; Bouza García 2017; Hoggett & Thompson 2012) – highlighted the crucial role of language, stories and emotions in shaping political beliefs, identities and actions. Drawing inspiration from fields like sociology, linguistics and literary theory, political scientists began to explore how narratives shape our understanding of the world, influence political behaviour and contribute to the construction of social and political order. This study follows such a transdisciplinary approach in an attempt to draw scientifically valid and relevant conclusions by way of critical interpretive policy analysis (van Hulst et al. 2024).

The methodology used in this study incorporates three perspectives on how discourse influences action. The first one, serving as the core method for establishing whether the analysed text is supportive or critical of the EGD, is framing analysis as understood by Stibbe (2015). As a cornerstone of many interpretive studies, it allows for the identification of recurring frames – distinct ways of understanding, explaining or perceiving an issue with the use of specific cues

(Goffman 1974; van Hulst et al. 2024). Stibbe's (2015) approach somewhat simplifies framing analysis for efficient use in environmental politics research by providing concise and not overly complex definitions of both 'frame' and 'framing'. The focus is to look for 'trigger words' that bring to the reader's mind stories about different areas of life, each with its own emotional and ontological weight (e.g. 'terrorist' when describing environmental activists or politicians advocating for ambitious environmental policies). This is supplemented by also analysing 'salience patterns', which are textual representations of areas of life that the author deems worthy of attention (e.g. clean air or restored marshland versus car industry or freedom of land appropriation). These are utilised here to create a clear demarcation between pro- and anti-EGD stories before proceeding to a more in-depth analysis of narrative elements and emotional appeals.

The second choice is narrative analysis, which provides some much-needed formalisation absent from typical text analysis common in political science, while avoiding the narrow focus on linguistic features characteristic of many quantitative corpus studies. It provides insights into narrative and affective strategies employed by political actors to influence policy attitudes (Linde 2020). Similar to how professional translators prioritise meaning and emotion over a literal word-for-word rendering, this study focuses on the core narratives and their affective impact, rather than purely linguistic features. It seems especially useful for climate policy research, as both climate change and climate policy implementation are highly emotive phenomena for the people involved (Brosch 2021; Brosch & Sauter 2023). The narrative analysis focused on the roles of different characters, examining how they are portrayed as protagonists, antagonists or other key actors in order to understand the power dynamics at play (Polletta 2015). It was the best fit for the study's emphasis on meaning and emotional impact through interpreting thematic content and rhetorical strategies, rather than a literal word-for-word rendering.

The third pillar is thus the study of emotional appeals embedded in the stories and used by the authors to address the perceived psychological needs of their target audiences. Recognising the increasing importance of emotions in political mobilisation, persuasion and polarisation, this kind of analysis reveals how political actors employ affective storytelling to evoke specific emotions in their audiences. While the study of emotions in climate policy is still developing, research from related fields suggests their crucial role in influencing climate action (Kovács et al. 2024). Thus, drawing on works by Brosch (2021), Brosch and Sauter (2023) and Kovács et al. (2024), the study explores how the emotional appeals are designed to address audience needs for security, belonging, agency, moral responsibility, etc.

The qualitative, interpretive research based on these three approaches allowed for the examination of the applicability of key concepts in the context of climate policy. One of these is strategic convergence of narratives which

results from focusing on electoral success (Laver 2005). The study aims to reveal whether the pro- and anti-EGD narratives from different countries differ substantially or are rather homogenous. This is achieved by deciding on a comparative analysis which has been thought through in regards to its validity and practicality. It was decided that qualitative comparative research in political science is indeed both possible and may prove valuable even with an interpretative approach and without controls (Simmons & Smith 2021). The similarities between the seven chosen CE countries allow for revealing patterns common to the whole region. The differences exclude the possibility of being good controls for each other, yet the common background allows for focusing on narrative strategies in contexts that are similar enough. The lack of controls transforms the research into a non-traditional case study, transcending the conventional conception of a case focusing on time or geography (Wedeen 2002). The case becomes the practice of political actors narrating a specific political process in relation to national material conditions and power relations.

The second theoretical concept verified in the study in the context of EU climate policy is interpretative polarisation (Kligler-Vilenchik, Baden & Yarchi 2020). It refers to the phenomenon where seemingly factual information is interpreted differently depending on pre-existing beliefs or group affiliations, directing narratives around an issue in increasingly divergent directions. The EGD is a good case study, it being a real and publicly available policy project, legislated in visible and transparent conditions, and with measurable (economically, geophysically, etc.) outcomes. Yet its interpretation and understanding remains highly contested and polarising. By way of framing, narrative and affective analysis, the study aims to reveal how the interpretative polarisation on climate policy extends beyond merely disagreeing on policy preferences. Importantly, this connects directly to the issue of strategic narrative convergence. If both phenomena are observed, it will contribute to a deeper understanding of the dynamics of political discourse surrounding the EGD, demonstrating how narrative homogeneity stems from not only similar communication styles but also from exploiting pre-existing interpretive biases.

The study introduces the concept of 'polarised homogeneity' in order to capture the situation where, despite a convergence in structure and types of narratives employed by political actors across different countries (the 'homogeneity' part), these narratives are simultaneously designed to reinforce existing beliefs and deepen divisions between opposing political forces (the 'polarised' part). The concept should be able to describe circumstances under which similar communication styles within converging narratives can lead to deeper ideological divides as long as their implementation remains polarised.

In order to empirically verify the above assumption appropriate research material had to be gathered, balancing scientific relevance with the practical constraints of a single researcher. The corpus consists of Facebook posts pub-

lished by the official profiles of CE MEPs within four different time-frames: December 2019–January 2020, July–August 2021, July–August 2023 and February–March 2024. They correlate chronologically with: the introduction of the EGD; introduction of the Fit for 55 policy package; introduction of the Nature Restoration Law (NRL); final voting on the NRL as well as intensified farmer protests caused in part by this process. Post selection prioritised those that explicitly mention the EGD and its related policies, supplemented by posts on general EU environmental policies or events caused by their implementation (e.g. the farmer protests). They were gathered from the official profiles of MEPs, focusing on their personal accounts of the events and processes unfolding. The total number of profiles searched was more than two hundred. Eventually, 351 posts were chosen, authored by 82 politicians with 48 different party affiliations or independent. Importantly, social media content fits the criteria for research material even for a traditionally understood narrative inquiry and can be conceived of as stories (van Hulst et al. 2024). The posts published on public Facebook accounts, although sometimes brief, are personal accounts of events as experienced by the authors, revealing their personal perceptions and interpretations. While each individual post eludes traditional definitions of a 'story' (having a clear beginning, middle and end, and an orientation to the past), they nonetheless function as narrative instances within a broader discursive landscape and a broader, yet structurally and ideologically framed political context. Even if a short post is not a full story by itself, it becomes a representation of such a story when taking into account the phenomena it describes, the political circumstances of its publication, the author's previous content, their affiliation, as well all the 'sense-making cues' used to invoke specific stories or emotions in the audience. This interpretation of Facebook posts as stories allows the analysis to maintain focus on the strategic use of narrative elements within political communication on the EGD.

Key findings

The analysis began with establishing the dominant framings of the EGD. The two most visible, top-level framings coalesced into, not surprisingly, a pro-EGD framing and an anti-EGD framing. The first one presented the policy project as something positive – either a chance or a great success – or something inevitable, the only possible way forward. Conversely, the EGD was also framed as a mistake, an unnecessary burden or straight malevolence. These framings are very much disjointed, yet a further narrative and affective analysis provided some important nuance. It continued with finding relevant characterisations: heroes and martyrs; villains; pawns and false idols; victims. These characterisations are either explicit, or implicit but visible when taking each post into a larger context – i.e. other posts by the same author or other authors with the same party affiliation, the

specific moment of the EGD's implementation, concurrent events, etc. Although not every story contains at least one of each, they all have at least two different characterisations as it is the power relations between those that constitute the plot. The emotional impact of these unequal power dynamics, and the associated threats and struggles, serves as the primary vehicle for the political influence each narrative seeks to exert. Thus, the last step of the analysis was to look for emotional appeals embedded in the stories in order to establish what needs or concerns of the target audiences were the focus of the storytellers.

The narratives, when looked at synthetically, eventually coalesced into four dominant meta-narratives, with three of those being connected by an overall pro-EGD framing and the fourth one being the one strictly anti-EGD meta--narrative. These were coded as: Pro-EGD (Embrace), Pro-EGD (Reform), Pro--EGD (Pragmatic) and Anti-EGD. Their general overview is presented in Table 1. The differences between the three supportive ones come down to specific characterisations and emotional appeals, described below.

Table 1: Overview of meta-narratives

Meta-narrative	Dominant stance on EGD	Key characterisations	Primary emotional appeals	Typical party affiliations
Pro-EGD (Embrace)	Uncritically supportive EGD as positive opportunity of inevitable progress	Heroes: EU, EU institutions, MEPs Villain: impersonal climate change Victims: Europe, nature, economy	Optimism, hope, sense of success	Centre-left to centre-right liberal, technocratic
Pro-EGD (Reform)	Fundamentally supportive, but wants more ambition and higher pace	Flawed Heroes: EU institutions and leaders Main heroes: authors (MEPs) Victims: environmental issues, socio-economic justice	Hope, optimism, anxiety, uncertainty	Most left-oriented green parties
Pro-EGD (Pragmatic)	Supportive, but critical of radicalism/ideology Has economic focus	Faulty heroes: EU institutions and leaders Main heroes: authors (MEPs) False idol: radical/green/leftist ideology Victims: economy, jobs, way of life	Economic insecurity, food insecurity, job insecurity	Centre-right Christian-democratic some right-wind populist
Anti-EGD	Strict opposition EGD as mistake, burden, or malevolence	Villains: EU and its institutions and leaders, pro-EGD MEPs Heroes: authors (MEPs) Martyrs: farmers Victims: economies, jobs, food security, way of life, sovereignty	Fear, anxiety, uncertainty, loss of sovereignty, solidarity against villain	Eurosceptic right-wing populist some centre-right

Source: Authors

The Pro-EGD (Embrace) meta-narrative is conveyed by posts uncritically supporting the EGD, which frame the EU, its institutions and themselves as the heroes fighting against the threat of climate change in order to protect Europe from its devastating effects, protect nature and its elements (e.g. forests, species), and protect or enhance the economy, as only making it 'greener' will ensure its competitiveness and continuous development. These stories utilise a non-human, non-personal threat instead of an identifiable villain; additionally, they evoke emotions of optimism, hope and a sense of success after reaching every important milestone in EGD legislation and/or implementation. The national party affiliations of these stories' authors fall into close proximity to the centre – from centre-left to centre-right – or reflect a liberal and technocratic orientation of the party. This is consistent with these types of parties being the most supportive of the EU as a project and being the driving forces behind further integration (Ladrech 2002; Hooghe et al. 2002). Examples of such stories are:

> The #GreenDeal is not a threat, but big change on the time horizon, of a better life for new generations. (Facebook, Danuta Hübner, 24 January 2020)

> Today, the European Commission presents its #EUGreenDeal. It will pave the way globally for solutions that will enable us to turn the fight against climate change into an opportunity. It is important to note that we will tackle climate change ambitiously, together with tradespeople and medium-sized companies. We must not stir up fear and we must support the backbone of the German economy. (Facebook, Daniel Caspary, 11 December 2019)

> Great news for the environment! We have supported its restoration in Europe.
> I am very glad that the majority of the European Parliament has resisted the politicisation of the issue and decided to take action.
> The environment really needs it. It is slowly dying out, about a million species of plants and animals are threatened with complete extinction, and the pace is unfortunately accelerating.
> Yet we depend on the environment. Without pollinators, i.e., butterflies and bees, there will be no food on our tables.
> It really is time to act, and I believe that the Wildlife Restoration Act is the answer. It will ensure the protection of forests and rivers, encourage the creation of more green spaces in cities, and help to combat the drought that is increasingly plaguing us in the Czech Republic. (Facebook, Marcel Kolaja, 17 July 2023)

The next two meta-narratives are both fundamentally supportive, yet occasionally critical or sceptical of specific elements or decisions made by the EC. The

Pro-EGD (Reform) mostly shares the victim characterisations with the previous one, focusing on environmentalist issues and socio-economic justice, yet differs when it comes to other characterisations and emotional appeals. In this meta--narrative the institutions and leaders of the EU are not undisputable heroes, but flawed heroes who drive the EU in the right general direction, but don't do so radically or ambitiously enough. The authors of these stories become the main heroes, as mentors pointing out mistakes or missed opportunities, appealing to a mix of emotions – from hope and optimism to anxiety and uncertainty if the institutions act too conservatively. These MEPs always vote for the EGD and its related policies and represent the most left-oriented of all parties involved or green parties – groups traditionally optimistic about the EU, yet critical of some of its aspects (Wang & Keith 2020; Bomberg 1998). Examples of these stories are:

> The climate crisis requires profound and radical changes. If the European Green Deal is to be a defining moment for the EU, it must commit to implementing these changes. We have the knowledge, technology, and resources to do so. However, given the EC's cautious approach, there is a concern that the most crucial element — political will — may be lacking. (Facebook, Sylwia Spurek, 9 January 2020)

> THE TRANSITION TO A GREENER ECONOMY CANNOT BE PAID BY THE POOR
> The fight against climate change and the overall transition of the EU economy to a greener and more digital one dominated today's discussion with MEPs in Bratislava. I have repeatedly emphasized that any transformation must be accompanied by measures that ensure adequate alternative solutions, decent living and working conditions for the countries concerned, industries, and especially people. We must prevent the worsening of energy poverty, which is not a mythical concept, on the contrary, it currently affects up to several tens of millions of Europeans. The transformation cannot be carried out at the expense of the weaker social classes. That is why I consider it necessary and try to promote in my political group, as well as in the ITRE Committee for Industry and in the plenary, that the different starting positions of the Member States are respected and, for example, gas and nuclear have played an important role at least in the transitional period and have been accepted as part of the energy mix for a long time.
> In the afternoon, I fly to Brussels, where we will have meetings of working groups, committees and on Wednesday also an extraordinary plenary session, at which the new European Commission will officially present the key strategic document of this legislative period, the so-called Green Deal for Europe. (Facebook, Robert Hajšel, 9 December 2019).

Competition for ever stricter climate rules will not get us anywhere if these demands are neither technically feasible nor socially viable.

It is high time to remove the green blinkers. Because people no longer know how to afford life. Ideas such as additional CO2 taxes are clearly out of place. (Facebook, Günther Sidl, 27 August 2023)

The other type of critique, embedded in the Pro-EGD (Pragmatic) meta-narrative, leans closer to the Anti-EGD argumentations. Like in the Pro-EGD (Reform), it is also based on a characterisation of EU institutions and leaders as heroes that are trying to do the right thing, yet mistakenly follow a false idol. This 'false idol' is not a literal concept, but refers to a perceived adherence to an overly ambitious or ideologically driven path that neglects economic realities. These are stories about the authors – being mentors to the faulty heroes just like in the previous meta-narrative – warning against following an ideology that is too radical, too 'green' or too 'leftist'. If adhered to, this kind of false idol will bring about the downfall of the victims, although the EU itself has not yet crossed a point of no return. The dominant victim characterisations in these stories are economy, jobs or elements of a way of life and the stories come from centre-right or Christian-democratic MEPs, who mostly voted for the introduction of the EGD, yet tend to vote against some of its more ambitious policies like the Fit for 55 package or the Nature Restoration Law. This often brings these narratives close to the Anti-EGD meta-narrative through similar emotional appeals to economic insecurity, food insecurity or job insecurity, aligning with the observed trend of right-wing populism affecting mainstream parties (Pirro & Taggart 2018; De Vries 2018; Wodak 2015). However, the stories differ visibly in their characterisation and do not paint the EU and its institutions as a villain, thus staying within the larger pro-EGD framing. This supportive yet conservative meta-narrative is exemplified by the following stories:

Climate protection is important, but the competitiveness and jobs of our local companies are just as important. Climate neutrality by 2050 is feasible, but does it also make economic sense? We need intelligent solutions to achieve sustainable change. The EU also has an opportunity here to act as an example to other regions of the world, because when all is said and done, the EU cannot stop climate change on its own. (Facebook, Angelika Niebler, 11 December 2019)

Nature conservation is important, but not the only consideration.

When faced with an economic crisis and a significant increase in food prices, we cannot make decisions that cause further inflation and difficulties.

That is why I do not support the Nature Restoration Law! (Facebook, Márton Gyöngyösi, 11 July 2023)

Frans Timmermans introduced a grand plan in the form of the Green Deal, which was supposed to address not only climate protection, but also environmental protection, biodiversity, or reducing the amount of waste and better recycling.

However, he focused only on climate-related issues and deal with them in a way that did not take into account the citizens of the Member States and the competitiveness of European industry. The other pillars of the Green Deal were barely addressed.

However, with his departure, nothing will change as the Commission's term of office draws to a close. Most of the proposals are already in the legislative process and only need to be finalised.

I hope that someone more rational will be in charge of the agenda in the next term. (Facebook, Veronika Vrecionová, 21 July 2023)

The most drastic change in characterisations and emotional appeals comes with the strict Anti-EGD meta-narrative, where the EU and its institutions, as well as any who vote for European climate policies, are the villains who threaten European economies, jobs, people's food security or their way of life (e.g. using a car indiscriminately). These villains do this in the name of a wrong ideology or in the name of some interest that conflicts with the interest of the specific state or its people, and the only ones who can stop them are the authors of the stories (MEPs voting against the EGD and their whole parties), sometimes assisted by martyrs, fighting and sacrificing heroically for the good of all (e.g. the farmers during their protests). This is the traditional, straightforward attitude of Euroscepticism (Vasilopoulou 2018; De Vries 2018) or an emanation of the 'politics of fear' (Wodak 2015; Pierzchalski & Golinowski 2016), visible in the following examples:

Left-wing climate fanaticism is leading Europe further and further into the abyss. Instead of finally dumping the utopian "Green Deal" on the dung heap of history, climate targets are being tightened even further. This is destroying agriculture in Europe. The result will be a massive surge in meat and food prices. Let's stop this policy in the EU elections on 9 June with a vote for the FPÖ. (Facebook, Harald Vilimsky, 7 February 2024)

The EU is planning to take away land belonging to the farmers! This is some kind of misunderstanding! How could the Polish MEPs from the opposition vote in favour of the nature restoration regulation??? (Facebook, Anna Zalewska, 13 July 2023)

Coal and steel are the roots of the EU! Ursula von der Leyen's Green Deal is severing these roots. Over 400,000 people in Germany and millions across

Europe will lose their jobs. We must steer away while we still can! (Facebook, Guido Reil, 22 January 2020)

Interestingly, a single MEP does not always stay within the same meta-narrative. This suggests a strategic storytelling, where the authors start implementing the characterisations and emotional appeals in different ways, depending on a larger context outside of the narratives. This is mostly visible in two cases. The first one is when Pro-EGD (Embrace) authors with mostly centre-left or green affiliations switch to a Pro-EGD (Reform) type of stories, possibly disappointed with the EC conservativeness or backing away from more radical policy elements under pressures from the right. The second one is when Pro-EGD (Pragmatic) authors lean the other way, towards the Anti-EGD meta-narrative, this time probably trying to opportunistically appeal to loudly voiced concerns from specific groups in order to translate it into electoral results. This was visible first after the introduction of the Fit for 55 in July 2021 package which includes many car-related policies, thus receiving backlash from groups that are either economically or emotionally connected with cars. Later it was more pronounced after the introduction of the Nature Restoration Law in July 2023, where some authors initially uncritical of the EGD began following the narrative of threat to food security. It culminated during the February-March 2024 farmer protests, when many of the Pro-EGD (Pragmatic) authors explicitly switched their narrative strategies and even started painting the EU institutions and leaders as villains, just like in the strict Anti-EGD meta-narrative. This is a process not entirely unlike the strategic 'hijacking of victimhood', where political leaders narratively construct threats to groups they want to mobilise (Barton Hronešová & Kreiss 2024). The dynamic of the discourse on the EGD revealed within the collected data is shown in Table 2.

Table 2: The narrative significance of the discourse dynamic within chosen timeframes

Timeframe	Correlated milestone/ event	Narrative significance
December 2019– January 2020	Introduction of EGD	Initial optimistic framing of EGD; Establishment of core Pro- and Anti-EGD meta-narratives
July–August 2021	Introduction of the Fit for 55 package	Observed shifts in some Pro-EGD (Pragmatic) narratives leaning towards Anti-EGD arguments
July–August 2023	Introduction of the Nature Restoration Law	Further shifts in Pro-EGD (Pragmatic) narratives, adopting concerns from and aligning with anti-EGD themes
February–March 2024	Final voting on NRL; Intensified farmer protests	Culmination of narrative shifts, with some Pro-EGD (Pragmatic) authors even explicitly adopting Anti-EGD narratives strategies, like portraying EU institutions as villains

Source: Authors

To conclude, the synchronisation and confluence of narratives of these four variations is difficult to miss even without looking at the data through a specific methodology. Looking closer at the characterisations and emotional appeals used, however, allows for revealing more than a cursory analysis. Firstly, the convergence of anti-EGD narratives is stronger than the convergence of any of the pro-EGD narratives. The stories of the strict opponents of the EGD have very similar structure despite different places the authors' parties take up on the political spectrum. Research demonstrating the almost universal climate-sceptical stance of right-wing actors is mostly confirmed, although some exceptions do appear, as in the case of non-right-wing populist parties, e.g. the Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia (Forchtner 2019; Wagner 2022). The sufficient common denominator is that the author's party is more or less sceptical towards the EU.

On the other hand, the three pro-EGD meta-narratives are mostly parallel to each other, yet intersect at some story moments either with each other, or, in the case of Pro-EGD (Pragmatic), with the Anti-EGD one. Nevertheless, the hero and victim characterisations in all three remain the same, but appear in distinct contexts. More differences appear when focusing the analysis on other characterisations and on the stories' affective aspects. The major one is due to how the opponents and proponents frame the most important, most emotionally evocative power dynamics of the stories – the threats to the victims. For the pro-EGD side the threats are usually impersonal, 'natural' forces, e.g. floods, heat waves, water shortages. They can have a personal aspect when reflecting internal political or policy missteps that could undermine the EGD's effectiveness or social acceptance. However, the opponents of the EGD frame the main threats – to the economy, jobs, agriculture, food, fuel or car prices, etc. – as being always human-driven, caused by specific people and institutions out of some ill intent. These stories, apart from being more structurally complete by always featuring villains, have the added emotional weight of revealing these villains' motivations. Those are interpreted as trying to make life harder for the common people in the name of a perceivably harmful ideology, geopolitical interests, personal gain or simply malevolence (attributed without much explanation).

What is also very visible is the disproportion in the amount of different positive and negative emotions evoked by the meta-narratives. The three pro-EGD narratives express a wider range of positive emotions compared to anti-EGD narratives, which primarily focus on solidarity against a villain. This suggests that pro-EGD stories aim to build broader support by appealing to a wider spectrum of positive feelings, while their adversaries focus on reinforcing in-group cohesion among those who already share their views or those most commonly experiencing economic insecurity, identity insecurity or looking for someone to blame. Importantly, the overlapping negative emotional appeals are of different character, as they address different narrative elements. The fear, anxiety, uncer-

tainty or disappointment in the pro-EGD stories pertain to what could happen if climate change is not addressed properly, whereas in the anti-EGD stories it is fear of specific institutions and people, anxiety and uncertainty in regards to short-term economic conditions, loss of sovereignty, unwanted changes in the way of life, etc. Moreover, the use of so many different and strong negative emotions in the anti-EGD narratives implies that the EGD is being framed not just as a policy disagreement but a moral wrong.

Discussion

While direct data on Europeans' attitudes towards the EGD specifically is limited – some conclusions can be drawn from indirect questions in existing surveys and research (European Comission 2023; Wittels & Traczyk 2024; Zachová 2022; Chabada et al. 2023) – this analysis still offers valuable insights on the strategic convergence of the political narratives across seven CE countries. Interestingly, the similarity of narratives coming from each country contrasts with observations of different environmental attitudes of their citizens, which are strongly correlated with per capita GDP as well as the Gini Index of the specific state (Urban & Kaiser 2022; Aral & López-Sintas 2023). The disconnect highlights the strategic nature of political communication surrounding the EGD.

The convergence of narratives across diverse national contexts suggests that political actors are primarily focused on mobilising their core supporters rather than engaging in persuasion or attempts at swaying the opponents, which seems to fit the 'polarised homogeneity' concept. Despite the seven CE countries having multi-party systems, the discourse coalesces into a race of four isolated meta-narratives. Apart from very few localised stories (i.e. those detailing the exact number of industry jobs threatened or a specific amount of financing received), the vast majority of the posts analysed are practically interchangeable between countries if deprived of specific proper nouns. This can be attributed to the electoral logic of following or anticipating voter preferences (Laver 2005). The proponents of the EGD (either full supporters or those critical for various reasons, yet voting for it) target those already committed to pro-environmental values, which seems consistent with the observed activities of climate change communicators (Hine et al. 2017). At the same time the opponents attempt to mobilise either working-class voters through the appeal to economic anxiety or nationalist-leaning voters by appealing to their sense of sovereignty, aligning with the research on the relationship between these values and scepticism towards environmental policies (Lockwood 2018; Walewicz 2024). This 'preaching to the choir' approach contributes to interpretative polarisation, as the narratives are designed to reinforce existing beliefs rather than foster dialogue. This means that the MEPs' discourse surrounding the EGD is not a 'narrative arms race', as there is no real engagement between the two sides. The emotional ap-

peals involved only further contribute to the polarisation. The anti-EGD stories are more narratively complete and emotionally overwhelming, often leaving them in control of the narrative space. However, the emotional appeals and moralisations on both sides are troublesome, as some research suggests that even positive emotions can fuel polarisation through glorifying one's group in opposition to the outgroup (Garzón-Velandia, Barreto-Galeano & Sabucedo-Cameselle 2024).

The fact that the heroes of the three pro-EGD meta-narratives become villains in the anti-EGD meta-narrative, with indisputably evil intentions ascribed to them, might also one-sidedly strengthen the effect of false or misperceived polarisation (Lees & Cikara 2021). This 'villainisation' moralises the issue, framing the EGD not as a policy disagreement but as a moral conflict, further hindering compromise. On the anti-EGD side the meta-perceptions of outgroup beliefs are being engineered to be overly pessimistic. Fortunately, Lees and Cikara (2021) show that there might be ways of overcoming the stereotypes about the 'other side', as the meta-perceptions do not result from a lack of knowledge, but rather the inability or unwillingness to apply it.

More insights can be gathered when taking a specific political stance towards the EGD and acknowledging the challenges it faces in the face of rising right-wing populism in Europe (Thalberg et al. 2024). Firstly, the domination of threats to the economy in the Anti-EGD and, partially, in the Pro-EGD (Pragmatic) meta-narrative is an attempt to engineer anxiety about its state and fits into the observable trend that populist parties achieve better electoral results in times of increased economic insecurity (Guiso et al. 2024). Projecting a vision of the economy as being damaged or outright destroyed by further implementation of climate policies seems to be aimed at increasing the economic insecurity of the audience for electoral results. This strategy exploits the well-documented observation that potential losses skew opinions more strongly than potential gains even in the most affluent countries (Van der Duin et al. 2023). Secondly, the isomorphism of the right-wing narratives is especially interesting considering their nationalist ideologies. When the perceived threat is supranational (the EU in this case), other hostilities – like those against neighbouring nations – take a backseat in the narrative or disappear completely. This suggests that the debate on the EGD is not simply about the merits of the policies themselves but also about broader political and cultural conflicts (Norris & Inglehart 2019).

Lastly, the consistent portrayal of EU institutions and European political elites as villains in the Anti-EGD meta-narrative presents an interesting contrast with the research suggesting that anti-establishment attitudes are weakly or negligibly correlated to climate change denial. Jylhä and Hellmer (2020) find that exclusionism, anti-egalitarianism and willingness to protect existing power relations correlate most strongly with climate change denial. It seems that it is not the supranational character of the EU that is the inherent cause of its vil-

lainy, but, once again, rather the perceived liberal and cosmopolitan leaning of its most important institutions (Norris & Inglehart 2019). This suggests that trying to bridge the interpretative gap between the two sides might require one of two approaches. It would be either decoupling the EGD from these broader social and cultural issues in order to sway people opposing ambitious climate policies or, conversely, explicitly demonstrating its interdependence with social policies in order to better mobilise those with pro-environmentalist attitudes. Unfortunately, the separation of the meta-narratives combined with the 'echo chamber' effect of social media presents a significant challenge. It discourages intergroup contact, which is one of the few known and proven ways of reducing polarisation at least under some conditions (Thomsen & Thomsen 2023). The struggle for depolarising climate policy – or repolarising it along different social divisions and unequal power relations as suggested by the concept of 'green populism' (Haas 2024; Davies 2020) – will eventually be won in the realm of policy and material conditions, yet it needs to start by finding ways to foster engagement between opposing narratives to counteract the divisive and isolating strategic narrative convergence coupled with interpretative polarisation. Lastly, these reflections must always be put into material contexts of the people involved, as it would be pointless to hope for higher acceptance for climate policies without addressing the fundamentals of economic security.

Conclusions

The transnational polarised homogeneity of EGD narratives shown by this study is not an isolated phenomenon. It reflects a broader pattern of convergence in policy discourse observed in response to perceived common threats, such as the discourse on terrorism after 2001, austerity measures following the 2008 financial crisis or the 'follow the science' narrative during the COVID-19 pandemic. Several factors contribute to this convergence. Firstly, a perceived common threat – in the case of the EGD, either the threat of climate change or the threat of outside constraints on the economic and social foundations of the status quo – drives the adoption of similar narratives. Secondly, the homogenising influence of international institutions and norms, often cast as heroes or villains, provides a central point of reference. The third factor is the interconnectedness and interpenetration of the ideological structures of political systems of states that are close to each other not only geographically, but also culturally, economically and politically. This explains why MEP narratives on the EGD are often indistinguishable across the seven countries, and are identifiable only by specific names, locations, numbers, etc. Finally, social media facilitates the rapid dissemination of highly emotional narratives, often overshadowing more nuanced and complex perspectives. Politicians tend to follow these trends in order to translate social media presence into electoral results.

The observed homogeneity of meta-narratives on the EGD, despite differences in national affluence, energy mixes, dominant industries, geopolitical ties and influence within the EU, reinforces the argument that climate policy is not inherently polarising. While public opinion polls demonstrate broad European support for climate action, the EGD has become a vehicle for existing political divisions, transforming it into a highly partisan and polarising issue. This is exemplified by the initial dominance of pro-EGD narratives, filling the discourse with optimistic messages right after the introduction of the EGD, followed by the near-complete takeover of the discourse by opposing narratives during the 2024 farmer protests, when anti-EGD MEPs propagated fear and uncertainty and opportunistically engaged in demonstrations of solidarity with the protesters – often opportunistically joined by authors whose stories had supported the EGD in the past. The lack of meaningful engagement between the many sides during any of those periods, likely due to political risk aversion and a desire to avoid inadvertently antagonising some groups, only exacerbates interpretative polarisation, probably contributing to other types of polarisation as well.

Due to the limitations of the study and the methods used, further research – including quantitative linguistic research – will be needed to explore the generalisability of the findings. Another possible avenue for following up on this study is determining how/whether climate policies can be depolarised or how they can assist in depolarising European politics. Are we doomed to blunting the policies as the only way of bridging the gaps, or can we initiate the depolarisation through coming up with more compelling stories and facilitating constructive dialogue (Jackson Inderberg & Bailey 2019)? Future research should focus on empirically assessing the persuasiveness of existing narratives in different social contexts, examining their impact on both competing authors and target audiences. It would be particularly valuable to study how the audiences react to narratives that they are not usually exposed to, including both existing (but less dominant and more nuanced) and engineered narratives. Finally, future research should consider the normative implications of depolarising climate policy and repolarising it along the axis of socio-economic justice. Should the acceptance of climate policies be contingent upon, or at least deeply intertwined with, the prior establishment of fundamental economic security for all, and if so, what ethical obligations does this impose on policymakers and advocates of the EGD (Papermans & Maeseele 2016; Haas 2024; Davies 2020)?

Data availability statement

All raw data containing the translated Facebook posts of Central European Members of European Parliament containing narratives on the European Green Deal is freely accessible at the on-line open repository RepOD: https://repod. icm.edu.pl/dataset.xhtml?persistentId=doi:10.18150/GQKX9O.

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