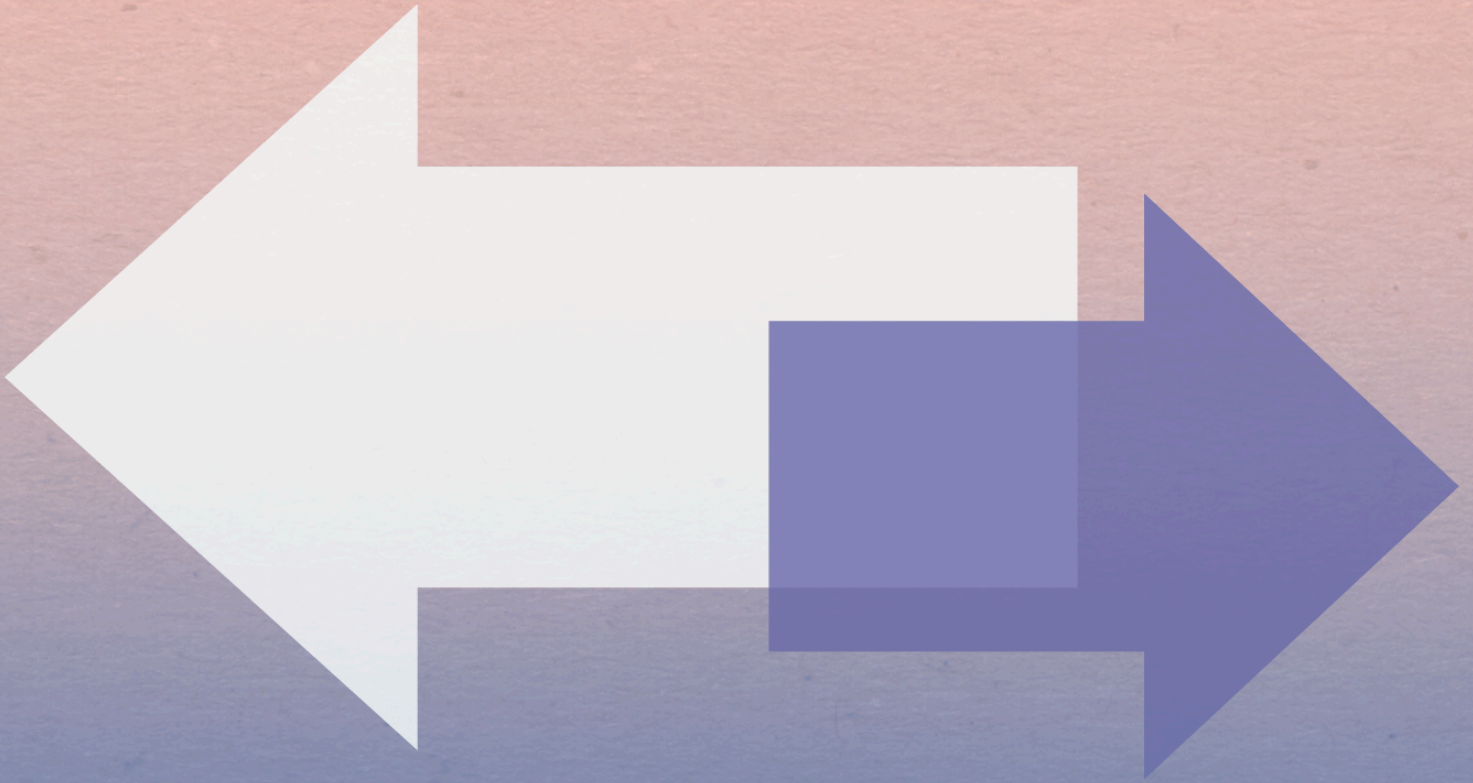


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## Europe on Edge? Building Strategic Communication on the European Union in Poland

### A Case Study from Polish Districts

The *Europe on Edge* project was carried out by the Res Publica Foundation between 2023-2024. It consisted of: meetings with local leaders in four district cities Przemyśl, Radom, Elbląg and Sosnowiec with polarised political identities, an accompanying podcast and the following report.

As our interviewees and interlocutors pointed out, there are no nationwide formats to map and connect local leaders, which would enable a conversation about the role of locality in the EU. There are no spaces or formats to talk about the implementation of EU directives at the local level, with the presentation of concrete solutions from Poland and other EU countries.

There is a noticeable lack of discourse regarding the European Union itself, particularly in Poland. Prior to the accession referendum held in 2003, public debate centred around whether or not Poland should join the EU. This discourse explored both the advantages and disadvantages of membership, as well as offered a broader reflection on the extent to which Polish society identified with Europe. In the 2003 referendum, a majority voted in favour of the accession, and Poland officially became an EU member in 2004.

In 2024, marking Poland's 20 anniversary of EU membership, the conversation about the EU's role and significance in our lives appears to have faded. What does the EU represent for Poland today? Do we perceive ourselves as active contributors to the European project, or do we view the EU, and specifically Brussels, as an external entity imposing decisions upon us? Furthermore, what role can local leaders and communities play in revitalising this conversation and contributing to the co-creation of the European Union's future?

By animating discussions on democracy in Poland, we have created local platforms for the exchange of ideas that increase the involvement of an active civil society.

Today, the *Europe on Edge* project ends. But the discussion about Europe from the perspective of Polish district cities continues within the podcast series as well as our various formats - discussions, workshops and texts. Please visit our website: <https://publica.pl/programy/europa-na-krawedzi>.

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## Editorial

On the eve of the Polish presidency of the Council of the European Union, the Polish government needs a coordinated communication strategy on Europe, and in particular the European Union.

An element of developing the Polish story about the EU should be the use of existing structures and networks outside of academic circles. This is the main recommendation for convincing the Poles about the sense of European integration stemming from our report.

Moreover:

- 1. European issues should be placed in the context of local issues, going down to the commune level.**
- 2. The basic task must be to counteract disintegration and social divisions.**
- 3. Communication activities must be engaging for local leaders.**
- 4. Communication must take into account the practical effects of meetings from the point of view of the problems of participants on the spot.**
- 5. European communication should be based on lively centres of local activity.**
- 6. The aim should be to connect and create a network of cooperation of local leaders of this subject throughout Poland.**
- 7. A pop-culture TV format should be created that combines the above-mentioned environments and raises the status of local activities, e.g. *Europa da się lubić* – remake.**
- 8. A talk show about Polish perspectives on Europe should be launched on Polish Radio with the voices of people from outside large urban centres.**

Authored by Dr Anna Kuczyńska, this report presents eight recommendations based on the experience of meetings with social leaders from four district towns where no party dominated the 2023 parliamentary elections and interpretation of existing sources.

I highly recommend reading it and invite you to discuss our project.

Wojciech Przybylski  
President of Res Publica Foundation  
Editor-in-Chief, Visegrad Insight

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## Report

### Introduction

Developing and refining narratives about the EU should involve leveraging existing structures and networks. Importantly, this approach should extend beyond academic circles. However, European communication is characterised by language from academic registers, conveyed by people who, in the common perception, are experts or academics. This creates a natural distance between communicators and key audiences, given that only 23.1% of the population in Poland, and just 19.0% of men, have higher education (CSO based on the 2021 Census.)

The qualities desirable from the point of view of Polish audiences are proximity and trust, which are overwhelmingly enjoyed by entities related to local government -- local authorities of a given city or municipality [CBOS Social Trust, 2024]. Therefore, communication about European policy should shift from merely explaining international and European topics to local audiences, to actively engaging them in cooperation with local opinion leaders.

That is why the basic element of developing the story about the EU should be the use of existing structures and networks outside of academic circles.

### Recommendations

#### 1. **Objective: Connecting European issues to local community concerns**

A radical change is needed in the operational framework of Polish Regional Centres (Regionalny Ośrodek Debaty Międzynarodowej, RODM). Instead of focusing on 'abstract' European issues relating to higher-order values such as human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and human rights, RODMs should shift towards communicating directly on issues that affect people in the local area – such as local problems, identified by the local community, that can be addressed and resolved at the European level.

Our interviewees frequently stressed the need for dialogue on European issues but from the viewpoint of 'smaller' cities rather than just Warsaw or Brussels.

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One of Radom's opinion leaders said during our debate on 24 November 2023, 'We need more discussions in places like Radom, focusing on issues beyond whether the EU should give us one million or ten (million euros).'

Leaders also highlighted the need to move beyond discussion, emphasising the shift from viewing the EU as 'they' in Brussels to seeing it as 'us' – a community co-created by the EU that acts both locally and in Brussels.

'As a society, as citizens, we would like to influence what happens in our small homelands.'

## 2. **Task: Countering fragmentation**

Clubs and organisations centred on local issues, founded on RODMs, seek to counteract the fragmentation – a key objective of disinformation campaigns, including those by Russia.

## 3. **Task: Focusing on local leaders**

Events realised by RODMs must bring together opinion leaders from local centres and European representatives living in those communities. This may include some academics but primarily focuses on local government officials, entrepreneurs and key figures of social life (e.g. librarians, journalists, clergymen and public service providers such as teachers, doctors and administration representatives).

## 4. **Task: Practical effects of meetings**

Meetings in such places allow different perspectives to be heard and different concerns to be expressed. At the same time, they promote reflection on how Poles can use the tools offered by the EU to solve local problems.

A meeting, such as the one proposed by the *Europe on Edge* project, can unite the local community around shared goals and local issues, bridging political divides. This allows us, as Europeans, to identify these challenges and reflect on the tools the EU offers to address them and to counteract the divisions in society that are at the hands of foreign powers, including Russia.

'Regarding this apoliticism, this common good of ours - I have the irresistible impression, that, unfortunately, literally everything in Poland is being politicised (...). And this time of reconstruction, that we have some common good (...), will be a very long process.'

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Cross-party agreements on local issues are possible when addressing matters that impact all or most residents, regardless of political affiliation, age or education. An example of an issue uniting the local community could be, for example, an illegal rubbish dump.

'They told some people all sorts of silly things like, "We have 250 years of coal." They just don't take into account that the extraction of this coal is linked to increasing capital intensity and that it causes environmental damage. And we already have earthquakes (...). There is a need for a strategy, and there is one in the European Union, but this strategy needs to be in Poland as well, a long-term strategy to prevent climate change. Even if someone questions that it is not man-made, that the changes are natural, at least they will protect the environment and we will live healthier.'

## 5. **Task: Building European communications on living local activity centres**

It is necessary to strengthen existing local clubs, including by funding their activities aimed at promoting the European perspective. This allows local leaders to invite experts and leaders from other regions. Such discussions could be recorded and used in excerpts in the form of a podcast, broadcast or video. Activities of this kind could, in the long term, contribute to the creation of a cultural centre, such as America House Kyiv.

## 6. **Objective: Networking local activities in all of Poland**

Funding should support not only the networking of local leaders with each other but also their connection to the wider community, with regular backing to maintain these networks. Ongoing support is crucial to ensure the continuity of databases, repositories and contacts, allowing for consistent collaboration with established partners, rather than creating new lists and databases with each project. Therefore, relying solely on one-time competitions and project-based activities is not advisable.

One participant mentioned that the protests that have taken place over the last 8 years in Poland, including those defending the Constitution and reproductive rights, have raised citizens' awareness of their rights. As a result, they know they can protest, write petitions, and send letters to the authorities.

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7. **Task: *Europa da się lubić*<sup>1</sup> - remake. A pop-cultural audio-visual format should be created, connecting the above-mentioned communities and raising the profile of local pro-European activities**

There is a lack of information and journalistic programmes that speak about the EU in a language other than typical journalism, which at the same time emphasise what local communities live in a European context, also taking into account the everyday life and local problems of people from other EU countries. There is a lack of decentralised communication about the EU - information not from the perspective of capital cities or large, well-informed and well-connected cities. There is a need for programmes that convey the message of the accessibility of EU values, of the EU being accessible to ordinary people.

8. **Task: Additionally, a talk-show programme should be launched on Polish Radio featuring voices from district and local communities across Poland. By incorporating call-in listeners, this programme would foster a sustainable discussion format, similar to the *Europe on Edge* podcast (2023 season), which included episodes with questions from local leaders.**

In particular, but not exclusively, such broadcasts should be aimed at young people who are not familiar with the world before Poland's accession to the EU (which may make it difficult for them to understand what Poles would actually be like). Such a broadcast would also be a tool to promote those who deal with these issues in local communities and to raise their profile.

## Justification

Available research indicates that when discussing the positive aspects of EU membership, many people rely on narratives from over 20 years ago, often highlighting benefits such as improved roads or the significance of European funds. However, the strategic benefits of Poland's EU membership – such as enhanced security and the improvement of civilisation standards through the rule of law – are not sufficiently emphasised.

Public opinion tends to react negatively to new aspects of EU membership, such as the Green Deal or the Pact on Migration and Asylum. Farmers' protests, in particular, have received strong public support. Meanwhile, there is a noticeable absence of counter-narratives that frame these EU membership issues in a positive light.

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<sup>1</sup> *Europa da się lubić* [Europe can be liked] was a Polish talk show broadcast on TVP2 from 2003 to 2008 and from 2019 to 2019, based on the French format *Union Libre*

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We need to develop new strategies at global, national, and local levels. Fresh insights and narratives about the EU, tailored to the current local and geopolitical context, are essential.

'If we have the approach all the time that raw materials from Russia, cheap labour from China and defence from America, then we have actually set ourselves up for such bourgeois passivity. And today, whoever is sensible knows that we will not go back to these things. The Chinese will no longer produce jumpers for us, because they have completely different ambitions.'

1. The narratives observe a perception of Poland-EU relations in terms of 'us' (Poles) and 'them' (the EU). 'They' impose rules (such as the Green Deal) on 'us', it is not 'we' as part of the EU who co-create them. What is missing, therefore, is a perception of the Union as 'us' - a collective in which we are active participants and co-creators of EU policies.

As the EU has for years been associated with issues other than security and defence, it is important for citizens to realise how much the war in Ukraine has changed in this regard and how important it is from a security perspective to be present in NATO and the EU.

As one of the participants in our meetings noted, the war in Ukraine has changed the approach to defence in the EU. He stressed that this was not only an important issue for Ukraine, but also for the EU itself, which until now had not sent military support.

The war has shown that the EU can play an important role in defence.

Participants also mentioned that not only NATO, but also the EU is an important support for Poland's security.

At the same time, the EU itself does not always care about visibility on these issues. Not only at the local level, but also at the EU-wide level.

At the same time, participants in the debates stressed that security issues are not visible and communicated insufficiently in the EU.

And this creates opportunities for new roles in the EU for Poland as well as for local communities.

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'From the perspective of Berlin or Paris, these are total peripheries (...) now [the war in Ukraine] we can see that you can look at it as the heart. Of course, maybe not the heart of the continent or the European Union, because it is still on the periphery. But it's about political themes that have opened up.'

'We are the security limit of Europe at the moment.'

2. More in-depth research is needed to understand how the European Union is perceived in Poland. This should include data analysis and additional qualitative research, such as individual in-depth interviews or focus groups, to deepen insights.
3. The research aims to describe and explain how the EU is currently perceived, why support for the EU - although still high - has been declining in recent years, and to identify the narratives that citizens use when talking about the EU. These findings will enable the development of targeted communication strategies that resonate with different segments of society.

## Background: Desk research

As old narratives about the EU wear off, new negative sentiments are emerging in the absence of new positive ones.

This is especially the case in the context of the Green Deal and the farmers' protests, which were supported by 76% of respondents in February 2024 (Ipsos 2024). With regards to restrictions on farmers, the issue of agricultural imports and grain from Ukraine, parts of the population cease to see what in previous years were positive aspects of membership, such as subsidies for farmers. In February 2024, 75% of respondents (of which 50% strongly) indicated that they were closer in position to Polish farmers than defenders of the Green Deal (Ipsos 2024). In all groups distinguished by political views, support for farmers outweighed support for the Green Deal, including among Civic Coalition voters (65% supported farmers) and Left voters (58%) (Ipsos 2024).

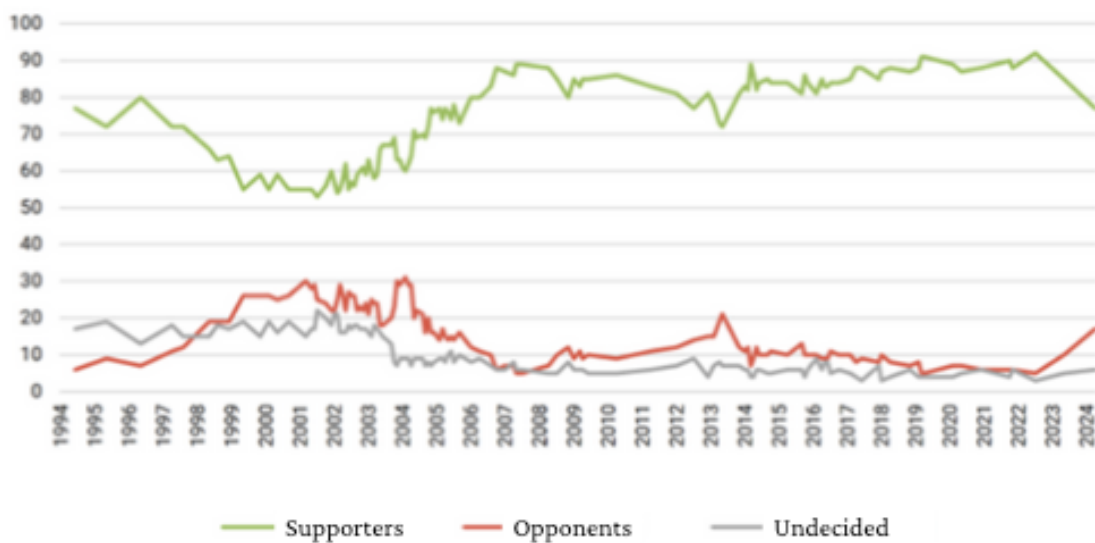
To a large extent, this is because Poland lacks a coherent narrative and communication strategy about the European Union. The country's political transformation was accompanied by the slogan 'return to Europe', but today the youngest generations of voters, among whom there is considerable support for anti-EU parties, do not remember a world in which Poland was not

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part of the EU. The advantages experienced and observed by middle-aged and older people are a stagnant reality for the youngest generations.

CBOS

FIG. 1. Attitude towards Poland's EU membership



Source: CBOS (2024 a).

The percentage of those in favour of EU integration in CBOS surveys has never been below 50%, and even happened to exceed 90%. Nevertheless, in recent years (CBOS 2024 a), we have seen a decline in Poland's support for the EU. In 2024, 77% of respondents support Poland's presence in the alliance – this is 8 percentage points less than in 2023 and 15 less than in 2022. 17% of respondents are against Poland's presence in the EU.

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Table 2

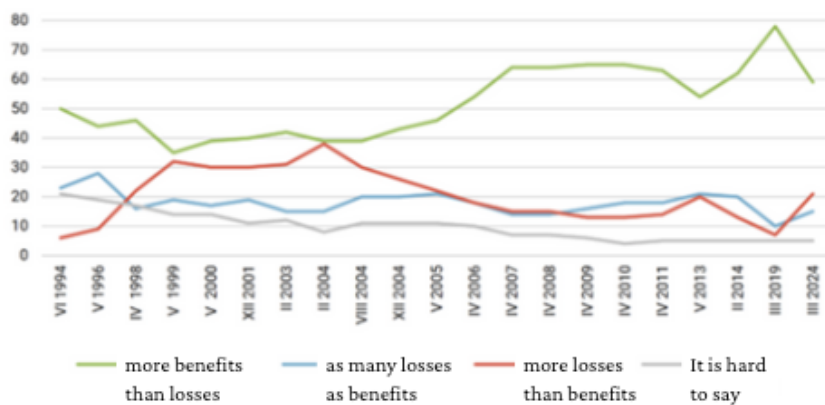
Potential electorates	Attitude towards Poland's EU membership		
	Supporters	Opponents	Undecided
	in %		
Civic Coalition	98	2	0
Third Way	95	3	2
The Left	92	4	4
Law and Justice	63	31	6
Confederation F&I	38	51	11

\*Small number of the electorate in the studied sample

Source: CBOS 2024 a.

Supporters of Poland's membership in the European Union dominate in all the socio-demographic groups distinguished in the CBOS survey (2024 a). The greatest differences can be seen when the population is distinguished by political and worldview orientation. EU membership is supported by 94% of respondents identifying with left-wing values (5% against) and 64% declaring right-wing political views (30% against).

FIG. 3. Assessment of the effects of membership/integration on Poland\*



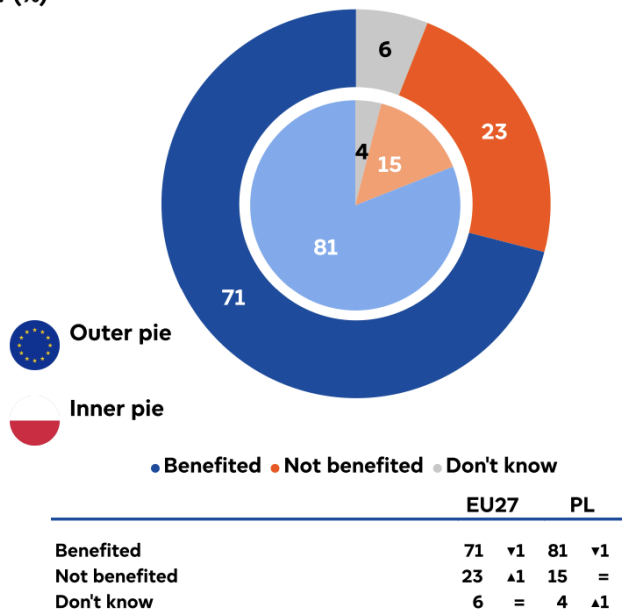
Source: CBOS 2024 a.

The majority still believes that Poland gains more than it loses from EU membership, but the percentage of indications in favour of this answer has also been falling (CBOS 2024 a) – over

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the past 5 years, it has decreased by 19 percentage points. More than one in five respondents (21%) believe that Poland loses rather than gains from EU membership.

**QA6. Taking everything into account, would you say that (OUR COUNTRY) has on balance benefited or not from being a member of the EU? (%)**



Source: Eurobarometer 2024.

Nonetheless, despite the falling percentage of people agreeing with the statement that Poland has benefited from membership, it is higher than the EU average: 81% and 71% respectively (Eurobarometer 2024).

Changes in thinking about the EU have been linked, among other factors, to the Union's actions in the face of such global challenges as the war in Ukraine, climate change and migration.

However, the changes noted over the last few years are not necessarily a permanent trend towards lower support for EU membership. One example of this is the change in perception of Poland's membership in NATO (CBOS 2024 b).

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FIG. 2. Do you personally support Poland's membership in NATO or are you against it?

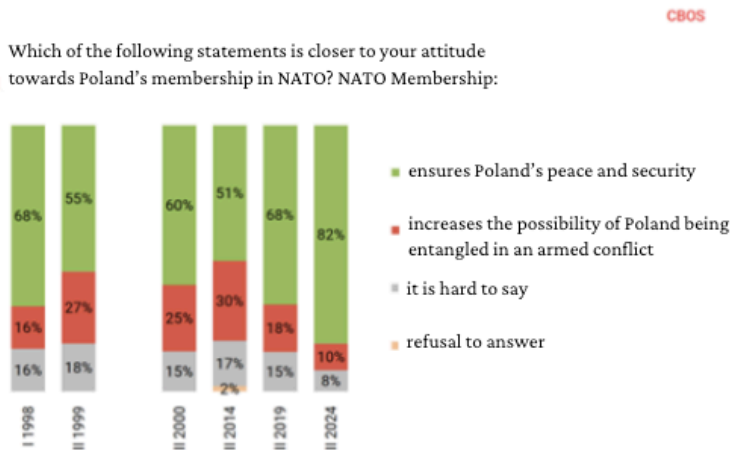


Percentages do not add up to 100 due to rounding

Source: CBOS 2024 b.

The full-scale invasion of Ukraine has translated into increased support for Poland's presence in NATO (CBOS 2024 b). NATO is now perceived as an organisation that provides peace and security for Poland. Support for such a statement has increased since 2019 by 14 percentage points, from 68% to 82% (CBOS 2024 b).

FIG. 5. Which of the following statements is closer to your attitude towards Poland's membership in NATO? NATO Membership:



Percentages do not add up to 100 due to rounding

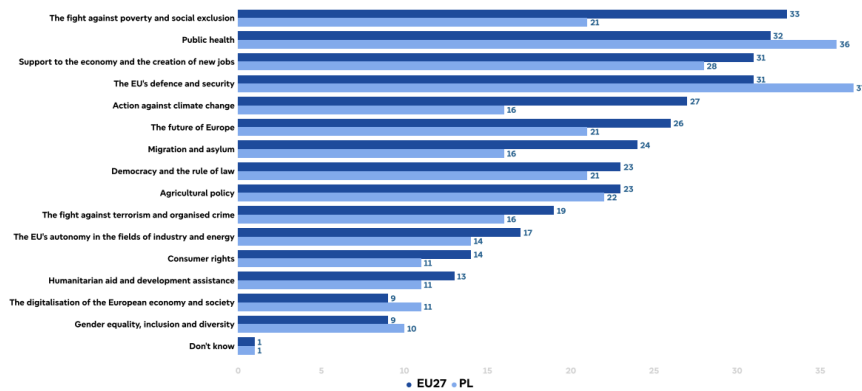
Source: CBOS 2024 b.

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Therefore, one may wonder whether the EU could gain more supporters in Poland if it was also associated with security or other values that are important to Poles. In this context, one can consider how challenges and solutions are addressed and communicated to a wider audience.

## CITIZENS' PRIORITIES AHEAD OF THE EUROPEAN ELECTIONS

QA14ab. Which of the following topics should be discussed as a matter of priority during the electoral campaign for the next European Parliament elections? Firstly? And then? (%)

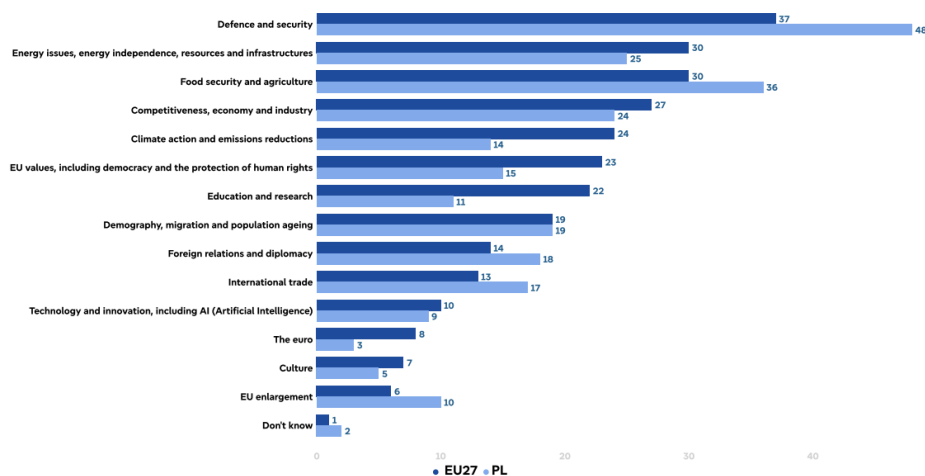


Source: Eurobarometer 2024.

Linking the EU to security could become an effective narrative, since, according to Poles, the priority during the European Parliament elections should have been precisely EU defence and security (37% of indications in Poland, 31% for the EU27) (Eurobarometer 2024).

## ASPECTS THE EU SHOULD FOCUS ON TO REINFORCE ITS POSITION IN THE WORLD

Q11ab. Thinking about the future, which of the following aspects should the EU focus on in order to reinforce its position in the world? Firstly? And Then? (%)



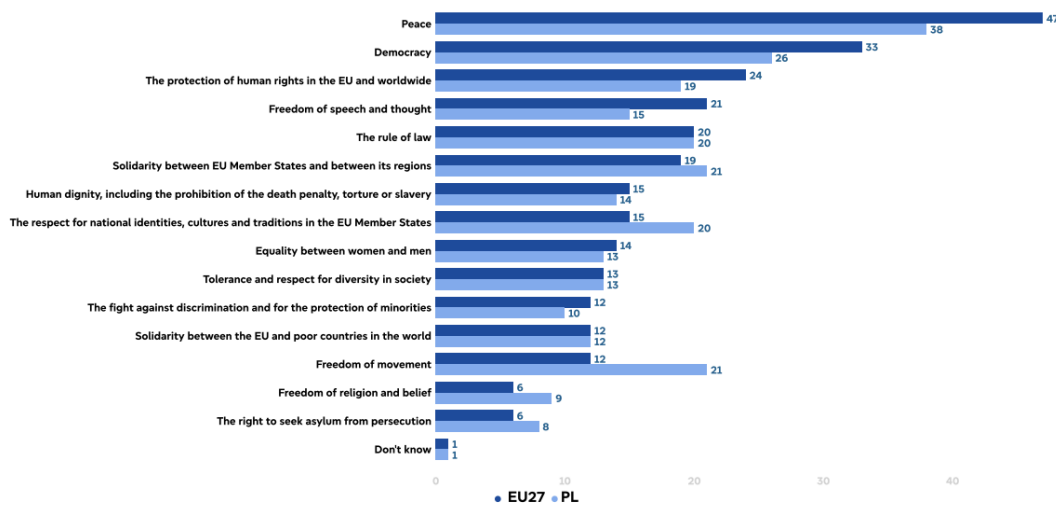
Source: Eurobarometer 2024

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Security is also an issue that will strengthen the Union's position in the world (according to 48% of respondents in Poland, 37% EU27) (Eurobarometer 2024).

## VALUES THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT SHOULD DEFEND IN THE FUTURE

QA15ab. In the upcoming European elections, the EU citizens will elect new Members of the European Parliament. In your opinion, which of the following values should the European Parliament defend as a matter of priority in the next 5 years? Firstly? And then? (%)



Source: Eurobarometer 2024.

Unsurprisingly given this context, the value that Poles believe the European Parliament should defend above all is peace (47% of indications, against 38% from the EU27) (Eurobarometer 2024).

## A case study from Polish districts: Europe on Edge

The theses of this report, confirmed by the above statistics, were derived from the choice of city was determined by:

- geographic dispersion – the relatively large distance of the cities from each other;
- the status of a district city rather than a voivodeship city;
- being the Polish equivalent of 'swing states', a place where support fluctuates between the Law and Justice party (PiS) and the Civic Platform (PO);
- the number of inhabitants – a population between 60,000 and 200,000.

Such parameters resulted in these four cities being high on the list of interesting research cases. Elbląg's location near the Russian border forced the city, among other things, to prepare a

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library digitisation system for literary works. Sosnowiec, on the other hand, was and is a highly industrialised area (Special Economic Zone).

The Res Publica Foundation's project from 2023 to 2024 aimed at bridging the divide and supporting communication between political leaders and citizens so that the public would be given the opportunity to communicate directly to politicians and be assured that ideas coming from a local level would be taken into account in broader political discourse.

The interviews were also designed to listen in to the voices of local opinion leaders and politicians in these four, carefully selected Polish cities – the aforementioned Przemyśl, Radom, Elbląg and Sosnowiec – in order to be able to provide them with a platform for discussion when confronted with big political actors, including Polish politicians in Brussels, in the government as well as high-ranking officials.

The objectives of the project are:

- to increase the participation of local communities in the national political debate;
- innovative civic education for communities living outside major cities;
- building and maintaining an informed democratic ecosystem for unengaged local leaders.

By creating a conducive democratic ecosystem for communities whose voice has hitherto been absent from public debate, we aim to build democratic resilience, connecting these groups through a shared understanding of key risks.

Public awareness and responsiveness to these policies are essential for good governance. The project stimulates open public debate through events and media. It also helps EU and Polish government planners and decision-makers to shape policies, taking into account both expert input and public response.

By animating discussions on democracy in Poland, we have created local platforms for the exchange of ideas that increase the involvement of an active civil society.

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At Collegium Civitas, she teaches classes related to quantitative research methods, statistics and data analysis in the programme R, but also online ethnography devoted to qualitative research. She is a member of the editorial board of the revised annual Zoon Politkon.

Previously, she conducted classes, among others, at the Polish-Japanese Academy of Information Technology and research for cultural institutions such as the Copernicus Science Center, Zachęta National Gallery of Art, POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews, and the Museum of Municipal Engineering, using both quantitative and qualitative methods.

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