





Is #Polexit an information operation?

Narratives travelling the information space

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Introduction: Poland, Russia, and Euroscepticism

With the implosion of the Soviet Union in 1991 and then Poland joining NATO in 1997, the long-standing conflict between Russia and Poland entered a new phase. Whereas Putin's Russia gradually succumbed to revisionist and increasingly aggressive regional politics, Poland followed its European and Transatlantic path by advocating for stronger international security guarantees and increased NATO presence on its eastern flank. The country's negative historical experiences stemming from various forms of Russian imperialism resulted in Poland (and Lithuania) assuming the position of Russian-sceptic hardliner at multilateral fora and becoming a "cold warrior". This adverse attitude is shared by Russia, which in April 2021 threatened to include Poland, Lithuania and Czechia on its list of unfriendly states².

These long-standing political tensions and Polish sensitivity to signs of Russian revisionism have resulted in very strong public support for NATO and EU membership in Poland, and the relative scarcity of openly pro-Russian political parties in the country. Yet notable exemptions exist. For instance, the Polish political scene witnessed an ephemeral movement called Zmiana (Change), which shocked public opinion with anti-American events and faded away soon after; and the Konfederacja (Confederation) nationalistic and reactionary party which whilst openly denying being a pro-Russian political force³, nevertheless mimics its narratives and sentiments4.

While skepticism towards Russia has had a chilling effect on any openly pro-Russian information operations, this has had little impact on covert and less-evident operations which run deep in Polish society. Such operations seek to sow distrust between Poland and its European and Transatlantic allies, undermine citizens' trust in public institutions, and fuel xenophobic and nationalist positions. One of the clearest examples is the staggering rise of Eurosceptism, with Polexit (Poland leaving the European Union) leading the

The political conflict between Poland's coalition government and EU institutions is multilayered and complex. Internal reforms introduced by the Law & Justice party and their coalition partners on numerous occasions were judged to fall foul of the EU legal system and European standards (e.g. related to the judiciary, press freedom). The ruling coalition's constituency is not Eurosceptic per se - only 4% of their

supporters would support #Polexit according to a recent poll⁵, while 65% favor a looser, mainly economic, collaboration with the EU and more independence for Member States.

The dispute over the shape of the EU and Poland's role therein has thus been internalized; and even though the Polexit card is rarely played, the ruling coalition still tries to muster popular support with "an assertive and firm" policy against Brussels. This has resulted in publiclyvoiced opinions that are either highly critical of the EU as a whole or question if Poland's EU membership continues to be its raison d'état. Apart from extreme rightwing movements, these voices were also echoed by various ruling coalition members. Especially active in this field has been Solidarna Polska⁶ (Solidary Poland), although certain major PIS (Law & Justice) politicians occasionally seconded these views⁷, at least initially⁸. Officially, it appears that the ruling coalition denies endorsing Polexit, and attempts to shift responsibility to the opposition¹⁰.

Notwithstanding, it can be assumed that the concept of #polexit asserts itself in both Russian-originated and domestic, Eurosceptic and isolationist, narratives.

Whither Polexit? **Overview of disinformation narratives**

Sowing divisions and weakening the European Union is a long-term aim of Russian disinformation¹¹, which was possibly¹² seen during the Brexit referendum. Coincidentally, the threat of Polexit – according to some experts¹³ – may be played by the Polish authorities to leverage their position against Brussels. The issue is continuously being disseminated across different social media platforms and traditional media, and is often linked to various disinformation narratives. To get a

¹ Mark Leonard & Nicu Popescu, A Power Audit of EU-Russia Relations, European Council of Foreign Relations, p. 48, [online]: https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/91773/Power_Audit_EU_Russia_1107.pdf

Polsat News, Polska na liście krajów "nieprzyjaznych Rosji"? Są nieoficjalne informacje, 28.04.2021, [online]: https://www.polsatnews.pl/wiadomosc/2021-04-28/polska-na-liscie-krajow-nieprzyjaznyc

Reczpospolita, *Bosak: Morawiecki kłamie, Duda jak narodowiec. Panika w PiS*, 23.01.2020, [online]: https://www.rp.pl/polityka/art922911-bosak-morawiecki-klamie-duda-jak-narodowiec-panika-w-pis.

J. Szczepański, Konfederacja nie poparła uchwały w sprawie Nawalnego. "Śmialiśmy się, że zrobią z nas rosyjskich agentów", 22.01.2021, Innlinel: https://wwdarzenia.interia.nl/autor/iakub-szczepanski/news-konfederacja-nie-poparla-uchwaly-w-sprawie-nawalnego-smialis.nl

P. Pacewicz, *Władza odkleiła się od narodu*, OKO.press, 12.10.2021, [online]: Władza odkleiła się od narodu [SONDAŻ IPSOS] (oko.press).

WP.pl, Polexit? Kowalski: Unia Europejska nas łupi, 10.09.2021, [online]: https://wiadomosci.wp.pl/polexit-kowalski-unia-europejska-nas-lupi-6681636295686656a.

Rzeczpospolita, Suski o "okupancie brukselskim". Buda: Może sobie na takie słowa pozwolić, 13.09.2021, [online]: https://www.rp.pl/polityka/art18912531-suski-o-okupancie-brukselskim-buda-moze-sobie-na-ta

⁸ Wyborcza, Terlecki: Kowalski to może referendum w sprawie opuszczenia UE zrobić u siebie w domu. 04.11.2021.

⁹ Gazeta Prawna, Kierownictwo PiS przyjęło uchwałę wykluczającą możliwość Polexitu, 15.09.2021,

¹⁰ Rzeczpospolita, Morawiecki: Kłamstwo opozycji ws. polexitu wywoływane, aby osłabić całą UE, 12.10.202: [online]: https://www.rp.pl/polityka/art19007141-morawiecki-klamstwo-opozycji-ws-polexitu-wywolywan

¹¹ A. Legucka, Russia's Long-Term Campaign of Disinformation in Europe, Carnegie Europe, 19.03.2020, [online]: https://carnegieeurope.eu/strategiceurope/81322.

¹² CSIS, Did Russia Influence Brexit?, 21.07.2020, [online]: https://www.csis.org/blogs/brexit-bits-bobs-and-blogs/did-russia-influence-brexit,

¹³ Wirtualna Polska, Wyrok TK ws. unijnego prawa oznacza polexit? "Droga do zerwania ze soba", [online]: https://wiadomosci.wp.pl/wyrok-tk-ws-unijnego-prawa-oznacza-polexit-droga-do-zerw

In all cases we used the keyword 'Polexit' to identify associated news, posts, and articles. In order to uncover the disinformation narratives linked to the Polexit concept, the Institute conducted a qualitative analysis of collected samples.

Open-source outputs (comprising various records) were narrowed down, depending on the monitoring tools' technical limits (e.g. CrowdTangle does not display events in private groups).

Wykop.pl

aggregator.

Wykop.pl first referred to #polexit in 2017. The vast majority of news posted under #polexit appeared to either warn other users of Polexit-driven intentions or was purely factual, and hence was not classified as fake news. The sample comprised 14

better glimpse into events in Poland, the

open-source information from various

and Wykop.pl – a popular Polish news

online media outlets, Facebook, Twitter,

Kosciuszko Institute collected and analyzed

narratives extracted from all news posted under the hashtag #polexit from 2017 until

Narratives spread on Wykop.pl Political context Polish Constitutional Tribunal ruling in favor of the supremacy Polexit is fake news conceived by the opposition to attack the of the Polish constitution over primary European law. government. Polexit is a way to protect Polish raison d'état and level the European Commission's Fit for 55 goal and simultaneous growth playing field with other European countries of energy prices. Polemic with Super Express article author who stated that Polexit is a legitimate future scenario, and should be discussed "Polexit is the idea of a madman or traitor" 14. No particular 04.08.2021 alongside other alternatives. political context. Growing tensions between the European Commission Polexit would be caused by European bureaucrats claiming 21.07.2021 and Poland over its Disciplinary Chamber and rule of law competences and making decisions that are not theirs to make deficiencies It is the parliamentary opposition that advances Polexit and Reaction to the Polish parliament's suggestion that it should 09.03.2021 vote against adopting the EU budget¹⁵. sabotages the government's work. 47% of Poles believes that a better future lies outside EU 16.12.2019 No particular political context, description of results EU survey. structures. The EU we have accedded was a completely different [better] No particular political context, speculations on the 01.05.2019 organization than today. consequences for Poland of joining the EU. On 17.01.2019, the European Parliament proposed linking The EU is ruled by Germans who seek to impose their imperialist 20.01.2019 access to European funds with upholding the rule of law¹⁶ ideas over us. Primary source no longer available. The conflict with Brussels is absolutely necessary in order to On 17.01.2019, the European Parliament proposed linking 18.01.2019 access to European funds with upholding the rule of law¹⁷ safeguard our values, culture, and welfare. Whoever considers the possibility of #polexit has already No particular political context. Primary source no longer 07.11.2018 mentally renounced his Polish citizenship. Polexit should be discussed because Brussels intentionally Declaration of a newly-established Eurosceptic "Movement of 20.09.2018 the 11th November" party. Most recently active in April 2020¹⁸. destroys nation states. The European Union is an imaginary community and has no 11.09.2018 An excerpt of the Polish president's speech in Leżajsk¹⁹. impact on anybody. The conflict with Brussels is merely a fight to elevate our Conflict over rule of law in Poland. Primary source no longer 03.01.2018 position in the international arena. available. Concerns the European Commission's plans to trigger Article 7 22.07.2017 Brussels acts as inquisitor against Poland. TFEU due to Poland's controversial judicial reform.

14 SuperExpress, Prawica chce wyjść z Unii. "Polexit to pomysł szaleńca lub zdrajcy" - pisze Tomasz Walczak, 16.08.2021,

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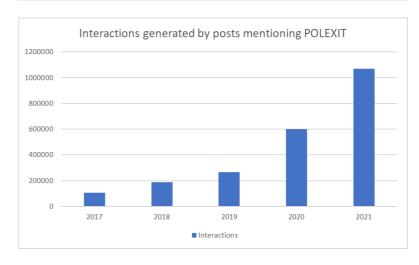
Facebook

Facebook analyser CrowdTangle gives bigpicture insights into events on the platform. We searched for #polexit posts published within the last four years by accounts tracked by CrowdTangle (Facebook pages, public groups, and verified profilesⁱ - so this method cannot analyse regular users' posts). Besides #polexit posts, we analysed the number of interactions generated on the platform. Obtained data shows that different Polexit narratives are becoming increasingly popular, with the number of such posts increasing from 464 in 2017 to 6725 in 2019. This is followed by a strong downturn in 2020, when the infosphere started to get dominated by COVID-19 related posts. Although we only have partial data for 2021 (mid-January to

November), the Polexit narrative is clearly once again gaining popularity, as evidenced by the volume of generated interactions. Despite the number of posts not increasing evenly year-on-year, every year since 2017 has brought more interactions: 104,872 in 2017, 267,350 in 2019, to 1,668,199 in 2021. Interestingly, the fewer posts in 2021 actually generated 300% more interactions than the larger number of posts from 2019 (an increase of 103%). This shows that the Polexit issue is increasingly stirring up emotions among people. The underlying reason may be the higher traction that Polexit narratives are getting in the media, and the issue's instrumentalization by various political parties for political objectives - both internal and external.

We next analyzed the last 24 months' 396 most popular Polexit posts on Facebook. The first question was each post's sentiment: anti, pro, or neutral Polexit? The results showed that 71% were anti, 27% neutral, and only 2% contained pro Polexit narratives. The second question focused on who was behind the posts, which we have categorized into six subgroups:

FB posts mentioning POLEXIT							
8000							
7000							
6000							
5000							
4000							
3000							
2000							
1000							
0							
	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021*		
■ Posts							



Narrative	Who's behind it?	Percentage of posts
Anti Polexit	Civic Platform and opposition's perspective	56%
Informing about the issue	News portals, journals, newspapers, etc.	22%
Anti Polexit	Law and Justice and United Right Coalition perspective	11%
Anti Polexit	Outside the political perspective, including artists, influencers, etc.	5%
Alternative perspective	Different actors stating that there is no such topic, "we don't want to discuss it", "it's clearly a made up political issue between the coalition and opposition".	5%
Pro Polexit	Representatives of far-right parties (Confederation) and alternative news sources (niewygodne.info. pl, wRealu 24).	2%

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xit-to-pomysl-szalenca-lub-zdrajcy-pisze-tomasz-walczak-aa-nup5-wVuA-PN7M.html.

Polsat News, Rzecznik rządu: dziś polska opozycja proponuje Polexit, 09.03.2021, 09/rzecznik-rzadu-dzis-polska-opozycja-proponuje-polexit/

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¹⁸ Ruch11listopada.pl, Partia Ruch 11 Listopada o #POLEXIT [OŚWIADCZENIE], 20.09.2018,

Dziennik.pl, Andrzej Duda o UE: Wyimaginowana wspólnota, z której dla nas niewiele wynika, 11.09.2018,

The Polexit debate is hugely politicized and dominated by narratives that oppose Poland's exit from the EU. However, these narratives differ internally and, in most cases, Polexit is used as a tool to criticize and hit out at opposing political parties. Parliamentary opposition figures often accused the ruling coalition of seeking Poland's exit from the EU [screenshot nr 1]", while representatives of the authorities accused politicians and opposition supporters of creating and spreading fake news about Polexit [screenshot nr 2]iii.

Posts containing Polexit narratives account for only 2% of the most popular posts sample. They are produced by a mixture of representatives of the far right-wing (Ruch Narodowy)iv, Confederation (pl. Konfederacja) politicians^v, and Facebook profiles of right-wing alternative news services such as Telewizja wRealu24vi and Idź Pod Prąd TV^{vii} (the latter uses a Polexit hashtag to promote conspiracy theories about the COVID-19 pandemicviii). This confirms that genuine support for Polexit remains low in Polish society, with Facebook posts demanding Polexit gaining little popularity, with a few exceptions.

Public profiles on Facebook are more tribal, in the sense that their content is either pro-government or proopposition, and predominantly replicate the top-down messages of political leaders. Following Law & Justice denials concerning their alleged plan to leave the EU, pro-government sources accused the opposition of hysteria²⁰ and called Polexit "fake news". 21 There were also rare examples of other narratives:

Screenshot nr 1.



Krzysztof Brejza, a Civic Platform senator, accuses Law and Justice of wanting to leave the European Union. His post states: "Kaczyński with PIS will lead Poland out of the European Union". The picture shows the Polish Constitutional Tribunal declaring selected provisions of the Treaties of the European Union as being incompatible with the Polish constitution.

Screenshot nr 2.



A post by Mateusz Morawiecki, Poland's Prime Minister, in which he denies fears - raised by the opposition - of working towards a Polish exit from the EU. In the post he wrote "Polexit is like the Yeti or Loch Ness monster - it does not exist".

Kev narrative

Other countries are in the same situation, as they have also claimed the primacy of their own constitutional laws.

Key narrative

The totalistic opposition fights not against #polexit but rather Poland's submission to Germany and the EU.

Key narrative

The opposition plays the Polexit card because it has no other programme.

20 Polskie Radio, "Histeria, którą ja nazywam polexitem urojonym". Czarnek o demonstracjach po orzeczeniu TK. 11.10.2021, [online]: https://www.polskieradio.pl/7/129/Artykul/2823981, Histeria-ktora-ja-nazywam-polexitem-urojonym-Czarnek-o-de

Twitter

With around 6 million users (around 15%-16% of the population), Twitter in Poland is significantly less popular than Facebook or YouTube - it's mostly used by journalists, politicians, and news outlets. The Polexit narrative on Twitter is similar to that of Facebook, especially in terms of who is spreading different narratives and the popularity of such narratives. Throughout our analysis, we identified 24,584 tweets posted in 2021 mentioning Polexit. Similarly to other platforms, the vast majority of tweets had an informative character or anti-Polexit sentiment. We analysed the most popular (241 tweets with 25 or more retweets), and through a labelling process we found 26 tweets backing Polexit (10% of the total). Among the authors, we can distinguish right-wing journalists^{ix} and private Twitter users^x.

Pro-Polexit narratives on Twitter

Key narrative

The European Union is fully controlled by Germany and its interests, and we must leave in order to regain our sovereignty.

Key narrative

The costs [of staying in the EU] outweigh the benefits, which mainly boil down to the passport-free travel.

Key narrative

Poland and the Polish people are persecuted by the European Union.

Key narrative

Polexit would be caused by Brussels-based bureaucrats claiming competences and making decisions that are not theirs to make.

Key narrative

Polexit is in Poland's interest. It will result in lower prices and greater production

Key narrative

We need a referendum to show Brussels who rules Polish domestic politics.

Key narrative

The CJEU's actions are aimed at weakening Poland.

Key narrative

Climate change reforms pushed by the EU are designed to destroy Poland's coal-based economy, hence we must leave the EU.

Key narrative

The West's leftist elites want to change our way of life.

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Rzeczpospolita, Mateusz Morawiecki: Polexit to fake news. To szkodliwy mit, 11.10.2021 [online]: https://www.rp.pl/polityka/art19002341-mateusz-morawiecki-polexit-to-fake-r

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Conclusions

The limited scope of the analysis (focused on two social media platforms and Wykop. pl) means that not all aspects of the Polexit debate could be covered. Although such sensitive topics need nuancing, our analysis can serve as a general overview of the trends in the debate. Polexit has been widely used by different actors for political gain and, to a lesser extent, to spread narratives about the need for Poland to leave the European Union.

The analysis focused both on presenting key elements of the Polexit narrative. and on presenting the broader context and sentiment of the discussion around Polexit in the Polish information space. Advocacy for Polexit has taken various forms. Open support for Poland's exit from the EU is most often presented by right-wing parties and circles (such as the Confederation and Ruch Narodowy (National Movement)), and by a small component of the government coalition (representatives of the Solidarna Polska party, known for anti-EU viewsxi). The ruling coalition led by the Law and Justice party has openly criticized the European Union and its institutions, which has fueled anti-European groups in Poland and the surrounding debate. Key Law and Justice

party figures have been openly critical of the EU and its institutions, particularly in the context of the legal and institutional conflicts between Warsaw and Brussels. President Andrzej Duda has even referred to the EU as an "imaginary community" that does little good for Poland^{xii}. Despite open criticism of the EU and a steadily deteriorating relationship with Brussels, the Law and Justice party is distancing itself from the idea of Poland leaving the European Union. The anti-EU narrative was also spread by Polish Public Television (TVP) - a highly politicized and governmentcontrolled media network - that has been used to support the government in conflicts with the EUxiii. Bearing in mind that the average audience of TVP's main information service is 2.1 million^{xiv}, its proliferation of anti-EU narratives should be seen as an important element in creating a negative image of the EU in Poland. This may lead to a change in attitudes towards the EU among Poles, and in the future serve as capital for politicians who speak openly about Polexit. However, it should be noted that at no point has TVP directly promoted leaving the EU, and that it has criticized the opposition for "creating false accusations against the government". Due to the limited

scope of our analysis, TVP's activities, which are an important part of the Polexit discussion, were mostly not covered. All these actions of the government and its media must be described as a dangerous political instrumentalization of EU criticism, which in the future may lead to a change in how Poles perceive the EU, and increase susceptibility to the actions and narratives of extreme anti-European parties that seek Polexit.

This limited research cannot go further in analyzing other EU-related rhetoric, often not straightforward agitating for Polexit but rather focused on undermining the trust to the EU among polish society. The Polexit-related discussion is multithreaded, highly politicized, and instrumentalized to achieve the internal goals of individual political players. Our analysis can therefore only serve as a fragmentary insight into the sentiment of this discussion.

Endnotes

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- viii Ihiden
- ix Rafał Otoka Frąckiewicz, Gaz importowany z USA zagraża europejskiej cywilizacji. Uwierzycie? :) #polexit #nordstream, Twitter, 12.02.2020, [online]: Rafał Otoka Frąckiewicz na Twitterze: "Gaz importowany z USA zagraża europejskiej cywilizacji. Uwierzycie? :) #polexit #nordstream" / Twitter.
- x Jarek, Te kurwy z KE poszły na zwarcie z Polską! Teraz już podważa legalność TK w Polsce! Ochujeli do końca! Za chwilę podważą legalność istnienia państwa polskiego! #Polexit, Twitter, 20.10.2020,
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