



## POLEXIT NARRATIVE: A CASE STUDY IN TERMS OF POLITICAL COMMUNICATION

NARRACJA POLEXIT – STUDIUM PRZYPADKU W ZAKRESIE KOMUNIKACJI POLITYCZNEJ

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### — ABSTRACT —

The issue of researching a narrative in terms of political communication, still being discussed by political sciences as a phenomenon classified between media science and political science, has become a challenging field. Mainly due to political reality, where a word “narrative” has emerged as a very common one. The Polesxit narrative, a fairly new political phrase, is an example of it. Taking a narrative into account in research of political science might be fascinating not only in terms of methodology itself, but in terms of real political consequences, including the EU-Poland relationships. So that, the questions here are how to study a narrative in relation to politics, and how a created story – here in case of a hypothetical Polesxit and not infrequently soaked with generics and populism – influences political reality, including the misunderstanding of the European integration process.

**Keywords:** political communication; narrative; Polesxit; the EU–Poland relationship; political struggle

### — ABSTRAKT —

Kwestia badania narracji w ramach komunikacji politycznej, będąca wciąż przedmiotem dyskusji w naukach politycznych jako zjawisko wciśnięte pomiędzy nauki o mediach i nauki o polityce, stała się ciekawym wyzwaniem. Głównie z powodu rzeczywistości politycznej, w której słowo „narracja” stało się dość powszechne. Przykładem tego jest narracja polesxitu, stosunkowo nowa fraza polityczna. Uwzględnienie narracji w badaniach politycznych może być fascynujące nie tylko pod względem metodologii, ale również pod względem realnych konsekwencji politycznych, w tym relacji między Unią Europejską a Polską. W związku z tym warto podjąć próbę odpowiedzi na dwa pytania: jak badać narrację w odniesieniu do polityki oraz jak stworzona opowieść – tutaj w przypadku hipotetycznego polesxitu i nierzadko nasiąknięta ogólnikami i populizmem – wpływa na polityczną rzeczywistość, w tym na nierozumienie procesu integracji europejskiej.

**Słowa kluczowe:** komunikacja polityczna; narracja; polesxit; relacje UE–Polska; walka polityczna

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## INTRODUCTION

Narratology, as a field primarily concerned as associated with literature, has been increasingly discussed as a research method implemented in political communication. An attempt to bring narratology closer to the theory of political communication has not been a simple task, especially due to some sceptical political scientists. But the fact is that in political cycle a word “narrative” has emerged as a common word, a word from non-literal areas of research. Undertaking research is more tempting due to the fact that the term ‘Polexit narrative’ is – from the scientific point of view – a fairly new phenomenon, especially interesting for a political scientist, who is increasingly required to present a broad, interdisciplinary research approach, and who is aware of potential criticism from traditional political scientists. While researching narrative we may find some references to theories concerning political science: constructivism as an interpretative approach, defining the study of way of thinking about both political phenomena and political statements; the sovereignty as a social construction; politicians’ activity on the basis of behaviourism; and finally the theory of the European integration (Czaputowicz, 2008). It, again, demonstrates the need to maintain a broad, interdisciplinary approach to the subject of this study.

## THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

According to J.H. Kołodziej (Kołodziej, 2017), I assumed that political narrative is a certain content which contains information and assessments of selected events, political actors and their actions, which dynamically change the reality; this content is expressed through a story in a way that lets one impose a framework of its interpretation and of its understanding. It is a cognitive meta-category that combines various elements into a whole and so that let us understand the political reality.

To research the Polexit narrative, I took into account both Gerard Genette typology (Genette, 1980) and J.H. Kołodziej’s assumptions (Kołodziej, 2017). I considered elements typical for narrative means, such as mood, instance, levels, and time (Guillemette & Lévesque, 2006), but I implemented them to politics. Recognizing the importance of the experts’ opinions (often used in politicians’ activities) and the importance of public opinion (creating stories adequate to social moods), I proposed additional research. They might be implemented in case these elements appear in relation to a studied narrative.

**Table 1.** Political Narrative as a Cognitive Meta-category – General Framework

<b>Research topic</b>	Political institutions and political actors Media institutions			
<b>Subject of analysis</b>	Communication behaviour of political actors, content of political statements and programmes Content of media messages			
<b>Created story</b>	Information and assessments of selected events and political actors and their activities			
<b>Elements analyzed</b>	Distance and functions of the narrator	Narrative voice, perspective and time of narration	Embedded narrative and metalepsis	Narrative order and speed, frequency of events
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– direct speech: the quotes of official political statements, interviews, short statements for media</li> <li>– indirect speech: paraphrased statements, describing statements for other media</li> <li>– the narrator tells, comments, assesses</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– present/absent in a story,</li> <li>– time: past, present, future, mixed,</li> <li>– the level of knowledge of the narrator</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– a basic story/a story in a story,</li> <li>– breaching of narrative levels</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– relationship between an event and talking about it,</li> <li>– relationship between the duration of an event and talking about it,</li> <li>– number of stories of an event/events</li> </ul>
<b>Social interpretation and understanding</b>	Message resulting from the story			
<b>Additional research</b>				
<b>Experts institutions</b>	Content of experts opinions implemented into political statements (if there are any)			
Society attitude towards information and assessments of selected events and political actors	Results of public opinion polls (useful also in the analysis of a message resulting from the story)			

**Source:** own concept based on G. Genette typology and J.H. Kołodziej's assumptions, <http://www.signosemio.com/genette/narratology.asp>.

## HYPOTHESIS, RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND METHODS

The political narrative about the EU-Poland relationship in terms of some difficult issues, such as migrant crisis and humanitarian aid or the sovereignty of the state and judicial system (a content), caused that the Polesxit narrative permanently entered the language of the public debate (events, political actors and their actions). Even if it could be described – so far – as abstractive and based on the politically emotional case of the UK (a story), it found fertile ground including a general negative attitude towards the EU and some difficult challenges the EU has to face. Conducting an inappropriate story aimed at reinforcing these negative opinions of “the sovereign” may lead to a misunderstanding of the integration process, its benefits, but also challenges, including sacrifices, concessions and inconveniences; and when it comes to the case of “exit” – it may lead to the irreversible consequences of this society’s decision (imposing a framework of interpretation and understanding). And it certainly will not be beneficial for the perception of Poland in the EU environment.

With this hypothesis I created some research questions: What Polesxit narrative results from the analysis of official political statements and selected media messages? How is it created by the ruling party, and how by the opposition? What is the significance of the Poles’ opinion about the EU membership and is this narrative to lead to change this opinion? What might it cause in the future?

Within case study method, I aimed at confirming or not the hypothesis that the political narrative of Polesxit, even if it is the form of political struggle, may lead to misunderstanding of integration processes and to negative perception of Poland. I assumed that the narrative concerning Polesxit was mainly co-created by the policy and the interests of Poland’s right-wing government. I also took into account the Polish opposition’s narrative, as well as the Polish society’s attitude towards the EU, its challenges, and a hypothetical Polesxit – all as additionally significant in the whole matter. As a background for my considerations, I analysed official political programme of the ruling party and some official political statements concerning Polish foreign policy tasks. To answer research questions completely and comprehensively I analysed some media messages from both pro-government media and not, assuming and realizing that the domain of contemporary media is the mutual citation and that official political statements are often the base for creating media reports.

As Polish society is the main recipient of messages in the Polesxit case, I used the Google search engine to find sources of the word “Polesxit” in domestic media.

While collecting data, I divided the sources into pro-government media and not, and then the politicians' statements of the ruling party and the opposition – so that I managed to have a balanced analysis of the narrative and to keep research objectivity. Media reports referred to poll results, so that is how I could quite easily find another data. All within the assumptions that as well as for me, the materials were supposed to be accessible for the Polish society.

The research period was 2018 as it was the hottest time for the EU and the UK negotiations on Brexit (it revived the discussion about other “exits”), as well as it was the time when the EU–Poland relationships have significantly deteriorated (hard scuffles about migrants and humanitarian aid, the case of the judicial system in Poland). However, I also referred to earlier materials to show that the problem was increasing, and that the adoption of a particular research period was imposed due to some facts mentioned above, but also to maintain research discipline.

#### THE BASIS OF POLISH GOVERNMENT'S NARRATIVE

Jacek Czaputowicz, the Foreign Minister, emphasized in his speech on foreign policy tasks in 2018 that the EU membership brought Poland many benefits: economic, political, social, and that a strong EU was Poland's goal (Czaputowicz, 2018). “We are a part of the EU” – said on another occasion, and with conviction, the Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki (Morawiecki, 2018b). During the 27<sup>th</sup> Economic Forum in Krynica, the Polish President highlighted that Poland was happy about its presence in the EU and that Poland wanted to be stronger in the EU and wanted the EU to be stronger (Duda, 2018). Also the Minister of Investment and Development declared that we were in the Union and we wanted to be in the Union (Kwieciński, 2018). Finally, this was generally confirmed by Jarosław Kaczyński, the leader of the ruling party, who said (a couple of times) that we wanted to be in the European Union and that the fact of real belonging to Europe was a membership in the EU (Kaczyński, 2018).

This general narrative corresponded to the assumptions of national European policy, which – being somewhere at the interface between domestic politics and foreign policy – concerned the functioning of certain rules and law, but also certain political, social and cultural visions (Dulak, 2017). It indeed enabled a broad understanding of integration processes, and the word “but” might have become crucial in the whole matter.

## POLISH "BUT" VS. HYPOTHETICAL "EXIT"

Firstly, according to the ruling party's political programme published before the elections in 2015, the principal goal of Poland's foreign policy would be restoration of the subjectivity of the state in international relations. What does it mean when the EU membership is mentioned? This membership should be "treated as a tool to realize Polish national interests", and "not as the end of Polish subjectivity". The EU should be an organization of sovereign state members, not a federal state (PiS, 2014). Thus a reflection of this approach might be found in many political statements, interviews and speeches – all that created the narrative of the ruling party. J. Czaputowicz also confirmed that point of view when delivering his speech on foreign policy tasks: "Guaranteeing national independence and sovereign statehood is Poland's natural reason of State" (Czaputowicz, 2018). The Prime Minister suggested that the ruling party wanted Poland's presence in the European Union, but "on the principles of full sovereignty and independence", and the Polish President asked whether the EU imposes too much on the countries that belong to this organization (Morawiecki, 2018b; Wprost.pl, 2016). On another occasion he even talked about the EU as "the community from which there are little results for us" (Duda, 2018).

Besides that, the EU–Poland relationships have – not only in words – deteriorated in recent years, mainly due to some controversial reforms enacted in Poland by the ruling party Law and Justice (PiS). The reform of the judicial system in Poland led the EU to the commencement of the implementation procedure of the Article 7 (it can be used against Poland as a member state with a risk of "breach of the rule of law"). The European Commission decided to take Poland to the Court of Justice of the European Union over this judiciary reform. It caused an avalanche of comments, including some negative ones and addressed to the EU. Wanting to cool down the already cold EU–Poland relationships a bit, the Foreign Minister assured us that his country would not ignore the ruling of the EU Court of Justice (Morawiecki, 2018a). Notwithstanding his words, it is important to quote his previous point of view: "The European Commission is not a supra-government, and the European Parliament is not a supra-parliament empowered to instruct national governments and parliaments" (Morawiecki, 2018).

At the same time, other PiS politicians presented different opinions, including suggestions to ignore the Court of Justice's decision. What is more, some of them claimed that Brussels had no right to interfere in Poland's internal affairs

and that the European Commission took responsibility for the “development of actions” between Warsaw and Brussels (Newsweek.pl, 2018; Koduj24.pl, 2016; Onet.pl, 2017).

Secondly, as a member of the EU, Poland is a donor of development aid. The majority of Polish assistance is channeled multilaterally, including flows through the EU budget. As Poland was not in favour of deeper integration in all the EU policies, development cooperation was mentioned as an unquestionable area for expanding cooperation (MFA, 2015). The problem has arisen – only or until – in the discussion of issues related to development, such as migrant crisis.

Even though mass migration has become a bone of contention in the entire EU, Poland has shown quite significant non-solidarity attitude within its narrative. There were various arguments to refuse relocation: they were not refugees, but illegal immigrants; they were dangerous to our citizens; Poland had accepted many immigrants/refugees from Ukraine, they were terrorists, supporting them was very expensive, it is better to support them in their countries and places where they live. But some stronger words were also spoken. “Muslim refugees will Islamize Poland”, “It’s not a knock at the door, it’s just forcing them”, “Take them all to Germany!”, “This is a cattle and should be treated like a cattle” (about immigrants), “Immigrants can bring unknown diseases”, “These people can’t be civilized” (Dziennik.pl, 2017; Dachnij, 2018; Strzałkowski, 2018).

This narrative was so strong and full of non-solidarity in its overtones that it covered some facts that could have been favourable for the government. According to its declaration, Poland was supposed to increase its humanitarian aid. Indeed, in 2017 it amounted to almost 174 million PLN and compared to the previous year it was an increase of 46%. The plan for 2018 was about doubling Polish humanitarian aid (a report on it is supposed to be published in September 2019; Wgospodarce.pl, 2018; Money.pl, 2018).

## THE STRUGGLE BETWEEN THE RULING PARTY AND THE OPPOSITION

As far as it concerned Polexit, politicians of the ruling party claimed that the idea they wanted Polexit to happen was as preposterous as they would aspire to “solar system exit” (Tarczyński, 2018). Simultaneously they sharply and strongly criticized the opposition, claiming that it unleashed more hysteria and created a narrative just to threaten citizens. According to PiS’s narrative, the opposition

dreamed that PiS would like to leave the EU and all the fuss around Polesxit was only the opposition's will to create "a clamour" (Dorzeczy.pl, 2018; Wpolarityce.pl, 2018; Newsweek.pl, 2018).

Undoubtedly, the opposition has implemented Polesxit into its narrative, and suggested that the government wanted to lead Poland out of the EU. It was said that the European policy of the current government was leading Poland to a chasm, Polesxit would cause a lot of tragedy, Poland was drifting towards the East and its self-destruction was coming; Poland has been becoming the pariah of Europe and the EU could not be fooled by the marionette dance of the PiS government (Tokfm.pl, 2018).

### POLITICS EXPRESSES THE WILL OF THE "SOVEREIGN"

The Polish government claimed that its decisions and actions were an expression of the will of the majority of the society, called in practice "the sovereign" (Polskatimes.pl, 2016). That is the reason why I decided to implement polls results into this particular research, expecting interesting results concerning narrative. And indeed, an analysis of this "will" identified both some facts and some discrepancies. Knowledge of them might make it possible to understand such and not a different narrative, created for political purposes.

Poles, like the citizens of other Eastern Europe countries, claimed that they do not want to leave the European Union. In Poland, depending on polls results presented by different research centres, between 70 and 88 percent of its citizens supported EU membership (Forsal.pl; Szpyrka, 2018). What is interesting, is that Poles' support for the EU was definitely higher than the EU average.

According to Poles' opinions on the most urgent topics that the EU should be focused on, development (as well as economy) was in the second position. They confirmed this tendency also in other polls: to the question: Should Poland support developing countries?, the majority of them answered: yes, it should (Szpyrka, 2018; TNS Polska, 2015). Where is this "but" then?

Well, when the majority of Poles declared they did not want the euro currency, it seemed that it could be the biggest bone of contention in the EU-Poland relationship. But mass migration quickly proved something different. The vast majority of Poles (71% of those surveyed) did not agree to accept immigrants from Muslim Countries, and they were against their obligatory relocation. Being aware of the fact that Poland lacks hands to work, they were willing to accept

Ukrainians, but not people from Africa or the Middle East. Besides, if they were about accepting anyone from abroad at all, instead of immigrants they preferred repatriates (Dorzeczy.pl, 2017; Rp.pl, 2017; Tvpinfo.pl; Natemat.pl, 2013).

When it was about the EU–Poland conflict in the context of the implementation of Article 7, Polish society was divided. According to the survey conducted on behalf of *Rzeczpospolita*, one of the biggest opinion-making daily newspapers in Poland, 48% of the respondents believed that the blame lies with the Polish government, 21% – that the EU bears the blame, and 24% – that they both share the blame. These results were compatible with political preferences of Poles (Dąbrowska, 2018).

The “Sovereign” also appeared in the mouths of PiS’s politicians in the context of Brexit, which – in some points of view – showed that Europeans no longer wanted the Union like that before. Besides, the Polish President asked (rather rhetorically) whether the EU worked in a non-democratic way, taking decisions arbitrarily in Brussels without consulting them with citizens. He paid his respects to the Prime Minister of the UK for making a decision to announce a referendum on Brexit. Moreover, when it is about the entire EU, PiS’s opinion was clearly presented: “The Republic of Poland takes the position that the European Union can be strong only thanks to the real support of its citizens, who are able to confer a democratic mandate on their elected governments” (Wprost.pl, 2016; polska.pl, 2018).

## CONCLUSIONS

Research confirm the thesis that conducting an inappropriate story on the EU–Poland relationship may lead to misunderstanding of the integration process and to irreversible consequences of Poles’ decision in the future, as well as to unbeneficial perception of Poland in the EU environment.

The analysis showed that the Polish political narration was rather populist and/or general than substantive and/or detailed. Undoubtedly it was mainly based on an internal – sometimes very dirty – political rivalry with a word “but” within as a main point of political considerations (a content based on “but” in terms of migrant crisis and humanitarian aid or the sovereignty of the state and judicial system). What is more, it showed both political unpredictability (of political actors and their actions), inconsistency of the narrative (a story), and it was difficult to assess what was more dangerous for further European integration. Especially

that the narrative fell on fertile ground, politicians benefited from the failure of the entire EU as well as from weakening the confidence of many citizens in an integration project; and thus a story could be created. At this stage of political debate it was hard to recognize if the government deliberately had conducted “but” narrative towards the EU (to gradually change Poles’ opinion about the EU membership – a part of imposing a framework of interpretation and understanding), but it certainly brought some social confusion (lack of political cohesion as it was in the case of political opinion on Poland’s accession to the EU before 2004).

Moreover it led to the perception of Poland as the next country to leave the EU (a part of imposing a framework of interpretation and understanding). The opinions about Poland such as: “a country that only takes”, a country with the motto: “take as much as possible, give as little as possible”, and a country that wants the UE to “leave it in peace” (Wyborcza.pl, 2016; Telewizjarepublika.pl, 2017), ceased to be a surprise.

Referring Polesit narrative to the varieties of political narration proposed by J.H. Kołodziej and its seven criteria, it has been seen that this narrative is multi-faceted (different aspects of the EU–Poland relationships), as well as long-term and forward-looking (it has been conducted since 2015, seems to be continued, it refers to the future), offensive and defensive, tactical (striving to change public opinion), but chaotic and aggressive (strong words, non-diplomatic words), and – what would be treated here as the eighth criterion – saturated with elements of fictional populism, defined as a populism saturated from factual narratives, partially fictionalized, to narrations based on any configuration of untrue and populist elements (Kołodziej, 2017).

The method adopted in the subject may be applied to other political narratives. It would be challenging to analyse it in the case of Polesit narrative after the elections to European Parliament in May 2019 (the leading politicians of the ruling party are candidates). And interesting when examining the Polesit narrative in terms of pro-government recipient and not – the results would probably show a political division in Polish society, said to be huge as never before.

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