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Towards an ever stronger politicization? How members of the European Parliament deal with values in social networks

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ABSTRACT

Since the 2000s, the reference to 'values' has become a key topic in the legitimation and politicization of the European Union (EU). This article studies to which extent and how members of the European Parliament (MEPs) mobilize values in their Facebook communication and whether it contributes to the politicization – understood as polarization – of their discourse.

Our findings show that references to values are minor in MEPs' Facebook discourse. Differences are visible along national and party lines and according to issues at stake. However, no clear patterns emerge to relate specific value narratives to stable coalition- or conflict-lines. Empirically, the article analyses Facebook posts by MEPs of four nationalities (France, Italy, Poland and Hungary) in pre- and post-electoral times (March 2019 – March 2020). Theoretically, it contributes to the literature on the politicization and legitimation of the EU ; and on MEPs' communication and use of social networks.

Introduction

The European Parliament (EP) is the most political arena of the European Union (EU). Values are culturally loaded controversial representations likely to challenge the consensus-making patterns of European governance. Social networks are spaces of direct expression enabling political elites to mobilize a more divisive discourse. Arguably, MEPs referring to values on Facebook may offer a structure of opportunity for the politicization of European affairs. The purpose of this article is to study to which extent this is really the case

We define values as interpretive frameworks that individuals rely on when relating to others and combining political interests and preferences and as collective representations structuring political conflicts and identities. In politics, values are used as symbolic resources to (de)legitimize and (de)politicize issues, to mobilize public support, to conquer or conserve power. The reference to values has increasingly driven the quest for legitimacy of the EU, as illustrated by the advocacy for distinctive « European values » enshrined in the treaties (Foret and Calligaro 2018).

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The academic debate about the meanings, forms and effects of politicization is a broad church. We adopt a relatively restrictive understanding of the notion by focusing on the dimension of polarization of discourses and actors more than on the dimensions of salience of topics or of enlargement of audiences. We study how the reliance on values as discursive resources may lead to a radicalization of different narratives likely to foster divergences or convergences between actors. Parliaments are usually considered as privileged venues for politicization as a direct emanation of the universal suffrage that are legitimate enough to dramatize conflicts; as representative of the diversity of values, identities and interests in a given political community; and as arenas for political entrepreneurs searching as much a tribune than influence on the policy process. The EP is no exception, notwithstanding its status as a secondary player in EU inter-institutional power games and proceeding from second-order elections. As such, MEPs are frequently the triggers of conflict at supranational level but are not in position to set the agenda and to shape the mainstream narratives.

Social media are described as structures allowing a direct expression without restrictions regarding contents or connotations of discourses and as channels filtering communication between like-minded interlocutors. Subsequently, social media is likely to give room in European politics to value-loaded discourses that would otherwise struggle to overcome obstacles set by national, cultural and linguistic differences as well as limited media attention. Individual online activities of MEPs are not submitted to constraints inherent to consensus- and coalition-building that frame EU policy-making. We chose to analyse messages on Facebook over a 12 -month period (March 2019-month 2020) starting before the 2019 European elections and finishing after several months of policy-making and various crises (from rule of law to coronavirus). Our sample includes MEPs of four countries (France, Italy, Hungary, Poland) characterized by a certain level of online activity and by national agendas with strongly normative stakes and – for the two latter – tensions with European institutions.

The article is organized as follows: A first part describes the politicization of EU legitimization, mainly understood here as a polarization through the increasing salience of values in political discourses. It frames the EP as a protagonist of this evolution that is especially visible in social media and shows how the online communication of MEPs relies on ethical arguments that reproduce competing broader narratives of EU legitimization. Finally, it explains the sources and treatment of data of the study. A second part analyses the references to values in MEPs' communication in terms of frequency and narratives, considering various factors (level of general online activity; national and political belongings; topics at stake on national/European agendas). A third part zooms on these narratives to highlight that they revolve around two main frames: European values and religious values. It maps how these two frames combine, compete and overlap; and to which extent the uses of these frames draw stable lines of conflict or coalition between narratives and MEPs.

The politicization of EU legitimization: shaped by values, driven by the EP, channelled by social networks?

Our case study is analysed as a potential most extreme case of the politicization of EU legitimization, considering the usual role of the EP to challenge consensus, the controversial dimension of values and the polarization created by social networks.

The politicization of EU legitimization understood as polarization through values

We cut through the rich debate on the politicization of the EU to focus on the polarization dimension, and we discuss polarization in terms of value-based oppositions of actors and narratives.

Politicization as polarization

The shift from 'permissive consensus' to 'constraining dissensus' about European integration (Hooghe and Marks 2009) has led to the politicization of EU governance at various speeds and in different forms according to the issue, the country and the context (de Wilde, Leupold, and Schmidtke 2016). To sum up a vast literature, politicization is commonly defined in three points (Kauppi and Wiesner 2018, 227–233): '(. . .) the salience of issues, the polarization of opinions and the expansion of actors and audiences involved in debating or shaping European integration. By salience, the authors understand the importance attributed to the EU and European integration, indicated by the number of newspaper articles dealing with European governance, the awareness of citizens of the EU, and the amount of public statements. Polarization refers to extreme positions, either in favour or against different aspects of European governance. Actor and audience expansion refer to the growing number of citizens and collective actors who invest time and money to follow and engage with EU governance. The setting of these processes includes parliaments, public spheres and public opinion'.

In this article, we focus mostly on the dimension of *polarization* of actors and narratives through the expression of value-loaded positions towards European integration as a whole or a specific stake. Our data does not allow us to assess *salience*, except by the share of value-related posts (any link, text post, video, or image shared on Facebook by MEPs public accounts), leading to the determination of value-loaded issues that enhance the EU agenda, and even less the *expansion of actors and audiences* regarding the little information available on the reception of MEPs 'online activities. MEPs communicating on social networks is a first step towards the enlargement of the debate but it does not necessarily create a public.

Politicization as the enhancement of values

In the 2019 European elections, the emphasis of values is acknowledged as both a cause and an effect of politicization especially through the tensions between the European Commission and some member states over, on the one hand, democratic backsliding and attacks against rule of law and, on the other hand, controversies about immigration and nationalism (van der Brug, Gattermann, and de Vreese 2022). This is an outcome of a long-standing evolution turning national identity into a major bone of contention in and between European countries (Zeitlin, Nicoli, and Laffan 2019; Kuhn 2019) and leading to the emergence of a transnational cleavage (Hooghe and Marks 2018) shaped as a cultural conflict between libertarian, universalistic values against the defence of nationalism and particularism (Hutter and Kriesi 2019; Kriesi et al. 2012). Political conflict is increasingly framed as a conflict between cosmopolitan vs communitarian values intertwined with the clashes of interests (Teney, Lacewell, and de Wilde 2014). This 'second dimension politics' that adds to the first, economic dimension and that is related to the organization of society and to cultural and moral issues, such as

immigration, law and order or gender equality, is discussed in its novelty, range and specificity (Green-Pedersen and Otjes 2019). The EU in itself is both an object and an arena of this 'second dimension politics'. The risk of polarization is reinforced as Europeans are strongly divided on this 'second dimension' and party systems struggle to subsume the increasing diversity of preferences along the traditional left versus right axis (Hobolt and Rodon 2020).

The evolutions of values as social representations, factors shaping political attitudes and choices, components of party manifestos and discursive resources for political actors are different things. This is why the way values are operationalized in European politics depends on the general context of EU legitimation as well as the communicative practices of MEPs.

Values as the new mantra of EU legitimization

The reference to values is anything but new in the justification of European integration but has recently become a major frame and bone of contention in European politics.

Building a European community of values

The literature has increasingly questioned the capacity of the EU to build a European community of values and belonging by reshaping the socializing patterns of citizens (van Houwelingen, Iedema, and Dekker 2019). Successive waves of works analysing the effects of interactions between European institutions and citizens suggest that the outcomes are still limited (Deutsch 1957; Fligstein 2008; Kuhn 2015). The limits of the great narratives sponsored by EU institutions have been largely documented (Checkel and Katzenstein 2009; Risse 2011). A consensus prevails that no congruence between culture and politics is possible at the European level (McNamara 2015) but that identity politics is now impossible to ignore (Börzel and Risse 2018). The most recent scholarship defines EU political identity as the articulation of fundamental values that take precedence over others, are shared across the EU and differs from the values of other polities; but it also states that these values are most designed through the different EU policies; are different from one policy to another; and do not imply a convergence of positions on European integration itself (Saurugger and Thatcher 2019, 468).

Recently, European values have become the new leitmotiv of EU legitimation. In her 2021 State of the Union Address on the 15th of September 2021, the president of the Commission Ursula Von der Leyen referred to 'European values' as a red thread of the EU's history, action and justification, the inspiration of European law and the compass in every crisis and for every policy. This use is emblematic of the new prevalence of 'European values' over other communicative narratives in terms of common cultural heritage, European citizenship or European identity (Calligaro 2021). A crucial step was the enshrinement of European values in the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights in 2000 and the integration of this Charter in the Treaty of Lisbon in 2009 (Foret and Vargovčíková 2021).

The EP as the arena for value-loaded politics

Parliaments may not benefit from the politicization of the EU as conflicts over the successive crises of governance boost executive powers and intergovernmentalism (Brack 2021). Still, they are the best arenas to study both the discursive justification of

European integration and its party political contestation (Wendler 2014; Lord 2013). They have the advantage to allow the analysis of the direct expression of actors (both institutional, collective through their subcomponents like political groups and individual through MPs) without the mediation of third parties (journalists).

Relying on Sjursen and others, Wendler establishes a typology of arguments about ethical and moral arguments as resources for political actors, with the first 'based on the constitutive values of a social community, and principled decisions between conflicting fundamental values -, therefore not claiming to be – universally acceptable to all participants of a discourse'. On the contrary, 'moral arguments aim at the justification of political action by giving reasons that can be accepted as fair and just across different social groups with potentially conflicting interests and value orientations'." (Wendler 2014, 551). In the same way, we analyse the uses of values by MEPs as ethical arguments that are 'especially likely to stir controversies as they are made on behalf of the identities and convictions of particular social groups in relation and contrast to others, be it in favour of and against the project of European integration and/or its modalities' (Ibid., 552–553).

The EP is a key actor and space for the politicization of EU governance, both regarding what happens within the institution (Guinaudeau and Costa 2021; Laffan 2019) and during European elections (Braun and Grande 2021; Vasilopoulou and Gattermann 2021). As such, it is frequently the arena where value politics emerge on the EU agenda (Hix and Hoyland 2011), but also where it is contained. A key element is that MEPs are not the dominant players of the EU political game. They are forced into compromises to preserve the delicate functioning of the assembly, leaving the stronger normative discourses to national rulers. Drawing their legitimacy from a second-order election and enjoying a weak public profile, they are no opinion leaders able to shape the debate around core values. Some MEPs may be tempted to compensate these handicaps by a strategy of scandalization consisting in an advocacy for controversial values or an attack against mainstream ones. This choice implies a renunciation to influence the legislative process (Foret and Calligaro 2018). Overall, what we know from European political communication in terms of values leads to the hypothesis that MEPs acting as mainstream policy-makers will have a limited use of and agency on it, while those positioned in the extremes may be more entrepreneurial.

The EP and MEPs as communicative actors

The EP has risen as a major player in European communication and increasingly relied on social networks to reach out for the citizens. These two evolutions could in theory reinforce the mobilization of values in political discourse.

The EP from a reluctant communicator to a protagonist of EU legitimization

The communication of the EP as an institution and of MEPs as political actors meets a series of constraints and handicaps. The first historical challenge was a reluctance to communicate as the assembly claims to speak *for* the Europeans and therefore to have no need to speak *to* them. The EP was labelled as « the great non-communicator » (Anderson and McLeod 2004, 897–917). Progressively, it has become more proactive due to the low turnout in European elections and the emulation with other EU institutions. Still,

individual MEPs have gained little in terms of media coverage and personalization (Gattermann 2020). The increased salience of EU politics in times of crisis has neither translated into a greater public support for the EP nor altered its status as second-order assembly (Eisele 2020).

Shifting from classic to new media, the EP like all EU institutions from the mid-1990s onward has used Internet both as a self-serving resource to put forward its transparency and responsiveness; and as a tool to activate civil society and citizens (Badouard and Malherbe 2015). In the last 2019 European elections, the EP claimed to have mobilized 150'000 volunteers through its campaign platform – thistimeimvoting.eu – in 24 languages to motivate people to go voting.[1]

With reference to social media, MEPs have been rather slow to adopt social networks compared to national MPs, mostly to campaign in electoral periods (Larsson 2015) but also to liaise with interest groups (Bunea, Ibenskas, and Weiler 2021), and with a predilection for Twitter (Daniel, Obholzer, and Hurka 2019). Both political actors and the general public seem little motivated to engage with each other about EU issues (Fazekas et al. 2021). The transnational dimension of interactions in social networks remain limited as most linkages remain national (Stier, Froio, and Schünemann 2021). Some predictors of MEPs' use of social media (i.e. Facebook and Twitter) are related to their belonging to parliamentary committees dealing with internal rather than external affairs or with social issues and fields where the EU has strong regulatory competencies. The country of origin matters, Facebook being favored by Eastern European MEPs and Twitter by Western and Southern European ones (Lappas, Triantafillidou, and Yannas 2019). Ideological and value cleavages are also influential. Anti-EU party candidates are more active on Twitter to promote their anti-EU rhetoric, by mobilizing a previously non-salient issue dimension in order to attract new voters (Nulty et al. 2016). It is especially true in countries with large electoral market for anti-EU parties such as the UK and France (Hobolt and De Vries 2015) or with populist and Euroskeptic movements whose strong social media usage is aimed to delegitimize European political and media elites (Alonso-Muñoz and Casero-Ripollés 2018).

Values in online political communication

Online politicization is frequently associated with value-loaded topics likely to increase social polarization beyond institutional politics. Twitter has been identified as an environment reinforcing strongly polarized communities and high degree of clustering by the ideological lead of users (Conover et al. 2011; Guarino et al. 2019). Cross-cutting exposure to information on social media is higher than in offline communication networks or traditional media consumption and yet has the effect of facilitating an increase in affective polarization (Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes 2012; Lelkes 2016), thus reinforcing the perceived social distance between party groups. The analysis of moralized content on Twitter corroborates the theory of political communities online as echo chambers that may exacerbate ideological polarization (Brady et al. 2017). Despite research on EU virtual politics and especially on Facebook being still scarce, we know that during the 2019 European elections campaign Facebook enhanced the pro-EU/ anti-EU conflict and promoted public figures developing strong value-loaded discourses such as Salvini and Verhofstadt over the official Spitzenkandidaten campaign (Galpin and Trenz 2019, 670). Social networks are thus confirmed as vectors of polarization of EU politics that do not benefit the EP and to MEPs.

Methodology: sources and treatment of data

Few studies investigate the use of social media by MEPs between elections and throughout the legislative cycle (Daniel, Obholzer, and Hurka 2019). We innovate by taking into account a 12 -month period (March 2019–March 2020), starting before the 2019 European elections and finishing after several months of policy-making and various crises (from rule of law to the beginning of coronavirus). Such a wider time frame allows to capture some major national political events functioning as secondary 'windows of opportunity' for the politicisation of European affairs (Kriesi et al. 2012).

We analyse the MEPs of four member states: France, Italy, Hungary and Poland. The choice of these countries is justified by, first, the frequent and value-loaded communication of their MEPs; and, second, by their complementary features. France and Italy are two founding member states, with contrasted models of relations between politics and religion (laïcité vs concordat), a relevant dimension regarding the salience of the religious issue. Poland and Hungary are more recent member states, both in tensions with European institutions over strongly normative stakes, including some with a significant religious dimension. All countries also share a dual way to relate to Europe likely to shape MEPs' normative communication. France questions the potentiality to restore its political influence in post-Brexit EU but wonders about the diminishing congruence of European policies and practices with national preferences (Rozenberg 2020). Poland claims to be at the vanguard of European integration – and sometimes of European civilization – on some issues but is in tension with the EU on others (Copsey and Pomorska 2020). Hungary is the showcase of the conflicts between competing versions of popular/national sovereignties, populist trends and tensions over rule of law that are raging across the continent (Furedi 2018). Italy is emblematic of rapid shift in public opinion from strong support to disenchantment towards EU institutions perceived in recent years as more critical than helpful to face economic and migratory challenges (Matthijs and Merler 2020).

Our dataset of Facebook data is collected through Crowdtangle, a content discovery and analytics platform that tracks posts shared by public pages or verified public persons and measures their social performance (further info in the Appendix).

From the list of MEPs elected in the 2019 EP elections in our country cases, we found 206 having a presence on Facebook and 200 a public Facebook account of 228 in total:

Table 1. Total number of Facebook MEPs accounts and posts. Period of observation: 16/03/2019 31/03/2020. Source: Crowdtangle.

	IT	FR	PL	HU	Total country cases
Country, nr MEPs	76	79	52	21	228
FB Accounts[5]	75	66	52	13	206
(% of the number of MEPs)	(98.6%)	(83.5%)	(100%)	(61.9%)	(90.5%)
FB Public Pages[6]	75	57	52	13	197
Total Number of Posts	35,349	18,283	24,577	6839	85,048
Total Number of Posts, filtered with value keywords** (%)	1226 (3.4%)	607 (3.3%)	435 (1.8%)	2325 (33.9%)	4593 (5.4%)

Table 1 provides a description of social media activity by MEPS in the observed period, using the raw counts of posts from the un-preprocessed data set. This gives us first indications about specific Facebook pervasivity and usage by different MEPs, but also a first *caveat* about data overall representativeness, ranging from 100% of Polish representatives to 61.9% of Hungarians. A keyword-based content analysis was performed in order to identify themes, word categories and possibly relationships between categories observed in the empirical material (Lynggaard 2019) The outcome is a number of 90,964 collected post, 4558 of which referring to values.

More information on the database and the methods can be found in the online Appendix.

Who refer to which values on Facebook, and about what?

In this part, we analyse frequency of the references to values in the Facebook communication of MEPs; the relation with their general level of online activity, and with their national and political belongings; as well as with the topics at stake on national and/or European agendas. Then we examine how these references to values are inscribed in different types of narratives.

Uses of values and impact of online activism, national and party membership

Table 1 shows, first and strikingly, the very limited place of values in parliamentary online discourses. It counts 5,01% of the total number of Facebook posts in our sample. A second finding is that the recourse to value politics appears to be generally congruent with *online activism*, with the exception of Italian MEPs, who are prolific on Facebook but relatively little in terms of values. In general, most of those mobilizing a normative rhetoric are protagonists of online communication. In other words, Facebook does not lead many MEPs to do values much. But it proves hospitable for those who do.

Nationality is not very discriminatory regarding the references to values with one exception. Value-related mentions range from 1.8% of the total number of posts by Polish representatives to 3.32% by French ones, but 33.48% for Hungarians. This is explained by the controversy about the strong normative rhetoric of V. Orbán and the policy conflict over value-loaded issues such as rule of law between Hungary and European institutions. Values can thus dramatize oppositions in some identity politics cases contrasting with European 'business as usual' communication. Still, our finding qualifies the assumption that Facebook is a structure of opportunity for ethical arguments.

Regarding *political belonging*, Table 2 shows that the occurrences of values in Facebook posts are correlated with the overall online activism of the political groups. It emphasizes that value-users come frequently from the right and the far right (ID, ECR), but very little from the greens, the left and the far left (Greens/EFA, Guel/NGL). Values (in an exclusive identity version) are often mobilized by the non-attached, confirming that they are instrumental for actors in the fringes of the political field that do not fit in mainstream families and search more to voice an ideological statement than to have policy impact. By contrast, centrist forces (EPP; S&D; RENEW) prioritize values that are enshrined in the treaties and that are also legal principles framing policies. Still, EPP's MEPs are less keen on

Table 2. Active accounts and associated value-oriented posts in the four corpora (keyword-based search). Period of observation: 16/03/2019 31/03/2021. Source: Crowdtangle.

EP Political Group	Number of accounts in the dataset	Total number of posts	Number of MEPs accounts active on values	Number of value-related posts
EPP Group of the European People's Party (Christian Democrats)	37	14,234	35	824
S&D Group of the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats in the European Parliament	33	15,839	32	1328
RENEW Renew Europe Group	16	3087	16	650
ECR European Conservatives and Reformists Group	33	12,894	29	300
ID Identity and Democracy Group	47	26,042	46	627
Greens/EFA Group of the Greens/European Free Alliance	11	1796	11	128
Guel/NGL Confederal Group of the European United Left – Nordic Green Left	6	3522	6	82
N.A. Non-Attached Members.	14	7634	13	654

values than other mainstream parties, thus qualifying the influence of a Christian democratic heritage shaping a normative Europe. However, the limits of the data and the interdependence with other variables such as online activism and national belonging invites to consider these distinctions merely as trends.

The influence of issues on national/European agendas

Once acknowledged that values are a low-key resource in online communication of MEPs and still – to various extents – a pattern of differentiation according to national and political belongings, it remains to be seen to which issue and agendas it is associated. Without surprise, the national agenda is prevailing as shown by the longitudinal analysis of MEPs posts in a one-year time-frame (see figure A2 in Annex). Our country's cases offer two distinct configurations for Hungary and Poland on one side, Italy and France on the other. Hungarian and Polish MEPs have volume peak and interactions[2] peaks of value-loaded posts regarding the EU on Facebook every time European institutions, courts (or sometimes NGOs) discuss or rule on national politics, as in January 2020, with the EP resolution expressing concerns on the democratic situation in both countries. For Italy and France, the scenario is inverse. Italian MEPs react to national debates regarding changes in government and annual budget law to produce normative views on the EU. French MEPs comment the European outreach of the Eurosceptic Gilets Jaunes

demonstrations. To some extent, there is a top-down logic in newer member states (references to values being imported from EU debates) and a bottom-up logic in older ones (values being projected towards the supranational level.

Values as components of broader narratives

Values interact with each other and combine or compete to frame different narratives. In our analysis, first, we took a look at the co-occurrence of keywords to identify two overarching narratives, related, respectively, to (i) European values and (ii) religious values. Second, we observed how the salience of these narratives in the posts by MEPs highlights clear differences between political families and between nationalities.

The first narrative revolving around European values includes references to 'European values', 'EU values', 'our values', 'common values' or 'values of Europe'. It relates to 'the fundamental values and substantive goals of European integration, as well as the internal and external representation of the EU through denominations and symbols (Wendler 2014, 551).

The second narrative in terms of religious values is linked to mentions of religion as a normative political object; of different denominations; and range from culturalist exclusive stances to inclusive messages (Figure 1).

Each narrative is more or less salient across political groups. Occurrence of the religious values narrative are found mainly in the discourse of right-wing and extreme right MEPs (Identity and Democracy Group and European Conservatives and Reformists Group; to a lesser extent of Christian Democrats (EPP).[3]

Looking closely at specific topics, in all the countries considered, references to 'Christian values' are mobilized by extreme-right MEPs, with the left and extreme left almost non-existent on this topic. Conversely, at the other extreme of the political
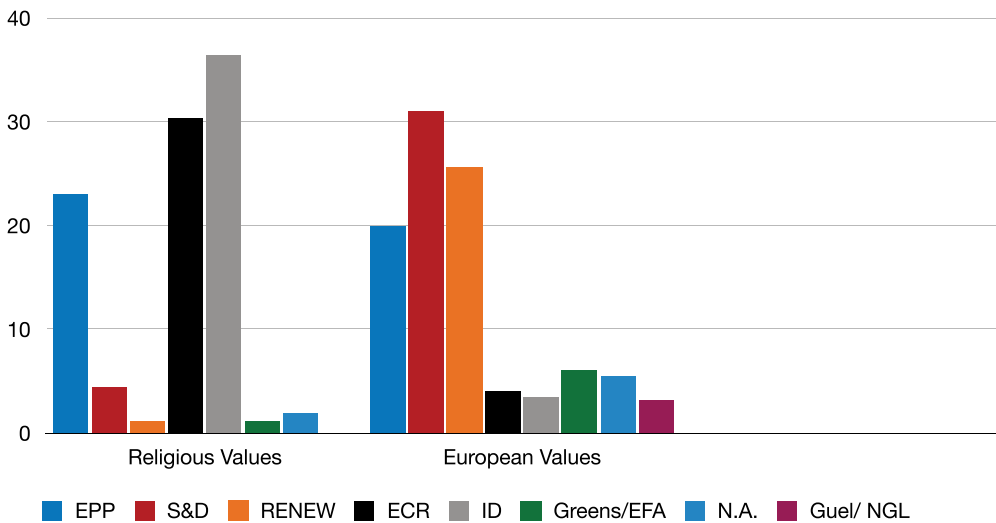

Figure 1. Europe and values: different narratives (percentage in the four corpora, political group). Period of observation: 16/03/2019 31/03/2020. Source: Crowdtangle.
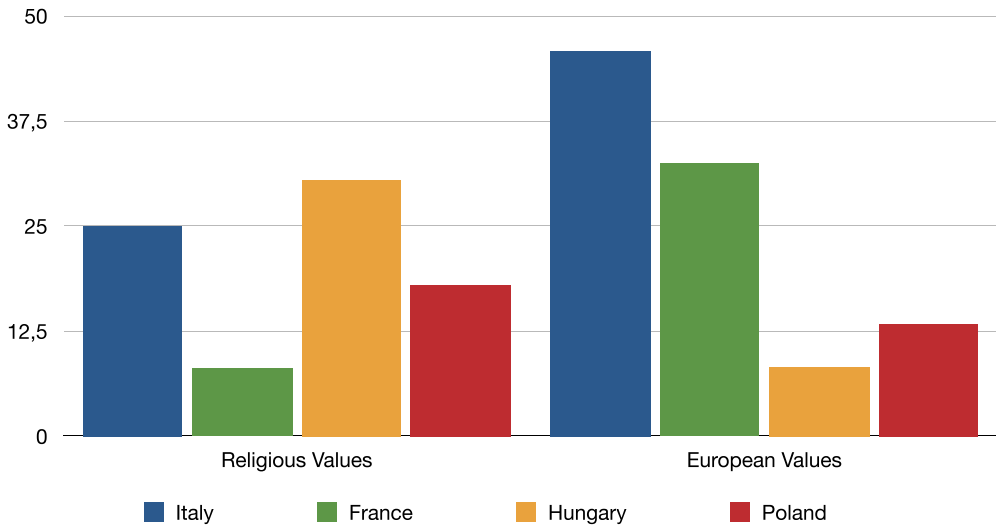
Figure 2. Europe and values: different frames (percentage in the four corpora, per country). Period of observation: 16/03/2019 31/03/2021. Source: Crowdtangle.

spectrum, the narrative in terms of European values is mostly referred to by the center left and right (EPP, S&D and Renew) and a bit by the Greens but largely ignored by the right and extreme right.

Overall, the global picture confirms that values may be a scarce element in posts by MEPs but still work as a factor of differentiation between political groups. To a lesser extent, this function of distinction is also observed regarding national belongings (Figure 2).

Religious values are put forward by Hungarian, Polish and Italian MEPs much more than by French ones. European values are more disputed, Italian and French representatives being the leading users compared to other nationalities that frequently refer to it to contest it or offer alternative interpretations. Are these differences in the uses of values along party and national belongings synonym of actual polarization of discourses and actors? To determine this, it is necessary to rely on more in-depth qualitative analysis to understand how narratives combine, collide and overlap.

Values as bones of contention: a polarization of narratives and actors?

In this part, we analyse to which extent narratives on religious values and European values oppose, compete and hybridize in the Facebook communication of MEPs; and whether they draw clear symbolic boundaries between discourses and actors.

Two umbrella narratives relating diverging stories

The **European values** **narrative** tends to be the monopoly of pro-European center-right and left forces. Still, within these party families, national framings confer distinctive meanings to the notion. French LREM representatives advocate that a strong political agency is required to turn the 'Europe of values' into a reality. This reflects the French

tradition granting to the state the responsibility to shape the future, public interest and society. European institutions are being missioned to pursue this task at the continuation of the 'France en grand' Alternatively, the 'Europe of values' is celebrated by center-left Italian MEPs mostly through references to history, to constant appeal to the legacy of – frequently Italian – founding fathers and to their values. This frames the EU as a 'substitute state' coping with the weaknesses of the Italian state and nostalgic of the golden age of the origins of European integration.

In new member states ruled by governments with authoritarian trends, the invocation of European values comes from opponents relying on this legitimizing resource to defend democracy, civil rights and pluralism. Hungarian MEPs belonging to Democratic Coalition request the support of EU institutions to counter Orbán. They search for a balance between advocacy for European values and for national interests: 'Just as we are the voice of European values at home, so here in the European Parliament we are the voice of Hungarians in Europe.'. Polish MEPs opposing their national government on minority and women rights, display both their hopes in the EU and their regret to see their country 'unfortunately, still on the periphery of European values'. European values are thus confirmed as a malleable narrative adaptable to many political ends and customized according to long-standing historical, political and cultural specificities. Still, they remain on the side of cultural liberalism and are little claimed by more traditionalist and nationalist forces that put forward religious values.

Religion increasingly becomes a proxy for identity and memory at the price of its hollowing from any normative authority and its reduction to a symbolic function (Roy 2020). Hungarian MEPs are the protagonists of a debate for or against the claim of Viktor Orbán to renew European Christian democracy. Supporters of Orbán advocate his 'Christian freedom politics' defending the rights of mainstream Christian culture and values over minorities and migrants (Bozóki and Ádám 2016, 143). Fidesz MEPs claim to have been '(. . .) entrusted by Hungarian citizens to stop immigration throughout Europe, to protect the Europe of the nations, and to protect Christian culture in Europe'. Opponents back EU institutions in their criticism of privileges granted to historically grounded Christian Churches considered as violations of the formal separation between church and state and discrimination between religious communities. They balance religious references and financial stakes ('Does Christian freedom in Orbán's view mean losing half of the EU subsidies to Hungarians?!'); attack collusion with the Turkey of Erdogan and question the security purposes ('While talking about Christian Democracy, the defence of Christian Europe and counter-terrorism, they [Orbán and his allies] are allied with those who bomb those fighting the Islamic State and are attached to radical organizations on a thousand strands. How is this? # ErdoganOrbán'.[4] Both supporters and opponents use the European arena as an extension of domestic fights.

Polish MEPs express a different defence of religious values against an aggressive European secularism. To a large extent, they duplicate the usual 'exchange of gifts' theory conservative elites have used to frame relations between Europe and Poland since the end of communism: Europe is expected to bring modernity, prosperity and democracy; in return, Poland offers a spiritual added-value to save a soulless EU as the 'Christ of nations' persecuted by invaders and totalitarianisms but redeemed as the bastion of Christendom (Ramet 2006). Christian values are instrumental to bash a 'Gayrope' too favourable to gender theory and homosexuality and threatening 'Mother Pole' (Graff 2014) or to

counter-balance compliance to EU norms by the moral mission of Poland (Guerra, 2020). Law and Justice MEPs claim back 'truly European values: Christianity, freedom, patriotism, solidarity and diversity' and state that 'empowering nations will prosper and result in a truly successful European project.'

Other nationalities refer less to Christian values and, when they do so, opt for a secular version. Italian MEPs of the League are emblematic of this reinterpretation of the heritage of Christian democracy in an authoritarian and nativist way (Albertazzi, Giovannini, and Seddone 2018). They stand for a Europe 'proud of its cultural and religious roots' and ready for 'the battles in defense of the Family and Christian values' with emergency calls: 'CHRISTIANS are under ATTACK, Europe cannot remain indifferent'. Even more to the right, MEPs belonging to Fratelli d'Italia (Brothers of Italy, FdI) call for 'National unity, defense of the family and Christian roots, stop to uncontrolled immigration, a new Europe of sovereign states'. Even in secular France, this culturalist stance is not absent, MEPs of the Rassemblement National (RN) use both laïcité and Christianity to reject cultural pluralism and to identify Islamism as the enemy.

All these instrumentalizations of religious values remain framed by national specificities. The main threat is '*Christianophobia*' or '*Islamo-gauchism*' in France, the '*miscegenation*' in Italy, the '*Muslim invasion*' and the '*totalitarian Islam*' in Hungary, the '*post-Christianity*' in Poland. Besides, these religiously loaded identity statements are mostly targeting national opponents and audiences. Addresses to European institutions are scarce and, when they occur, systematically critical. Polish and Hungarians MEPs referring to the 'European ruling class' accuse them to promote immorality and to put at risk security and traditional values. This ruling class includes leaders of the EU and of other member states. A Polish Law and Justice MEPs proudly celebrates Poland as 'one of the few European countries where classical and true anthropology is strong and where LGBT ideology is relatively weak' against decadent 'European values and standards'. In short, the 'religious values' narrative does not draw a unique frontline but rather an archipelago of discourses and actors fighting with each other.

Multiple guerrillas rather than a polarized conflict

A look at the broader picture of the uses of values in the Facebook communication of MEPs suggests rather an atomization than a clear-cut polarization of political forces and discourses. There is a dichotomy between center-right and -left actors relying on European values and right and extreme-right MEPs putting forward religious values. The boundaries are, however, not hermetic: EPP parliamentarians also 'do' religious values, and even secular liberal and leftist actors mobilize it occasionally as a backlash against the culturalist stance of their opponents by accusing them of betraying their Christian ideals. If a kind of polarization occur, it is only at symbolic level by taking postures of principles and building profiles in courage against 'global elites'. Normative statements online do not aim to influence the EU policy process but target national media, civil society and electors. The reference to religious values sounds like a non-committal claim to cultural and memory heritage serving many ends rather than a bow to a religious doctrine prescribing compliance to moral norms and Church directives. Similarly, the reference to European values are general and vague enough not to be reduced to the legal principles enshrined in the treaties that have binding policy force.

The different discursive repertoires are more competing than clashing, both camps trying to recuperate the resources of the other one. Christian values are framed as the source of European law and civilization. Those starting from an advocacy in terms of official European values pose as the right heirs of European history, as those invoking Christianity, identity and tradition as first inspiration want to reassert the true meaning of European norms.

Finally, national and ideological differences criss-cross and overlap to draw heterogenous sets of actors and discourses. Religious values and European values may act as pan-European rallying flags but are still deciphered in national and party terms submitted to divergent interpretations. As such, values at European level play their usual function to show ideological credentials in political competition, to send signals to civil society active in the EU and domestic policy-making, and to offer reassurance and identity gratifications to citizens. Their policy and political effects are much more uncertain.

Conclusion

The purpose of our article was to investigate the place and effects of values in the Facebook communication of MEPs as a trigger of politicization, the latter process being understood as a polarization of narratives and actors. Our main findings are threefold: values are a meagre component of MEPs' discourses; they keep a function of distinction along party and national lines; they are symbolic axes around which revolve actors and overlapping narratives rather than boundaries-makers.

First, values are a tiny part of the Facebook posts by MEPs, with the exception of Hungarian representatives embedded in the feud between their country and EU institutions over rule of law. This shows that politicization understood as a conflictualization on normative issues remains limited to some specific cases. MEPs on their own are in no position to act as firebugs able to ignite the controversies and stick most of the time to a value-free repertoire that is the European business as usual, even in their online communication that comes without the constraints associated to moderation by media and coalition-making.

Second, the use of values still works as a distinctive feature in terms of party and national belongings. It characterizes right-wing and extreme-right MEPs much more than left-wing and extreme-left ones. This distinction is even enhanced by the type of values that is mobilized. Roughly speaking, the 'religious values' narrative dominates in the right part of the political spectrum while the 'European values' narrative prevails in the left and in the center part. Differences are also visible between nationalities. The political agenda and culture of each country commands why and which values are addressed.

Third, these party and national differences do not draw stable and hermetic boundaries between actors and narratives to constitute homogenous coalitions. A significant diversity prevails within each nationality and political group regarding the reliance on and the meanings granted to values.

Overall, our findings contribute to the broader debate on the 'polarization' part of EU politicization. They confirm that this politicizing process remains fragmented and contingent according to the issue at stake, the political context, the nationality and the party belonging. They also suggest that values are part of a dynamics of conflictualization but as instrumental and symbolic resources rather than as direct stakes.

Our work paves the way for future research at least in three venues. First, regarding the influence of context, our observation in a one-year timeframe on four nationalities could be enlarged to a longer period and a greater number of countries to precise the variations in the uses of values. Second, in terms of the agency of locutors, the limits of MEPs as agenda-setters could be compared to those met by other supranational politicians (Commissioners), on the one hand, and national MPs, on the other hand, to see to which extent the status of secondary players restricts the ability to shape values. Third, as far as the influence of the support of communication is concerned, the place of values in MEPs' Facebook communication should be discussed according to their expression in other social media, in classic media and 'in real life' to test further the influence of (or the absence of) mediation on the polarization of normative discourses.

Notes

1. http://www.europarl.europa.eu/factsheets/en/sheet/144/la-politique-de-communication
2. Volume peak indicates an increase in posts' production. Interaction peaks calculate each post's audience reaction in terms of reactions, comments and shares. For further details see Appendix.
3. At the time of the fieldwork, the Hungarian party Civic Alliance Fidesz was still formally a member of the EPP Group, yet suspended in 2019. It finally withdrew from the political group and the party in March 2021. Retrospectively, it confirms the ownership of values and religious values by extreme right and non-attached MEPs.
4. Ujhelyi István, 19 October 2019, Facebook post, our translation.
5. For details on Crowdtangle coverage for pages, we refer the reader to https://help.crowdtangle.com/en/articles/1140930-what-is-crowdtangle-tracking.
6. Facebook accounts include private pages whose data are not tracked by Crowdtangle. Facebook Public Pages, tracked by Crowdtangle, indicate places for businesses, brands, organizations and public figures to share their stories and connect with people.

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