United we stand: narratives of Latvian leading politicians on unity and values of the European Union during Covid crisis (2020-2021)

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Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic, which began in Latvia in March 2020 when the government declared the first state of emergency, provided political actors with numerous opportunities to work in order to overcome the crisis and strengthen their positions not only in a complex coalition and but also ahead of the forthcoming Saeima elections in 2022. The popularity ratings of the parties show that not all coalition forces managed to maintain their positions, moreover, the level of trust in the Latvian decision-making and executive authorities has significantly decreased recently. In a situation where society is angry and increasingly negative about the actions of the ruling politicians, it is important for political actors to provide supportive rhetoric. At the beginning of the 2020s, a number of issues highlighted the tendency of Latvian politicians to "lean against" the European Union, seeking not only opportunities to correct their mistakes, but also emphasizing themselves as part of a cohesive and goal-oriented community. It is important that if only about one in three trusts in the Saeima and the government in Latvia, the level of trust in "remote Brussels" is significantly higher (Eurobarometer 2021).

As the wave of general discontent also had spread beyond the "country's borders", giving new fuel to Eurosceptic narratives about the European Union's inability to combat the pandemic, for the government and the leading coalition in parliament in Latvia, this meant the need not only to deal with the health and economic crisis caused by the pandemic, but also to maintain confidence in the European Union while hoping for favorable decisions for Latvia, for example, regarding the supply of vaccines.

1. Political communication during Covid-19 pandemic

Political communication is seen in this article as "making sense of symbolic exchanges about the shared exercise of power" and "the presentation and interpretation of information, messages or signals with potential consequences for the exercise of shared power" (Jamieson, Kenski 2014: 3). This article examines the practice of political communication on the social networking site Facebook, which is the most popular social media in Latvia. It is used by more than 1.2 million inhabitants (NapoleonCat 2021). Social networking sites and other social media platforms have become not only

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a permanent tool for political communication, but also a quick and reliable way to inform the public about crises and disasters or to help prevent their consequences. For example, in the US, various social media and smartphone apps are actively used to provide the most up-to-date information in real time during various emergency situations (Harvey 2014: 396). This means that governments which try to build their political communication, should choose their messages carefully in the process of exercising certain decisions and powers, especially when it comes to the crisis.

Although the majority seeks to find correlations, most data suggest that there is no strong evidence for a link between the style and ideology of national governments and the policies chosen to limit the effects of a pandemic (Lilleker, Coman, Gregor, Novelli 2021: 337). Initially, European countries may not have fully assessed the danger of the virus, but the next steps should have been precise and coordinated. Here, Latvia's approach stands out because, compared to other countries, including neighboring Estonia and Lithuania, in the autumn of 2020 the country chose a very small number of vaccines which led to political scandal and dismissal of the Minister of Health. Recordings of politicians' conversations obtained by journalists showed that the preparation to the following Covid-19 wave was executed poorly, and the chaos in vaccine orders came as a result of unsettled and sloppy political and executive leadership in the healthcare industry (Nekā Personīga 2021). Importantly, the correction of the error related to the initial failure to purchase the vaccines is directly related to the request for assistance from the European Commission.

2. Latvian political context and society

There are several factors worth mentioning that shaped the context of Latvia's political environment and most likely influenced the decisions of Latvia's leading officials. First, very low confidence in the government. Its fall marks a steady change in public attitudes, and this confidence was and remains one of the lowest in the European Union (LSM 2022). Secondly, the number of people willing to be vaccinated decreased during the first half of 2021, as a result of which in May 2021 officials were one of the first in the world to allow everyone over the age of 18 to be vaccinated (LSM 2022a). The non-prioritization of age groups was unique, but its impact (inability to identify risk groups, non-addressing and non-prioritization of seniors) can be seen in the data - in February 2022, only 81% of people over the age of 60 in Latvia were vaccinated (LSM 2022b). Third, the outcome of the 13th Saeima elections in 2018 created a clear climate of political tension, as the ruling coalition was formed only after four months of negotiations, with the government being "stunned" by five ideologically very different players. In the 2018 elections, seven parties were elected to the Latvian Parliament. After four months of negotiations, five of them formed a government: *New Unity*, *Who Owns the State?* (after disintegration in the summer of 2021 was excluded from the government), *the New Conservative Party*, *Development/ For!*, *National Alliance*. Two more - *Harmony* and U*nion of Greens and Farmers* - work in the parliamentary opposition.The fall of the Cabinet of Ministers headed by Krišjānis

Kariņš has been predicted by political experts since its approval, but the general composition of the Saeima and the "red lines" of the parties have created a situation in which there was no real alternative to the current government. Aware of this, there were both sharp political disputes within the coalition and attempts to preserve what was created. During this government, one political force was ousted from the government - the populist party *Who Owns the State?*, which won second place in the elections and became the largest faction among the coalition parties. However, it did not last long and, with its own disintegration, was ousted from the government. Also, several ministers changed in the government during this time due to various scandals. All of this led to the conclusion that Kariņš's government, despite very difficult circumstances, had become the longest-running Cabinet in the history of independent Latvia (LETA/TBT 2022).

The population of Latvia evaluates the country's economic condition more negatively than in the EU on average, and this evaluation tends to worsen during crisis years. At the same time, Latvian residents rate the economic situation in the EU better than the average among EU member states. Significantly more often than the EU average, Latvian residents believe that the main challenges of the EU are social inequality (on average in the EU - 36%, in Latvia - 52%), overcoming global health challenges (on average in the EU - 15%, in Latvia - 23%) and insufficient economic growth (on average in the EU – 19%, in Latvia – 25%) (European Commission 2021: 5). In addition, the population of Latvia is significantly less interested in the issues put forward in the agenda of the EU's future goals, such as climate change (on average in the EU - 49%, in Latvia - 28%), considering health-related risks, forced migration and various types of conflicts as the main global challenges in the EU . The above-mentioned shows that, in the opinion of Latvian residents, the EU should basically work with issues that are essentially within the competence of each national state. Although the majority of the population of Latvia still believes that the country's membership in the EU is a good thing, the proportion of people who think so is lower than the average in the EU, and with a tendency to decrease.

More often than the average in the EU Latvians tend to think that one of the ways to get their opinion heard at the national level is to engage in discussions on the Internet through social media - this is what 16% of citizens think, which is the second most common answer after going to the elections. This confirms that political actors, if they want to reach the target audience, must also engage in communication in this environment.

The formation of messages and their perception are also affected by misinformation and poor media literacy. The lack of media literacy during Covid-19 has led to an increase in the spread of misinformation and false news on social media, proving the public's susceptibility to this type of content. According to the think tank's GLOBSEC report, Latvians are more likely than others in the Baltic States to believe in conspiracy theories related to the Covid-19 virus (GLOBSEC 2021: 9). According to the report, 32% of Latvians believe that the Covid-19 pandemic is a planned operation by the hidden forces or the elite to control the population, while 42% believe that offi-

cials and institutions are overestimating official data on the number of Covid-19 infected. The use of social media has significantly increased - in Latvia, a total of about 1.2 million people use them (Statista 2022). Social media like Facebook, Twitter, Tik-Tok, etc. - are used not only for personal communication, but also for obtaining information, moreover, during the Covid-19 pandemic, social media served as one of the central sources for obtaining information about the virus and related news (Latvijas Fakti 2020: 9).

High mistrust of official information is typical of the entire Central and Eastern European region. In this region political parties are also experiencing a crisis of mistrust, and Latvia is no exception. In the 2018 parliamentary elections, only a third of the deputies were re-elected, but in October 2021 only 17% trusted the government, only 16% - to the Saeima, which is the lowest indicator of this term (SKDS 2021:12). Also, 43% of the population believe that the Latvian government has too much power (the highest rate since 2012), confidence in the information provided by the media is falling (43% is the lowest rate since 2014), but the satisfaction of the Latvian population with the government's decisions to fight the coronavirus pandemic is the lowest in the European Union (21%; EU average is 43%) (Kaktiņš 2021). Mistrust represents potential problems with the effectiveness of the democratic system and the legitimacy of elected entities, as well as an unstable political future, which depends on party qualities such as the type of political actors, the level of electorate and experience they can use to implement prudent policies (Chromiec 2020: 2). Political communicators use rhetoric to reinforce, transform, or initiate citizens' beliefs, value orientations, or attitudes (Feldman & Zmerli 2019: 2).

The level of trust is particularly important in times of crisis. According to a Eurobarometer survey conducted in February 2021, Latvians are the least satisfied with their government's decisions to combat the coronavirus pandemic - only 2% are very satisfied, while 19% are almost satisfied (EU averages are 8% and 35% respectively). Complementing this with the declining turnout in various elections (56.84% in the 2018 Saeima elections, 33.53% in the 2019 European Parliament elections, 34% in the 2021 municipal elections), we can talk about a society that, for various reasons, does not want to get involved and influence the political process in the country.

During crises, the role of the media in providing political information increases significantly, but society is no longer coherent and communication opportunities have increased with the popularity of social media platforms (Blumler 2016). The pandemic also highlighted a number of challenges in the political communication process. The fragmentation of the media audience hinders and hinders the effective transfer of information. Politicians can also influence the information environment in the fight for voter votes with the help of social media.

3. Political messages and power

The difficult context and decision-making struggles is also a question of the ability of ministers and leading politicians to work together towards a common goal.

Therefore, referring to other institutions that the public trusts more can be useful for easier communication. For example, the European Union and the European Parliament. There is also a significant difference: Latvians are more likely to trust the European Union (61% vs. 49% EU average) than national government and parliament (Eurobarometer 2021).

During the campaign of European Parliament elections in 2019 a big part (43.9%) of political party messages was focused on comparing national and European dimensions, which means that European issues were adapted to Latvia's situation or national problems were promised to be addressed at European level (Pričins 2021: 158). It shows a high ability of political actors to harmonize their and the European Union's (EU) agenda.

Ten years after joining the EU in May 2004 it was concluded that Latvia had become "safer and more prosperous", but after another five years citizens acknowledged Latvia as even more safe and prosperous. In 2019, almost half of the population admitted that membership in the EU brings more benefits than losses to Latvia's security, moreover, only 12.1% of respondents thought otherwise (Austers, Auers, Šteinbuka, Ozoliņa 2019: 153). The assessment of Latvia's economic growth also became increasingly positive.

Political scientists have identified the ability to control the information flow as a function necessary to maintain national sovereignty and promote national security. On the other hand, from the perspective of political communication, the aspect of power is basically understood as a discursive power,, namely, the ability of actors in the political communication environment to offer, reinforce and sustain themes, frameworks and speakers in the ongoing political discourse. (Jungherr, Posegga, An 2019: 416). Other aspects of policy that have no direct bearing on the acquisition and retention of power, such as the transfer of citizens' interests and demands, the symbolic legitimacy of power, and the identification of alternatives in policy-making, also depend on communication. Thus, discursive power refers to the ability to control the flow of information.

The functioning of modern political communication is characterized by two parallel activities: the traditional logic of mass communication, as well as the decentralized, participatory logic of Internet communication. The use of new technologies focused on political communication does not provide large-scale communication between large groups of people, but tends to create closed, small communities (Hermes 2006: 274). There is a paradox: on the one hand, the Internet increases the chances of confusion and requires citizens to have much more skills to distinguish between real and fake content.

[...] On the other hand, the reorganization of public conversation, the change of the format of communication, undermines the order of power (Del Olmo 2018: 274). Power requires communication to flow in only one direction, from top to bottom. Today, however, with the advent of social media and the crisis of representation, people are no longer just passive recipients and consumers of information.

4. Methodology

The object of the research is Latvia's leading politicians who have profiles on the most popular social media in Latvia - Facebook. Data collection was performed using the Facebook analysis tool *CrowdTangle*. The keywords 'European Union', 'European Parliament', 'European Commission' and their acronyms in English and Latvian were used to select the data. Between November 1 2020 and June 30, 2021, *CrowdTangle* identified posts made by 26 leading national politicians. The profiles of members of the Cabinet of Ministers of Latvia, the factions of the Saeima and the heads of commissions were used for the analysis[1]. After manual analysis, 241 records were selected from 23 politicians, followed by narrative analysis of the records. The categories of the narrative analysis were created based on the results of the Eurobarometer survey on the most important issues/topics for Latvian residents (see Chapter 2).
The following research questions are raised in the work:

- Whether and how is the public's opinion about the work to be done by the EU reflected in the public communication of Latvia's leading politicians?
- What kind of topics or events encourage politicians to communicate about the EU?
- Which themes and values dominated in politician communication about the EU during Covid-19 pandemic?

5. Main results
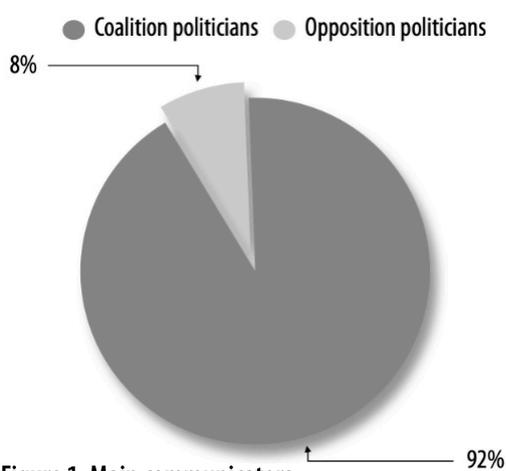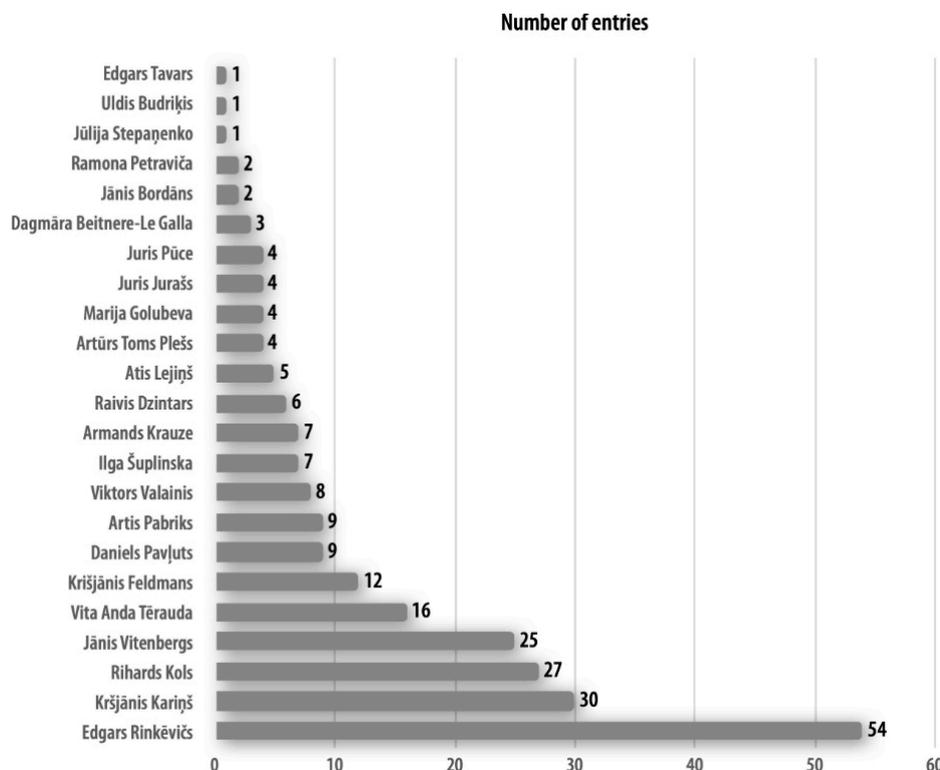
5.1. Speaking according to the duties

Figure 1. Main communicators

Analysis included online-communication of 23 officials, 19 of whom represented the ruling parties, so the amount of provided information pieces splits accordingly – 92% of posts were made by politicians of the parties forming the current parliamentary coalition, but 8% belonged to opposition politicians. Thus, the research basically looks at the communication of and between the representatives of government and also on the interpretation of the decisions of the institutions related to the European Union.

[4] Prime Minister Krišjānis Kariņš, Minister of Foreign Affairs Edgars Rinkēvičs, Minister of Defense Artis Pabriks, Minister of Economic Affairs Jānis Vitenbergs, Minister of Health Daniels Pavļuts, Minister of the Interior Marija Golubeva, Minister of Education and Science Ilga Šuplinska, Minister of Welfare Ramona Petraviča, Minister of Justice Jānis Bordāns, Minister of Environmental Protection and Regional Development Artūrs Toms Plešs, Members of the Saeima Juri Pūce, Vita Anda Tērauda, Juris Jurašs, Krišjānis Feldmans, Raivis Dzintars, Atis Lejiņš, Uldis Budriķis, Dagmāra Beitnere-Le Galla. It should be noted that the profiles of the Minister of Finance Jānis Reirs and the Minister of Agriculture Kaspars Gerhards cannot be found on *Facebook*, while Minister of Culture Nauris Puntulis, Minister of Transport Tālis Linkaits, former Minister of Health Ilze Viņķele and others have an active private profile, but *CrowdTangle* software allows to cover only public access pages, groups and verified profiles. content analysis and narrative analysis of records.

During the period under review, the Minister of Foreign Affairs Edgars Rinkēvičs communicated most actively (22,4% of all posts). His communication was prevalent about the institutions and issues related to the European Union, while his involvement in the communication about EU-related issues is clearly underpinned by his position. He communicates about issues that are either directly or intermittently related to the EU key issues. The emphasis on unity is important in his communication – joint action and position in the face of geopolitical challenges, while also drawing a strict distinction between supportable and non-supportable political actors. Political actors, mentioned in minister's posts, are evaluated not according to their position, but according to their ideological and world-vision orientation. For example, sympathy is shown towards western-oriented opposition of Russia and Belarus, while expressions of dictatorship that are inconsistent with democracy are criticized. Significant distinction is made while explaining the differences between arrested politicians in non-democratic and democratic states – the aim of this clarification is to draw a line for the local audience between local arrested oligarchs who publicly claim to be arrested for their political views and actual political prisoners like Alexey Navalny. While explaining the differences, the minister refers to the ECHR and common EU values that are binding on Latvia. EU also is used in the argumentation about the distinction of Western world and countries under Russia's influence – support for deeper Eurointegration of Ukraine traits the necessary shift towards democratization resisting the hopes of sovietization held by Russia. Opposing the narrative of EU fragmentation and collapse the theme of future relations between Great Britain and the EU is also looked through the prism of universal EU values.

Figure 2. Number of posts by politician

The second most active communicator was Prime Minister Krišjānis Kariņš (12,4%). His posts were devoted to issues related to the country's foreign policy, as well as internal and inter-level issues, such as ensuring a unified supply of vaccines to the Baltic States. Like Rinkēvičs, Kariņš's posts are united by the emphasis on united action and solidarity, which in times of crisis has allowed not only to succeed, but also to correct own mistakes. This was particularly important at a time when Latvia had not purchased enough Covid-19 vaccines due to its own failure. Kariņš also emphasizes the common position and the resulting strength in the position of the EU and NATO member states against the activities of Belarus and Russia.

The Minister of Economics Jānis Vitenbergs (10,3%), also communicated quite actively and mainly wrote about the various funds of the European Union, as well as the available funds of the Recovery Mechanism and what can be achieved with them for Latvia's economic development. Relying on EU funding allowed the minister to make promises and build a positive image of himself and his work. The argumentation shows the goal of ensuring the connection between Latvia's well-being, development and Latvia's membership in the EU, thus achieving the projection of the indivisibility of Latvia and the EU for the future successful existence of the country.

Two politicians from the Greens and Farmers Union, who during the previous convocation of parliament was a member of coalition, used EU related topics and issues to back up political quarrels and power struggles. The EU issues and opportunities were used either as a point of reference for assessing the status quo or as desirability, which was hampered or hindered by the ruling power. The EU is also used as a reference point to accentuate the quality of proposed ideas, asserting that the implementation of such kind of opposition's proposals could allow Latvia to "keep up with other EU countries".

Answering the *2nd research question*, four main themes related to the EU were identified in the online communication on Facebook: Europe's universal values (27.9%), EU action on Covid-19 (25.7%), EU foreign policy (29.4%), economy and energy (17%). Each of the topics will be discussed further in the text.

5.2. Defending Europe's universal values

In this topic, issues of mutual relations between the EU countries and Latvia's interests in the European Union were identified. Latvia is among those countries, where a higher than average proportion of respondents indicate identifying with being European (63% in Latvia) (Eurobarometer 2021).

The prism of EU values allows political actors to evaluate political partners both domestically and abroad. This also helps political communicators by using rhetoric to reinforce, transform, or initiate citizens' beliefs, value orientations, or attitudes (Feldman, Zmerli 2019: 2).

Assessing Latvia's interests in the EU narrative, in some situations the EU is opposed to the United States, especially when it comes to former US President Donald Trump. Latvian politicians emphasize the EU values that the US leader acted contrary

to, thus cutting the potential benefits for Latvia, as the EU is not only a guarantor of "peace but also security", which has allowed Latvia to spend 2% of GDP on state security. Germany's position, for example, on the issue of implementing Nord Stream-2, which would involve cooperation with Russia, is also assessed more negatively in the communication of political actors, emphasizing that Germany would also need to think about the common interests of the bloc.

The importance of joint action in overcoming the Covid-19 pandemic while expecting fair and transparent conditions is emphasized. A critical case of non-compliance with these values was the unavailability of vaccines. The EU as a value-based block was used by the officials to emphasize reliance on the interests of all countries. Krišjānis Kariņš, emphasizing Latvia's desire to get involved in the provision of vaccines, also emphasized the obligation of vaccine manufacturers to comply with the agreements and contracts reached. It is important that the messages of politicians show differences in Latvia's capabilities during the Covid-19 crisis - if Kariņš emphasizes, among other things, the country's ability to become involved in vaccine production in the future, the Foreign Minister tells the EU that a right decision has been made by providing vaccines to those countries "most in need" (including Latvia). In Rinkēvičs' opinion, this is an indicator of support and true solidarity, which, according to Kariņš, has been achieved by the joint efforts of the EU member states. Given the low trust ratings in local politicians, invoking the EU helps to provide an additional layer of information, reinforcing or obscuring the problems caused by local decisions or lack thereof.

Recognizing the importance of the EU in Latvia's development, politicians want a greater return from Latvia's membership in the EU, which requires clear goals and plans. This indicates Latvia's unchanged position in maintaining its membership in the EU.

Opposition politicians use the common framework of EU rules to highlight omissions and mistakes compared to other EU member states. For example, politician Armands Krauze, praising the Czech experience in supporting local producers, emphasizes that in Latvia the representatives of this sector only continue to wait for the actions of Latvia's ruling politicians, who will not only blindly obey EU orders, but also work in accordance with local producers. The Minister of Economics Vitenbergs has the opposite opinion, believing that a number of sectors of the Latvian economy have managed to show relatively high indicators even during the Covid-19 crisis. Both politicians use the EU as a reference point, but the interpretation and direction of such a reference point differ due to different political interests and objectives.

In the context of EU-NATO cooperation, government politicians have consistently expressed their position for NATO as a cohesive, united and strong organization. NATO membership is also seen as a long-term plan.

Cooperation and unity within the EU are viewed by politicians not only from the perspective of the common block, but also from the perspective of bilateral relations, where each transnational link ensures closer links and mutual integrity within the EU. Such unity is seen as a key element in effective and timely decision-making in a vari-

ety of areas, including geopolitical ones. At the same time, the idea of unity and solidarity is skewed in moments when it comes to certain human rights issues in individual EU Member States. The views of national conservative and liberal politicians on the issue of sexual minorities in Hungary, for example, showed a deep gap in this bloc of values. A similar situation can be seen in politicians' assessment of Poland's intention to reform the judiciary. The chairwoman of the Saeima's European Affairs Committee, Vita Anda Tērauda, emphasized that the division of values in the united EU as a whole has created a unique situation when the state turns against the state in the EU Court. It is essential that respect for common values is 'motivated' by strict rules, including financial consequences for countries. At the same time, these sharp differences of opinion on human rights on both fronts are based on the principle that the EU is based on the values of democracy and human rights.

5.3. EU action on Covid-19

Issues such as social protection and health, EU capacity for action and crisis communication were identified under this theme. The communicators explained the decisions taken in the procurement of vaccines, the need for restrictions and the EU's vision for crisis management.

On December 10, 2020, the Prime Minister of Latvia Krišjānis Kariņš pointed out that "the way out of a pandemic is vaccination, which requires coordinated action at both the national and European levels". However, delays and problems with the procurement of *AstraZeneca* vaccines plunged the government, necessitating the help of other countries to provide the vaccines. Problems with the procurement of vaccines opened up opportunities for the parliamentary opposition to sharply criticize the ruling parties' inability to deal with the crisis. In conditions of low trust in the government, as well as in times of crisis, such criticism has a greater potential to reach the target audience. Opposition repeatedly criticized the government for failing to deliver a small supply of vaccines with emotional epithets and metaphors ("it's an open, cynical mockery of our seniors in these challenging circumstances"), demanding an assessment of the health minister's responsibility and disagreeing with the restrictions.

Before 2021, several ministers and Prime minister emphasized words such as 'united', 'together', 'responsibility' and so on. However, disagreements also emerged within government officials. The crisis and the problems in solving it made it possible to open the field of political struggle also within the coalition, taking into account its complex structure. The global healthcare crisis has been used to highlight the failure of coalition partners to deal with it, in an apparent attempt to absolve themselves of responsibility for earlier decisions in government.

At the beginning of January 2021, Prime Minister Kariņš briefly announced the purchase of additional vaccines, which would promote faster public immunization and the possibility to waive restrictions sooner. Explaining the vaccine procurement process, Kariņš emphasized the Baltic Prime Minister's 'coordinated Covid response and cooperation'. But then the public, the media and the opposition began to criticize

the document on the creation of priority groups for vaccination, which, for example, favored 'critical officials'. Despite the initial plan to start vaccination with medical personnel, clients of medical institutions and care centers, and then people with chronic diseases and people over the age of 60, the opportunity to vaccinate anyone over the age of 18 appeared in April, which was a unique situation in the world. The widespread availability of vaccination actually followed in response to widespread public discontent, which was actively expressed on social media, effectively forcing officials to reconsider their vaccination strategy, preventing unnecessary fluctuations in society during the already socially stressful times. At that time, the term 'Twitter government' was coined by social media users and journalists to describe the government of Latvia, thus describing the situation where ministers make decisions based on what is happening on Twitter.

Due to the situation with the procurement of vaccines, the value of solidarity came to the fore. For example, in April 2021, the Minister of Health Daniels Pavļuts informed about the reached EU solidarity agreement, obtaining more than 400,000 vaccines for Latvia. It was explained that "it is not possible to defeat a pandemic in one country, but only in all Member States together" and the need to address inequalities in the availability of vaccines at EU level was emphasized. This shows a tendency to characterize one's failures as a wider problem, where the solution should be sought at the international rather than the national level.

In June 2021, the Minister of Health announced the addition of the digital Covid certificate to the unified European certificate system. The topic of the certificate also sparked debate among government parties. The *National Alliance* emphasized the need to avoid inequality, discrimination and violations of fundamental rights, while welcoming its implementation.

Covid-19 crisis allowed a number of issues not directly related to the problems of the health sector to remain under one roof. One of the central health sub-themes was restraints and education.

Raivis Dzintars, a member of the *National Alliance* , repeatedly called on the Cabinet of Ministers, the parliamentary education commission and other institutions to listen to education and health experts about restrictions in schools, while expressing concerns about children's ability to follow epidemiologists' instructions. Street protests that took in Latvia at the end of 2020 and were organized by populists were used by coalition politicians to speak about the danger of misinformation and the need to stay united, pointing out that Latvia 'even in times of crisis is a democratic state' and that freedom imposes a responsibility to be aware of the consequences.

Politicians based their arguments on their decision based on the experience of other EU countries. But this approach also depended on the actor's point of view – those who opposed strict restrictions referenced the countries with softer restrictions, while others strengthened their reasoning with the practice of other countries, especially emphasizing that in other places the restrictions are even more severe and the government has tried to implement the most optimal solutions. Such a dual approach can be observed in issues related to education, business, and movement.

5.4. EU foreign policy

The most active communicators in the field of foreign policy were the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Latvia Edgars Rinkēvičs, the Chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the Parliament Rihards Kols, the Prime Minister Krišjānis Kariņš and the Minister of Defense Artis Pabriks – political actors, whose job duties are directly related to the actualization of such topics. The topics identified were security, EU-NATO co-operation, strengthening Latvia's and the EU's co-operation with the Eastern Partnership countries, Europe's role in the crisis in Belarus, sanctions and co-operation with other countries.

In several posts, Rinkēvičs congratulated the Eastern Partnership countries on the inauguration of the new foreign ministers, emphasizing the strengthening of their relations with Latvia and the European Union. As Latvia is a supporter of active dialogue with the Eastern Partnership countries, highlighting the values of the European Union and the West through events in Belarus is also an important part of the message. Rinkēvičs has repeatedly condemned the violence against demonstrators in Belarus, calling on the EU to impose sanctions on the perpetrators of the violence. Over time, the minister strengthened the message of the 'rogue Lukashenko regime in Minsk' by supporting broad and effective individual and sectoral sanctions against him, calling for the release of political prisoners and holding free and fair elections in Belarus, expressing full support for Belarusian civil society. The core values expressed in the posts are liberty, democracy and human rights.

Similar values were emphasized in the case of Alexei Navalny, a political prisoner. In their messages, Rinkēvičs, Kols and Kariņš expressed strong support for EU sanctions against Russia. They also raised the issue of the visit of the European Union's High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Joseph Borrell, to Moscow, criticizing his inability to take a sufficiently strong position in negotiations with Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov. In general, Latvian government officials have repeatedly expressed support for their Eastern Partnership countries. For example, when announcing the meeting with the Ambassador of Ukraine to Latvia, the Deputy Speaker of the Parliament Dagmāra Beitnere-Le Galla emphasized the support for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine, wishing to maintain the European course.

Rinkēvičs also reported on his activities at the EU Foreign Affairs Council or the Munich Security Conference. Solidarity and support for France and Austria in relation to terrorist acts were expressed, cooperation between the United States and the EU within NATO was emphasized, as well as the impact of the EU-Great Britain agreement on future relations and their compliance with Latvia's interests. The Minister of Economics Jānis Vitenbergs also highlighted Latvia's benefits in trade in goods from this agreement. Rinkēvičs emphasized the issue of human rights violations in relation to the situation in Hong Kong, calling on the EU to pursue a strict and principled policy.

On December 10, 2020, the Prime Minister of Latvia Krišjānis Kariņš pointed out that "the way out of a pandemic is vaccination, which requires coordinated action at both the national and European levels". This emphasized the necessity of joint action, where countries alone are unable to combat the pandemic, thus stressing out the need

for cooperation regardless of other problematic issues that might in other situations create disagreements between countries.

On the subject of Russia and Navalny, the Prime Minister emphasized the need to "stop the systemic repression against Russian civil society" and to ensure that Russia meets international obligations. Taking in consideration different positions towards Russia among the countries of the EU, Latvian politicians tried to push the message about Russia which does not comply with common values of the EU thereby moving the rhetoric from the issues of economic cooperation towards the respect of the EU values.

In his posts on foreign policy, Minister of Defense Artis Pabriks both brought Latvia's interests to the fore and pointed to the need to strengthen the security of Latvia, Europe and NATO member states. The Minister of Defense emphasized the competitiveness of Latvian companies in meeting the needs of the Latvian army, the need to react to external threats together, emphasizing that there is no place for competition or jealousy. Speaking of external threats, Pabriks highlighted the authoritarian regimes in NATO and the EU's neighborhood that are "actively seeking to undermine Western democratic systems." Taking into account the history of Latvia and years of Russia's position as a possible aggressor state in the rhetoric of part of Latvian society and politicians, emphasizing the joint action on the security of the region shows the attempt to influence the view of other countries about the vector of security policy development.

The chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee, Rihards Kols (*The National Alliance*), had twice to explain his involvement in various scandals involving Russia. The first case was participation in a conference organized directly or indirectly by the Russian business tycoon Yevgeny Prigozhin, who was close to Russian President Vladimir Putin. Although the conference was entitled "Strategic Dialogue in the Baltic Sea Region" and the Latvian MP was invited by a German Bundestag colleague from the *Free Democratic Party*, it was only after the event and the media interest that Kols concluded that such events were part of a 'network of influence'. The second was 'Leonid Volkov', a spokesman for the Russian opposition Alexei Navalny, who turned out to be a fake person. False Volkov managed to mislead not only the deputies of the Saeima, but also the Latvian public television and the British parliament. Both cases point to an increase in the impact of disinformation in the European political and media environment, which Kols himself called for.

Kols also focused on the priorities of the EU's problems - not on the domestic debate on the 'Lohnes monster' (strategic autonomy of the European Union), but on the EU's joint strategy towards Russia, China and NATO. He also emphasized his cooperation with Lithuanian colleagues on the Nord Stream 2 project, which could be used as a mechanism to put pressure on its neighbors, pointing out that the project runs counter to the EU's energy security goals, European values and principles. Some messages from coalition parties differed from other records. For example, MP Uldis Budriķis informed about the meeting with the Dalai Lama, pointing to the need to stand up for religious freedom, human rights and independence, thus trying to cre-

ate a political similarity with Latvia. Dagmāra Beitnere-Le Galla, on the other hand, does not always name values, but creates symbolic similarities with other countries. Juris Jurašs, Member of the *New Conservative Party*, explains the legal framework proposed by the party-led Ministry of Justice through a European Union directive ensuring a common approach to combating non-cash means of payment fraud. These differences from the rest of the topics indicate the efforts of politicians to advance their political agenda at the individual level.

5.5. Economy and energy

The sub-themes identified while analyzing the general theme "economy and energy" were the distribution of EU funds, the protection of the EU's financial interests, the involvement of the European Recovery Fund, the digital transformation, energy and the Green Course.

According to the Eurobarometer data described in the theory section of the paper, people in Latvia think that economic issues are one of the most important problems to deal with also with the help of the EU.

The most significant discussion in the Latvian media environment was related to the EU multi-annual budget and the Recovery Fund established by the European Commission. The program aims to support reforms and investments related to the transition to a green and digital economy in addition to the EU's multi-annual budget for the 2021-2027 programming period. On December 11, 2020, Prime Minister Krišjānis Kariņš informed that the fund will contribute more than 10 billion euros (equivalent to the budget of Latvia in 2020 (Ministry of Finance of Republic of Latvia 2020) to the Latvian economy. The large sums contributed to the need for politicians to report more frequently on the fund. For example, the Prime Minister informed about the meetings at which the support of the Recovery Fund was discussed, but the Minister of Economics Jānis Vitenbergs emphasized that the fund's money will help to promote the connection of local entrepreneurs with science, as well as climate policy and reduce inequalities. It will also contribute to economic transformation, productivity, digitalization, accessibility and energy efficiency.

There was also criticism of the government on this topic. Opposition politicians has repeatedly spoken out against various government ministers, for example, criticizing the statements of the then-elected Minister of Welfare, Gatis Eglītis (*New Conservative Party*), whose public statement led to think that the money of state budget and EU funds will be taken care of primarily by coalition politicians. This raised concerns about the impact of the statements on the EU funds available to Latvia and opposition called on the Latvian Prime Minister to take action.

The Minister of Economics Vitenbergs, who is expected to comment on economic issues the most, repeatedly informed about the possibilities of obtaining various grants from the European Commission, support mechanisms for entrepreneurs and support for various social groups. For example, the then Minister of Education and Science Ilga Šuplinska drew attention to the solution of social and educational issues

and the involvement of the population in decision-making, arguing that the population is dependent on receiving social benefits as the only guarantor of survival.

This theme also contains individual messages that appeared rarely and were directed by specific politicians, taking into account their political agenda. In the field of digital transformation, the main messages were related to the need to work remotely as often as possible. Coalition deputy Juris Pūce emphasized Latvia's 5th place among the EU countries in the use of public digital services and expressed confidence that in the future it will only improve, not to mention the quality of services. It also describes attending conferences organized by the European institutions and discussing digital issues, or the introduction of ambitious digital goals to enable EU citizens to "make more and better use of digital services", and provides information on the introduction of 5G technologies.

Development/For! member Vita Anna Tērauda emphasized the need for a regulator to oversee social networks and the information space. The entry does not elaborate on the implementation plan, but highlights the emergence of information bubbles and the spread of misinformation faced by European countries, stressing that Vera Jourova, EC Vice-President for Values and Transparency, also agreed. In one post, the Minister of Justice Jānis Bordāns (*New Conservative Party*) emphasized the protection of the EU's financial interests in the fight against money laundering, corruption and cross-border VAT fraud.

Energy and renewable resources are one of the less identifiable topics. The political association *Development/For!*, whose representatives at that time Juris Pūce, the Minister of Environmental Protection and Regional Development of Latvia, and Artūrs Toms Plešs, the head of the Climate Subcommittee, replaced Pūce as the Minister of the MEPRD most often spoke about this topic. The Chairman of the Riga City Council Mārtiņš Staķis repeatedly emphasized the progress of Latvia and the EU towards climate neutrality, reduction of emissions, increase of energy efficiency in buildings, transition of public transport to a more environmentally friendly mode.

The economy is closely linked to energy. The messages highlight both the benefits of bioenergy policy (reducing energy poverty, more cost-effective) and the need for a shared vision in the region, as it emphasizes cooperation and supply-side support from colleagues in Lithuania, Estonia, Poland, the Czech Republic and Hungary. By achieving Europe's common goals of climate neutrality, Vitenbergs justifies setting a minimum for the use of wood in the construction of public buildings, while Plešs supports supporting the green economy and creating new jobs.

Conclusions

The analysis of the Facebook posts posted by key Latvian politicians shows that politicians from Latvian government parties and certain members of the opposition are active disseminators and defenders of European values.

Answering the *1st research question,* the study shows that in public communication Latvian politicians at least partially take over the citizens' expectations from the

EU, including them both in the explanation of their own actions and mistakes. Referring to the EU has often helped politicians, trying to reduce the weight of their incompetence in overcoming the Covid-19 crisis and its consequences, actively spreading the opinion that one country cannot cope with it at all. Politicians also like to connect the solution of economic problems with the EU, which is important because, as shown by the Eurobarometer data, people expect the EU to take active action in increasing the well-being of the population.

Answering the *3rd research question*, in the communication of Latvian politicians it is possible to identify all the values on which the European Union is based: human dignity, freedom, democracy, Equality, Rule of law and human rights. These values permeate a wide range of issues, highlighting the importance of unity and mutual cooperation in the implementation of successful policies. In communicating on issues directly or indirectly related to the EU, politicians also include the goals of the EU's existence. Politicians do not try to broaden the scope of values and goals, but it is possible to observe different interpretations of the breadth of values, adapting it to their position and political goal.

Latvia's leading politicians rarely initiate issues related to the EU and its institutions. Exceptions are foreign policy issues related to security and human rights issues in the neighboring countries, as well as the protection of certain Latvian interests in cases of equal distribution of vaccines to EU member states and information during meetings or diplomatic meetings. But it is important to note, that "louder" and more critical messages are sent "merging" with other actors such as two other Baltic states, thus increasing the visibility and "weight" of the messages.

Given, for example, the misinformation created by Russia about the division and weakening of the EU, as well as the Eurosceptic movements within the EU, it is important for political actors to convey messages that allow them to maintain an impression about strong and united EU that can meet the challenges in a constructive way.

In foreign policy, for example, this is particularly the case with the Eastern Partnership countries, NATO and the strengthening of security. It is also reflected in the defense of international human rights in Russia and Belarus. This indicates a high level of integration in policy planning and implementation, linking its agenda to that of the European Union. At the same time, it raises the legitimate question of whether, without Europe, environmental protection programs and other activities, which may not be as relevant to society, could be thought of or implemented.

Politicians of the parties representing the Latvian government can successfully defend European values and inform about events related to the matter, but the ability to link the EU issues with Latvia's context is often lacking. This happens either briefly and informatively, as the Prime Minister or Foreign Minister often does, or in very long and lyrical memoirs (Lejiņš and Beitnere-Le Galla). Given the low level of interest in European affairs among Latvians, as evidenced by the record low turnout in the 2019 European elections (33.5%), political communicators should be more diligent in informing local people about the validity of events, such as the Minister of

Economics Vitenbergs, informing about specific support opportunities for entrepreneurs and other social groups. The connotation of Europe, the European Union, in the rhetoric of politicians depends on the ideological and political position, and one and the same aspect can be used to substantiate and overthrow the position.

Considering the low levels of trust in the Latvian government and parliament, communication about topics and problems of interest to local residents in close connection with references to the EU can promote greater credibility of what politicians say, because Latvian residents trust the EU more than local government institutions. However, in order to draw firm conclusions about the impact of using the EU "roof" in communication about problems on the audience and possible higher trust in messages formulated in this way, it would be necessary to conduct additional research.

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Note