



Comprehensive perspectives from Germany, Portugal and Slovenia on the current European integration process and demographic change

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Abstract: This paper examines current aspects of European policy, focusing on its perceptions in Germany, Portugal, and Slovenia. The main research aim is to determine how these countries and their citizens perceive the European Commission's policy priorities for 2019–2024. In line with the aim, the study tests the hypothesis that the analysed Member States and their citizens converge on the key aspects of these policy priorities. The analysis integrates national and public perspectives. The programmes of the German, Portuguese, and Slovenian Presidencies of the Council of the EU are analysed to capture attitudes of the Member State, while Eurobarometer surveys are used to assess public opinion. The reference period spans from 1 July 2020 to 31 December 2021, when the selected countries held the Presidency of the Council of the EU. Methodologically, the study applies scaling methods alongside univariate and multivariate analyses. Cluster analysis is employed to visualise similarities and differences among Member State positions using dendrograms. Data processing and analysis are conducted using MS Excel and IBM SPSS Statistics 28. The findings reveal a high degree of convergence regarding key EU priorities, particularly the European Green Deal, strengthening a resilient and stable economy, enhancing international cooperation, and addressing challenges related to fundamental European values. Divergences emerge mainly in the area of demographic change, reflecting national priorities and differing impacts of generational change, work values, and work-life balance approaches. Incorporating generational and social perspectives enables a deeper understanding of resilience, adaptability, and cohesion in contemporary European policy-making.

Keywords: cluster analysis, European Union, integration process, Likert scale, Presidency of the Council of the EU.

JEL Classification: C82, F15, F55, O10, O52, O57, R10.

1. Introduction

The European Union is constantly evolving, responding to new internal and external challenges, which helps it to be more competitive in the global market. One of the European Union's (EU) tools to respond to these challenges, which can often take the form of crises, is the Presidency of the Council of the EU. The EU needs to react flexibly to changes. This can be done by Member States working together in a 'Presidency Trio'. The fact that all 27 EU Member States rotate the Presidency of the Council of the EU also ensures that solutions and approaches are diverse, original and innovative. The Presidency Trio of Germany, Portugal and Slovenia has primarily dealt with the global crisis caused by COVID-19. The Presidency Trio of France, the Czech Republic and Sweden dealt mainly with the war in Ukraine, the migratory wave associated with it, the energy crisis and the possible reconstruction of Ukraine. The current Presidency Trio of Spain, Belgium and Hungary also addressed these topics. These changes are reflected in the Presidency Programmes of the Council of the EU. The EU is, therefore, a changing place in a changing world, responding flexibly to these changes. Due to these changes, the European Council responds by setting policy priorities. Since the beginning of the 21st century, the EU has been going through a series of crises, and the Member States should express their views on current events, not only on the European scene. The Member States can express their opinions on the current shape of the European integration process and its presentation at the global level through the Presidency of the Council of the EU. The political will is, after all, the driving force behind the European integration process itself. The Member States decide whether to adopt and approve policies or emerging policy initiatives.

Since 2007, three successive presidencies of the Council of the EU have been working together to form the 18-month Council of the EU Programme. This article examines the EU Presidency Trio of Germany, Portugal and Slovenia. It is a Trio that faced an unexpected global pandemic caused by COVID-19, which strongly impacted the European economy. In addition to the national level, it is also necessary to reflect the views of the citizens of the countries analysed, as Europeans expressed both their interest in being more involved in the European integration process at the Conference on the Future of Europe and their views on current European policies. For this reason, this article uses Eurobarometer surveys, namely the Standard Eurobarometer 95 and the Eurobarometer on the Future of the EU to gauge Europeans' views on European policy priorities.

The article aims to find out how Germany, Portugal and Slovenia, including their citizens, perceive the European policies falling under the European Commission's priorities for the period 2019–2024, i.e. digital and green transformation, social economy, freedom, security in Europe, strengthening democracy and protecting the European way of life, and the role of the EU as a global player. This means the policy set by the European Commission is based on the European Commission guidelines for the period 2019–2024 (European Commission, 2019). The research question is related to the stated aim: Do the countries analysed perceive European policies in the same way or in different ways? The paper seeks to answer this question. Beyond the institutional and political context, demographic and generational renewal increasingly shapes how both national governments and citizens perceive EU priorities. Variations in age structure, labour market participation, and generational values influence attitudes toward sustainability, digitalisation, and social policies – dimensions that are essential for understanding policy convergence and divergence across the Member States. In line with the aim, the study tests the hypothesis that the analysed Member States and their citizens converge on the key aspects of these policy priorities.

The article is based on the analysis of the data obtained through a content analysis of the European Commission Programme for the period 2019–2024, the 18-month programme presidency of the Council of the EU (from 1 July 2020 to 31 December 2021), the programme of the German Presidency of the Council of the EU, the programme of the Portuguese Presidency of the Council of the EU and the programme of the Slovenian Presidency of the Council of the EU falling within the reference period from 1 July 2020 to 31 December 2021. The Standard Eurobarometer 95, published in 2021, and the Eurobarometer on the Future of the EU, published in 2020, were used to gauge people's views.

Based on the programme's Presidency of the Council of the EU and Eurobarometer surveys, the opinions of the selected Member States and their citizens on the current European policies are outlined using the scaling technique (the traffic light method). Multivariate analysis (the cluster analysis) is used to sort the attitudes of the analysed EU countries on the current European policy into heterogeneous and homogeneous groups. Microsoft Excel and IBM SPSS Statistics 28 software are mainly used for data processing and analysis. The emphasis is placed on a more detailed description of the methods used rather than on European policies. The methodology of the articles is based on the methods applied by Druláková et al. (2021) in the analysis of the Presidential Trio of France, the Czech Republic and Sweden. However, they did not include the population's views in

their analysis. The paper is thus innovative in that it uses the methodology mentioned above but applies it to another presidential Trio of Germany, Portugal, and Slovenia, as well as to the citizens of the countries analysed. The article attempts to fill a research gap by seeking the views of the EU Member States on aspects of European policy in addition to those of their citizens.

The first part of the article discusses a literature search that focuses on a theoretical introduction to the EU Presidency, the EU Presidency programmes and how the Member States, through the Presidency, can emphasise aspects of European policy that fall exclusively within their national interests. The second part presents the methodology of the data collection and the quantitative methods used to classify countries into homogeneous and heterogeneous groups. The third part presents the results of the analysis and a conclusion that summarises the research.

2. Literature review

The rotating Presidency of the Council of the EU was established by the Treaty of Paris in 1952. As the EU has 27 members, the Presidency of the Council of the EU is a rare opportunity for each Member State, which comes around once every 13.5 years. It is, therefore, often seen as a chance for national policymakers to push through policies that are important to their country. Some Member States see the Presidency of the Council of the EU as a space to promote national interests and priorities or as an opportunity to present their country in a good light at the European level (Niemann, Mak, 2010). The Member States may also see the Presidency of the Council of the EU as an opportunity to narrow the gap between the domestic public sphere and the EU (Vaznonyté, 2022).

The Presidency of the Council of the EU rotates among the EU members every six months (Hernández, 2024; Gruisen, Crombez, 2021). Each Member State tries to ensure the continuity of EU activities within the Council of the EU by chairing the meetings of the different configurations of the Council of the EU (except for the Foreign Affairs Council). Since the entry into force of the Lisbon Treaty, countries holding the Presidency of the Council of the EU have been collaborating closely in groups of three, known as 'Trios'. The composition of the Trio itself is based on the principle of geographical diversity. The Trios establishes an 18-month programme that sets out the topics to be addressed by the countries of the Trio, resulting in sufficiently broad programmes. In addition to the joint programme, all three countries prepare a more up-to-date and detailed programme

for their Presidency of the Council of the European Union (Council of the European Union, 2024; Vanhoonacker, Pomorska, Mauer, 2011).

Each EU country develops its own programme for its Presidency of the Council of the EU, which includes priorities according to the sub-compositions of the Council of the EU. According to Tallberg (2003), the Presidency can influence policy outcomes and raise awareness of specific issues by including them in its Presidency of the Council of the EU programme. Kaniok (2024) states that the EU Council Presidency used to be considered a neutral and technocratic service, but this is debatable in times of the EU politicization. Čepo (2023) argues that the EU Member States can influence the direction of European integration through their EU Council Presidency program. According to Häge (2016), the presidency programmes are an accessible source of information on the priorities of the Presidency. According to Alexandrova and Timmermans (2013), analysing presidential programmes can reveal some national priorities. Each Presidency of the Council of the EU can influence the EU agenda by setting its own priorities and determining which topics receive higher importance. Over six months, it can try to promote European priorities that align with national interests. It can neglect some issues not in the interest of a given pre-enlargement country (Alexandrova, 2017; Alexandrova, Carammia, Timmermans, 2012).

Elgström and Tallberg (2003) add that the EU Presidency is an opportunity to pursue national interests. According to Harwood (2024), this fact is even more evident in the case of the small European Union Member States. Tallberg (2004, 2006) points out that the Presidency of the Council of the EU contains many power resources that allow the Member States to promote their preferences during the Presidency. Bulmer and Wessels (1987) point out that the driving force is the priorities of the presiding country, the need to respond to important topical issues and the legacy points from earlier meetings. Wessels (2008) points out that the Presidency provides political momentum by linking national interests to EU plans and projects, increasing the chances of proposals being adopted and national priorities being incorporated. Alexandrova (2017) points out that the function of the Council of the EU is to respond to sudden global and EU events and to balance national preferences. Based on the above, it follows that current events on the European and global scene, national interests and inherited points from earlier meetings influence the Presidency's priorities.

Presidency programmes can provide information on Member States' positions on current European policies, but it is also important to know the views of Europeans for comprehensive understanding. In the context of the Presidency of

the Council of the EU, Cuglesan and Ilik (2022), Vaznonyté (2020), Karolewski, Melhausen and Sus (2013), Quaglia and Moxon-Browne (2006) surveyed Europeans' views on European policy through Eurobarometer opinion polls. Eurobarometer is an official opinion polling instrument used primarily by the European Parliament, the European Commission, and other EU institutions and agencies to monitor the state of public opinion in Europe regularly. Thematically, Eurobarometer deals with EU-related issues, mainly of a political and social nature. Eurobarometer provides high-quality and relevant data on public opinion to researchers, the media and the public. Eurobarometer takes different forms (Standard Eurobarometer, Special Eurobarometer, Flash Eurobarometer, Qualitative Study) and uses different methodological approaches (interview method, sample size and sampling).

In addition to political and institutional determinants, current scholarship highlights the importance of generational and demographic factors shaping public opinion on European integration. Studies such as Guinan, Parise and Langowitz (2019) and Marnewick and Marnewick (2021) emphasise that intergenerational differences in work values, digital literacy, and adaptability strongly influence trust in institutions and engagement with EU initiatives. Integrating these socio-demographic dimensions into policy perception research enriches the understanding of how Europe's ageing and renewal processes affect long-term governance capacity.

3. Methodology

This paper applies content analysis and quantitative methods using Microsoft Excel and IBM SPSS Statistics 28. In this article, statistical methods are applied to the Presidency of the Council of the EU from 1 July 2020 to 31 December 2021, in particular, to compare the views of the countries of the presidency Trio (Germany, Portugal, Slovenia) on the key policy aspects of the European Commission 2019–2024. To make the analysis comprehensive, the views of the Trio countries on all aspects of current European policy are identified. The analysis is performed in the line with content analysis of documents (machine analysis, quantitative analysis using NVivo software) – Exploratory data analysis – and multivariate analysis.

Based on content analysis, data are obtained that fall within the Likert scale and meet Llaurad's criteria. Quantitative methods are then applied to these data. Scales are a common tool in European integration research and have been used, for example, by Aybar, Pérez and Pavía (2024), Huber and Martinaityté (2022),

Vidačak and Milosic (2020), Eftimova and Haralampiev (2020), Vandecasteele, Bossuyt, and Orbie (2015), Cross (2013), Thomson, Arregui, Leuffen and Costello (2012), Warntjen (2007), and Thomson and Stokman (2006). Based on the content analysis, the priority areas and priority themes (European policy) are identified at the EU level (the European Commission's policy priorities for 2019–2024), at the level of the Presidency Trio countries in the period from 1 July 2020 to 31 December 2021 (18-month Council of the EU Programme, the programme of the German EU Presidency, the programme of the Portuguese EU Presidency, the programme of the Slovenian EU Presidency), and according to the opinion polls, the so-called Eurobarometer, especially Standard Eurobarometer published in 2021 and Eurobarometer on the Future of Europe published in 2020.

According to the content analysis of the sources studied, a quantitative analysis of keywords and phrases was conducted using NVivo software to verify the relevance and importance of the priority areas. NVivo software also determines the frequency, performing a comprehensive qualitative keyword analysis. The machine analysis aims to determine the frequency of keywords characterising European policy programmatic orientations, which form the basic framework for determining the order and importance of priority areas and sub-topics resonating in the European space. The software cannot distinguish between the frequency of occurrence of a positive area/theme and the frequency of occurrence of a negative area/theme. For this reason, a progression from the content analysis through the NVivo analytical tool and back to the content analysis seems appropriate (NVivo, 2022).

After the NVivo content analysis, it is necessary to code the data obtained and assign values to quantify the importance/ significance of the priority areas and themes. Each priority area and theme is assigned specific values corresponding to a three-item scale (see Table 1). Importance/significance is determined on the basis of the steps that the Member States wish to take in specific priority areas on the basis of legislation being prepared within the EU legislative process. The priority areas are then calculated as the average of the priority themes in the priority area. Scaling techniques, particularly the numbering and semaphore methods, were also used to assign values to the corresponding scale. The numbering procedure applies to the individual priorities and their themes. The numbering technique assigns specific numbers to each priority and its respective themes. The traffic light method assigns specific symbols to the values of the priority areas and themes based on specific numbers corresponding to a certain percentage level of

the priority theme under consideration. Usually, these symbols take the form of three circles in traffic light colours (Kutscherauer et al., 2010).

Table 1. Values and scaling of importance/significance of priority areas and themes

Values and scaling of importance/significance of priority areas and themes	Importance/significance
The most important/most significant areas/themes	3
Medium important/significant areas/themes	2
The least important/significant areas/themes	1

Source: Author's own work based on: Druláková et al. (2021).

It is important to stress that the priority areas are to be understood as a superordinate concept and priority themes as a subordinate concept. It is desirable to first assess the importance of priority areas and themes at the EU level and then at the level of the analysed countries. Subsequently, the views of the studied countries on European priority areas and themes are examined in terms of the strength of their linkage (Druláková et al., 2021).

Exploratory data analysis was conducted to examine the dataset, assess its structure, and identify missing values and potential anomalies. It was impossible to match all national priority areas and themes with those set by the European Union. Where this has not been possible, a measure of the intensity of the link to the priority theme has been established, reflecting the Member State's view of the European priority theme, based on a re-analysis of the content. Although the national theme is not linked to the European theme, this does not mean that the European theme is not discussed and expressed in the Presidency programme.

To determine the degree of intensity of the link, a Likert scale with values 0–4 was created. However, it is important to underline that the degree of intensity of the interconnection is determined based on the steps that the Member States want to achieve in the priority themes identified at the European level, i.e. in the framework of the related pending legislation following the legislative process of the European Union. The Likert scale allowed the statistical tools for interval statistical signs to be applied further. The set Likert scale fulfils the conditions according to Llauradó (2015), i.e., it meets the following conditions: at least 5 items; it contains the same number of positive and negative values; the distances between the values are perceived as identical based on the descriptive analysis; the middle of the scale represents a neutral attitude (see Table 2). A value of 4 expresses the uniform views of the studied Trio of countries on the perception of European policy, while the value 0 is the most negative and expresses a completely different

attitude of the Trio countries on the perception of European policy. The numbering method and traffic light method were also used to determine the degree of intensity of the link. The intensity of the linkage to the European themes is shown in Appendix 1, where it is already visible how Germany, Portugal and Slovenia approach European policy. This obtained data was the basis for the cluster analysis.

This paper applies a quantitative approach to the perception of Likert scales, meaning that Likert items can be considered as discrete interval statistical features. Thus, using the same methods to analyse them is possible for quantitative statistical items (Friedrich, 2017).

Table 2. Values and scaling of the intensity of links to the EU

Values and scaling of the intensity of links to the EU	
Unified opinions	4
Slightly divergent opinions	3
Medium divergent opinions	2
Very divergent opinions	1
Completely divergent opinions	0

Source: Author's own work based on: Druláková et al. (2021).

Following the content analysis, scaling techniques, exploratory data analysis and cluster analysis methods are used for the paper. In the cluster analysis, an agglomerative hierarchical clustering procedure is applied, the principle of which is based on the gradual merging of objects (in this case, the priority themes of the DE-PT-SI countries) and their clusters into other larger clusters. The starting point of the clustering process is determining ways to express the similarities (distance) of the priority themes of the DE-PT-SI countries. The squared Euclidean distance is chosen as a measure of distance to represent the usual type of distance (Boček, 2009).

The final step of cluster analysis is selecting an appropriate clustering method. According to the optimisation point of view, Ward's method, which is based on the loss of information generated during clustering, is used. The criterion for clustering is the total sum of squared deviations of each object from the cluster centre of gravity to which it belongs. Ward's method suits objects with the same variable dimension (Řezanková, 2009).

But how do citizens of Germany, Portugal and Slovenia perceive European policy? The Eurobarometer surveys can be used to analyse the opinions of the citizens of the DE-PT-SI countries. The analysis uses the standard Eurobarometer 95 for all three DE-PT-SI countries and the aggregated Eurobarometer on the

future of the EU, which is the first survey on the future of Europe since the European Commission took office in 2019 (European Union, 2020; European Union, 2021). The same methodology as at the national level was used to determine how DE-PT-SI citizens perceive the European Commission's European Priority areas 2014–2019.

In addition to the institutional and policy-oriented variables, this study acknowledges the relevance of demographic and generational structures as contextual factors influencing the perception of the EU priorities. Although the current dataset focuses on national and programmatic documents, future stages of the research are designed to include demographic attributes derived from the Eurobarometer microdata, particularly respondents' age cohorts. Integrating age and generational segmentation into the analysis will allow for identifying potential correlations between age-specific value orientations (such as trust in the EU institutions, digital adaptability, and attitudes toward sustainability) and the prioritisation of European policies. This methodological enhancement follows the current research trend emphasising intergenerational dynamics and value shifts as explanatory variables in public policy perception studies (see Kraus et al., 2022; Marnewick, Marnewick, 2021).

4. Research results

Based on the content analysis of the European Commission's priorities for the period 2019–2024 and the frequency of key concepts, an inventory (list) of five key European policy priorities was compiled (Druláková et al., 2021; European Commission, 2019). These include Digital Transformation; Green Transformation; Social Economy; Freedom, Security in Europe, Strengthening Democracy and Protecting the European Way of Life; EU as a global player. This inventory serves as a transnational reference base for identifying thematic links and quantifying their intensity compared with the national priorities of the countries of the DE-PT-SI Presidency Trio, as follows:

- Digital Transformation – the EU's digital strategy will empower people with a new generation of technologies,
- Green Transformation – Europe aims to be the first climate-neutral continent by becoming a modern, resource-efficient economy,
- Social Economy – the EU must create a more attractive investment environment and growth that creates quality jobs, especially for young people and small businesses,

- Freedom, Security in Europe, Strengthening Democracy and Protecting the European Way of Life – Europe must protect the rule of law if it is to stand up for justice, and the EU’s core values, as well as the EU, give Europeans a more significant say and protect our democracy from external interference such as disinformation and online hate messages,
- The EU as a Global Player – the EU will strengthen its global voice by championing multilateralism and a rules-based global order.

In addition to the five key areas of European policy, thirty-nine themes were outlined in the priorities (see Table 3). This inventory can be seen as a transnational reference base for identifying thematic links and quantifying their intensity compared with the national priorities of the countries of the DE-PT-SI Presidency Trio. In the same way as at the European level, a content analysis of the 18-month Council of the EU Programme and the sub-presidency programmes of the countries analysed identified priority areas and themes that must align with the European Commission’s programme for 2019–2024. However, it is important to emphasise that the Presidency defines the priority areas and the themes falling within them in their Presidency programmes. The content analysis of the Presidency sub-programmes was thus a tool for identifying them precisely.

However, it should be stressed that a comparative assessment of the priority areas and themes of the countries of the DE-PT-SI Presidency Trio has been carried out to maintain a uniform terminology of priority areas and themes according to the EU and the European Commission’s programme for the period 2019–2024 respectively. For the German Presidency, 6 priority areas and 22 priority themes were set. The following Portuguese Trio had 5 priority areas and 31 priority themes. For the last country of this Trio, Slovenia, had the 4 priority areas and 31 priority themes. The priority areas set at the national level, i.e., Germany, Portugal and Slovenia, are shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Priority areas of the Presidency Trio DE-PT-SI

Germany	Portugal	Slovenia
1	2	3
European response to the COVID-19 pandemic	Resilient Europe	Resilience, renewal and strategic autonomy
A stronger and more innovative Europe	Green Europe	Conference on the Future of Europe
A fair Europe	Digital Europe	The Union as a reflection of the European way of life, the rule of law and equal opportunities for all
Sustainable Europe	Social Europe	A European Union capable of ensuring security and stability in its neighbourhood
A Europe based on security and shared values	Global Europe	

Table 3 cont.

<i>1</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>3</i>
An effective EU respecting the international order in international partnerships		
Green Europe		

Source: Author's own work based on the Portuguese Presidency of the Council of the European Union (2021), the Slovenian Presidency of the Council of the European Union (2021), and the German Presidency of the Council of the European Union (2020).

4.1. Interpreting scale techniques

Scaling techniques were used in the first step at the European level, i.e., setting European priority themes and areas (see Table 4). The same procedure needs to be applied to the individual countries of the Presidency Trio (DE-PT-SI). Based on the content analysis carried out and using scaling techniques, it was found that the priority areas of Digital Transformation and Green Transformation were the most important for the European Commission for the period 2019–2024. Subsequently, the two priority areas, Social Economy and Freedom, Security in Europe, Strengthening Democracy and Protecting the European Way of Life, were ranked as areas of medium importance. The last area, the EU as a Global Player, is perceived as the least important/significant of the European Commission's programme strategy for the 2019–2024 term. The analysis showed that certain priority themes have levels of importance/significance that differ from those of their corresponding priority areas. This means that, for example, in the Digital Transformation priority area, which is perceived as the most important/significant, there are also priority themes of medium and low importance in addition to the most important ones. Conversely, the priority area EU as a Global Player, which is perceived as the least important/significant, contains topics that have been identified as the most important/significant, as well as of medium importance/significance (see Table 4; Druláková et al., 2021; European Commission, 2019).

To maintain the same terminology, the priority areas and themes set at the EU level have been compared with those set at the national level, i.e. (Germany) DE, (Portugal) PT and (Slovenia) SI. Exploratory data analysis was also carried out to standardise the terminology. It was impossible to match all national priority areas and themes with those set by the European Union. Where this has not been possible, a measure of the intensity of the link to the priority theme has been established, reflecting the Member State's view of the European priority theme, based on a re-analysis of the content. This is because, although the national theme

is not linked to the European theme, this does not mean that the European theme is not discussed and expressed in the Presidency programme. The intensity of the linkage to the European themes is shown in Appendix 1, where it is already visible how Germany, Portugal and Slovenia approach European policy. On this basis, a cluster analysis was performed, and the results are presented later.

Table 4. Importance/significance of EU areas and themes

EU – Priority areas	Importance/significance	EU – Priority themes	Importance/significance
1	2	3	4
P1 (Digital Transformation)	3	P1A (Strengthening digital sovereignty)	3
		P1B (Data access and protection)	3
		P1C (Development of innovative technologies)	2
		P1D (Modernisation of infrastructure)	1
		P1E (Digital Goals Delivery Plan 2030)	2
		P1F (Building a functioning digital market)	3
		P1G (European electronic identity)	1
P2 (Green Transformation)	3	P2A (Leader in the fight against climate change)	3
		P2B (Reducing emissions and using resources more efficiently in all sectors of the economy)	3
		P2C (Green transformation)	3
		P2D (The goal of climate neutrality by 2050)	2
		P2E (Implementing the UN 2030 Sustainable Development Goals)	2
		P2F (“Fit for 55” package – reducing emissions)	2
		P2G (Carbon offset mechanism at the borders)	2
P3 (Social Economy)	2	P3A (Implementing the social rights pillar)	2
		P3B (Protecting workers’ rights in the digital economy)	3
		P3C (Ensuring equal opportunities for all)	3
		P3D (Minimum wage framework, increased wage transparency)	3
		P3E (More resilient and stronger EU economy)	3
		P3F (Free movement through the proper functioning of the Schengen area)	2
		P3G (Single market and rules-based trade)	3
		P3H (Supporting national reform and investment programmes and stimulating private investment)	3
		P3I (An ambitious and more resilient European industrial policy)	2
		P3J (Single currency, financial stability and a fair financial market)	2
		P3K (Protection against unfair competition from abroad)	2
		P3L (Measures in the area of taxation)	1
		P3M (Strategic autonomy)	2

Table 4 cont.

<i>1</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>3</i>	<i>4</i>
P4 (Freedom, Security in Europe, Strengthening Democracy and Protecting the European Way of Life)	2	P4A (Respect for the rule of law)	3
		P4B (EU response to terrorism, hybrid threats)	2
		P4C (Elimination of demographic changes)	1
		P4D (Respecting fundamental rights and combating discrimination)	2
		P4E (Fighting racism and equal opportunities for all)	2
		P4F Comprehensive reform of the EU migration and asylum system)	3
P5 (the EU as a Global Player)	1	P5A (Promoting and reforming a rules-based multilateral global order)	3
		P5B (Close cooperation with strategic partners, primarily the USA)	3
		P5C (Cooperation with Eastern and Southern Neighbourhood partners)	2
		P5D (Promoting a dynamic partnership with Africa)	2
		P5E (Improving defence capabilities for a stronger Europe as part of a stronger transatlantic alliance)	2
		P5F (Striving for a strong WTO)	1

Source: Author's own work based on data from Druláková et al. (2021), the European Commission (2019).

The comparison of the opinions of the selected EU Member States and their populations may be limited by the fact that the presidency programs are technical policy documents, while data on public attitudes reflect the opinions of actors who do not necessarily have a corresponding understanding of the complexity of European policies. This difference in the level of political literacy can lead to asymmetries in measurement, which is why the analysis in this context was conducted at the level of priority thematic areas rather than at the level of their detailed breakdown.

The content analysis of Eurobarometer and scaling techniques has showed that there are both congruent and incongruent views on the perception of the EU priority areas in the countries of the DE-PT-SI Presidency Trio, namely Germany, Portugal and Slovenia, as well as among the citizens of these countries (see Figure 1). Thus, there are divergent views or attitudes on the perception of the European priority areas at the national and population levels, primarily in Germany and Slovenia. Consistent views on the perception of EU priority areas at national and population levels are found only in Portugal, see Figure 1 for more details. In Germany and Slovenia, people rate the EU as a global player more positively than at the national level, but rate Freedom, Security in Europe, Strengthening Democracy and Protecting the European Way of Life more negatively.

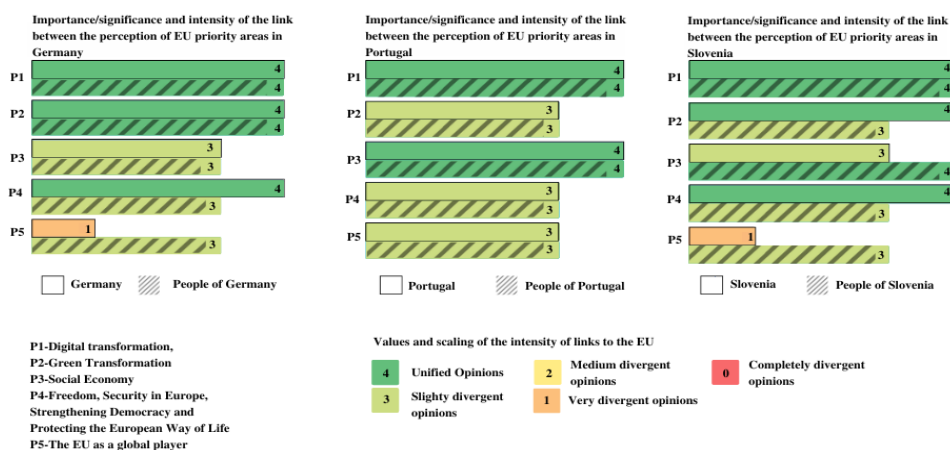


Figure 1. Values and scaling of DE-PT-SI relative to the EU

Source: Author’s own work based on data from the Portuguese Presidency of the Council of the European Union (2021), the Slovenian Presidency of the Council of the European Union (2021), Standard Eurobarometer 95 (2021), Eurobarometer on the Future of the EU (2020), the German Presidency of the Council of the European Union (2020).

4.2. Cluster analysis and interpretation

Building on the earlier content analysis and scaling methods, cluster analysis was used to organize the Trio countries and themes into clearly defined groups of similar and distinct items. The agglomerative hierarchical cluster analysis with the squared Euclidean distance and Ward’s method was performed using IBM SPSS Statistics 28 statistical software.

First, clustering was done according to variables. When the results are visualised in Figure 2, two clusters were formed. The generated Dendrogram shows that Germany and Slovenia perceive current policy more similarly, while Portugal perceives European policy differently within the Trio. The largest differences in the perception of the European priority themes between the clusters were found, for example, in the priority theme Developing Innovative Technologies; Supporting National Reform and Investment Programmes and Stimulating Private Investment or in the priority theme Strategic Autonomy (see Annex 1).

Germany and Slovenia are countries that have experienced different historical developments. Germany is a founding country of the European Coal and Steel Community, and Slovenia is a country that joined the EU in 2004. Portugal is a country that became a member of today’s EU in 1986. Thus, the results show no direct relationship between the length of membership in the EU and the views on

today's comprehensive European policies within the three countries studied. It can be concluded that the number of clusters is small. Still, additional EU countries will be added in further research, which will provide a more comprehensive view of the EU Member States' perceptions of European policy. In the next research phase, it will be possible to compare EU countries based on the geographical areas they fall into or when they joined the European Union.

Another relevant aspect emerging from the data is the demographic and generational composition of the analysed countries. Germany, facing an ageing workforce, tends to prioritise social security and stability, while Portugal, with a younger labour market structure, places greater emphasis on inclusiveness and youth employment. Slovenia, positioned between these two patterns, reflects a balanced approach that combines digital modernisation with social resilience. These findings suggest that generational renewal may be a latent factor behind national variations in policy prioritisation.

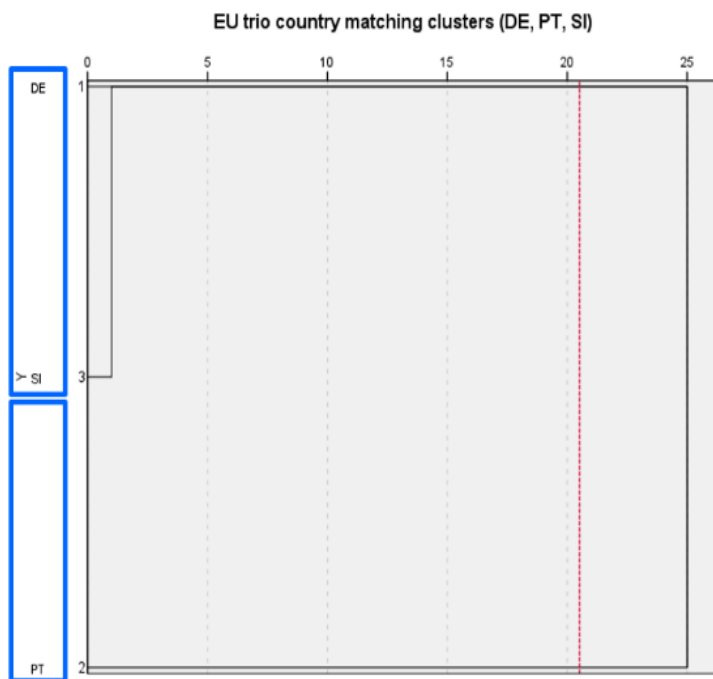


Figure 2. Dendrogram of the Trio of the countries (DE, PT, SI)

Source: Author's own calculations and processing in IBM SPSS Statistics 28 based on data from the Portuguese Presidency of the Council of the European Union (2021), the Slovenian Presidency of the Council of the European Union (2021), and the German Presidency of the Council of the European Union (2020).

Four clusters were created within the clustering by subject, which are visualised in the Dendrogram (see Figure 3). In general, Cluster 1 contains priority themes that fall under all the priority areas of Digital Transformation, Green Transformation, Social Economy and the EU as a Global Player. The most important/significant priority area is the Digital and Green Transformation. The former has gained importance due to the COVID-19 pandemic, where security in the digital and internet environment has become increasingly discussed. Closely linked to the Digital Transformation is the Green Transformation, with the ambitious Green Deal being most closely associated with it. Green and digital transformation are hotly debated and quite controversial, so it is not surprising that, for example, Germany, Portugal and Slovenia take contradictory positions on the 2050 Climate Neutrality Goal and the other themes focused on Digital Transition.

Interestingly, however, all the countries analysed are members of the Eurozone and still adopt contradictory positions. However, this may be because the countries are in different economic situations. This issue falls under the Social Economy priority area. This also includes Ensuring Equal Opportunities for All, which the EU sees as one of the most important/significant themes. However, what may be striking in the context of today's situation in Europe is the fact that in Cluster 1, there is a priority topic, Cooperation with Eastern and Southern Neighbourhood Partners, on which the countries of the Trio share slightly divergent opinions and which the European Union, according to the Commission's Programme for the period, perceived as of medium importance/significance. Therefore, it was certain that cooperation with the Southern Neighbourhood will become more important due to the current events. The growing importance of this issue was indeed confirmed during the French, Czech, and Swedish presidencies of the Council of the EU. Another theme found in Cluster 1 is shown in Figure 3.

In cluster 2, 15 values express the unified opinions of the countries of the DE-PT-SI Trio on the European sub-priority themes. Cluster 2 contains EU-priority themes that cover all European priority areas. Still, most of the themes found in this cluster fall under the priority areas of Digital Transformation, Social Economy, and Green Transformation. There is, for example, the Comprehensive reform of the EU migration, which has been discussed at the European level since the refugee crisis in 2015 and which has gained renewed importance due to the war in Ukraine. There are unified opinions on half of the themes falling into the Digital Transformation and Green Transformation. The previous cluster showed that the Digital and Green Transformation can be controversial within some themes. Still, according to cluster 2, it appears that the selected countries agree on

more than half of the themes falling into the mentioned areas. The DE-PT-SI also expressed their united opinions on the more resilient and more robust EU economy, which corresponds to the actual state of the European Union, which has practically gone from crisis to crisis since the beginning of the 21st century. The selected countries express a unified position on the theme Respect for the Law of Rule, one of the elementary principles on which the EU is founded. For example, Poland and Hungary have long faced challenges in complying with this principle (Hernández, 2024).

In Cluster 3, there are 9 values representing the opinions of the countries of the Trio on current European policy. These are mostly a combination of unified and slightly divergent opinions. Some themes should be provided to all citizens, not just those in Europe. These themes deal with the fundamental rights, the fight against discrimination and equal opportunities for all. There are also themes related to the Digital and Green Transformation (see Figure 3).

Cluster 4 contains themes that are considered the most controversial by Germany and Slovenia. These are supporting National Reform and Investment Programs, Stimulating Private Investment, Promoting Strategic Autonomy, and Eliminating Demographic Change. Portugal also expresses itself most controversially on the last-mentioned themes. At the same time, this is a theme that cannot be reversed and is already troubling Europe as a whole today, and in the future, this problem will be even more visible.

The issue of demographic change is closely linked with generational renewal, labour market participation, and evolving work values. While the EU institutions frame it primarily as a demographic and social challenge, it can also be seen as a driver of innovation and adaptation. Generational renewal introduces new attitudes toward digitalisation, work-life balance, and social responsibility – factors that reshape the perception and implementation of EU policies.

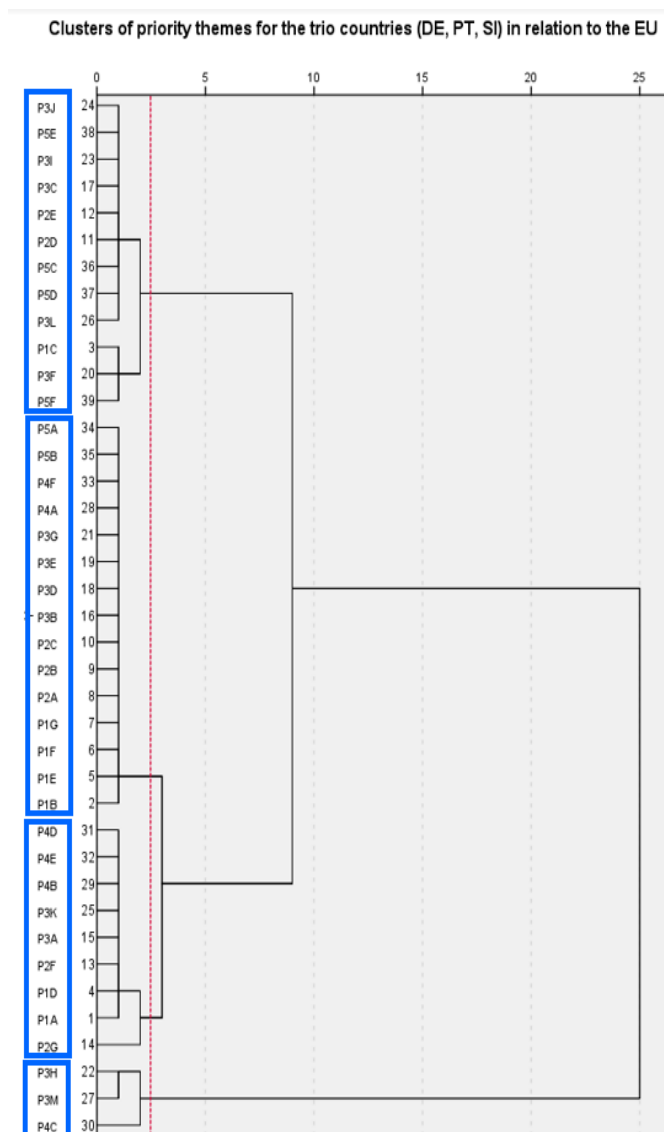


Figure 3. Dendrogram of the priority themes

Source: Author's own calculations and processing in IBM SPSS Statistics 28 based on data from the Portuguese Presidency of the Council of the European Union (2021), the Slovenian Presidency of the Council of the European Union (2021), and the German Presidency of the Council of the European Union (2020).

However, the issue of demographic change is not only a political challenge at the EU level but also has direct consequences for the practical functioning of EU Member States. In practice, demographic changes are reflected differently in

individual EU Member States through the generational shift in work teams, which has a profound impact, for example, on project management and the effective utilization of EU funds. Generational differences in attitudes toward technology, team leadership, work values, or work-life balance, represent a micro-level of broader demographic challenges, which are also reflected in the European priorities set by the European Commission.

5. Discussion and conclusions

Through the Presidency of the Council of the EU, EU Member States can express their views on current aspects of European policy. Using quantitative and qualitative methods, the article provides a comprehensive view of the current aspects of European policy, or rather the perception of European policy of the three selected countries which formed the EU Presidency Trio. The methods were applied to data obtained from content analysis, a rather lengthy procedure that yields views or perceptions of European policy that cannot be obtained from hard data. This fulfilled the article's aim of examining how the analysed countries of the Presidency Trio perceive specific European policies areas based on the European Commission's programme guidelines 2019–2024. The hypothesis was partially confirmed: for example, Portugal and its citizens converge in their perceptions of the key European policy priorities, whereas such alignment cannot be observed in the cases of Germany or Slovenia. The research question of whether the countries surveyed perceive European policy the same or differently was also answered.

Based on a cluster analysis of the member countries, Germany, Portugal, and Slovenia perceive some European priority themes similarly, while perceiving some differently. Germany and Slovenia agree on several priority themes and can be said to perceive many aspects of current European policy similarly, see Appendix 1. In contrast, Portugal perceives European priority themes differently than Germany and Slovenia. The most significant differences in the perception of the European priority themes between the clusters were found, for example, in the priority theme Developing Innovative Technologies, Supporting National Reform and Investment Programmes and Stimulating Private Investment, or in the priority theme Strategic Autonomy (see Annex 1). Germany, Portugal, and Slovenia are countries that have undergone different historical developments and have been part of the European Union for different periods of time. Thus, the results show no direct relationship between the length of membership and views on today's complex European policy within the three countries analysed.

The cluster analysis by subject shows that the most extensive cluster is made up of European priority themes, on which the countries of the DE-PT-SI Trio adopt unified positions. These are, for example, priority themes such as Comprehensive Reform of the EU Migration and Asylum System, Respect for the Rule of Law, Single Market and Rules-Based Trade, and More Resilient and Robust EU economy. The second most numerous cluster includes priority themes on which the DE-PT-SI countries have held different positions. This includes, for example, the following priority themes: a Single Currency, Financial Stability and a Fair Financial Market, an Ambitious and More Resilient European Industrial Policy, and ensuring Equal Opportunities for All. The third most numerous cluster contains priority topics to which the countries analysed and assigned unique combinations of unified positions, slightly divergent opinions, and very divergent opinions. These are, for example, priority themes such as Respect for Fundamental Rights and the Fight Against Discrimination, Combating Racism and Equal Opportunities for All, and the Union's Response to Terrorism. The smallest cluster comprises the European priority topics, on which the countries of the DE-PT-SI Trio have adopted unique combinations of opinions. These are different combinations of uniform, very divergent opinions, and completely divergent opinions. These are the following priority themes: Supporting National Reform and Investment Programmes and Stimulating Private Investment, Strategic Autonomy and Eliminating Demographic Changes. However, demographic changes cannot be understood solely as a political priority of the European Commission, but also as a factor that fundamentally influences the functioning of EU Member States. Generational changes are reflected in different work values and approaches, e.g., to technology, team leadership, or work-life balance, which in turn influence the effectiveness of project management and the use of EU funds.

A comparison of the perceptions of the European priority areas by the analysed countries and their populations revealed that different attitudes towards the perception of the European priority areas at national and population levels exist mainly in Germany and Slovenia (see Figure 1). Citizens in Germany and Slovenia perceive the priority area 'The EU as a Global Player' more positively than the corresponding national-level positions. In contrast, they perceive 'Freedom, Security in Europe, Strengthening Democracy and Protecting the European Way of Life' more negatively.

The analysis shows that the countries analysed agree on the key priority issues that are also the most important at the EU level. These are priority themes that resonate through European policy and reflect current challenges. These are

topics related to Green Deal, a more resilient and stable economy, respect for the rule of law, comprehensive reform of the EU migration and asylum system, reform of the multilateral rules-based global order, and close cooperation with strategic partners. These themes touch on European values and reflect current developments in the global economy.

The findings thus provide valuable insights into how EU countries perceive and prioritise key European policies. Beyond these political and institutional insights, the findings also highlight the relevance of demographic and generational dynamics in shaping national and public attitudes toward EU priorities. The differing age structures and work value orientations among the Member States – such as preferences for flexibility, work-life balance, or social protection – may influence how governments and citizens align with overarching European objectives. Recognition of these intergenerational differences contributes to understanding policy divergence within the EU and to identifying strategies for strengthening societal resilience and trust in European governance.

Overall, the analysis confirms that demographic and generational dynamics play a growing role in shaping the perception of European policies. Understanding how younger and older generations differ in their expectations regarding sustainability, digital transformation, and social cohesion allows for a more nuanced interpretation of national priorities.

The research on which the article is based has its limitations. The main theoretical limitation concerns the definition of relevant aspects of European policy. Methodological limitations are related to subjectivity in data collection. Subjectivity can also be a limitation in the context of qualitative and quantitative analysis, particularly in relation to the choice of distance metrics and clustering methods. To minimize these limitations, the research was based on a study by Druláková et al. (2021) and on the official political priorities of the European Commission for the period 2019–2024, as directly defined in the European Commission Guidelines for that period. A potential limitation of the study concerns the selection of a specific Trio of Member States. This choice reflects the institutional logic of the 18-month Presidency cycle rather than a broader comparative design.

Future research could include adding other EU Member States to the analysis, which would provide a comprehensive view of the European integration process and a more detailed understanding of all Member States' views on the present and future of the European Union. Another possible direction for future research is to integrate age-related variables from Eurobarometer data to capture the full impact of generational renewal on European governance and resilience. Future research

could thus focus on linking European priorities with the practical implications of demographic change in the EU Member States. The aim could be to contribute to a better understanding of how European policies can be more effectively adapted to the reality of generational change. From a methodological point of view, future research will focus on more sophisticated verification of cluster analysis and methods for revealing cluster characteristics, such as the Silhouette Index.

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Appendix 1: Values and scaling of the intensity of links to the EU

EU – Priority areas	EU – Priority themes	Intensity of the bond		
		DE	PT	SI
1	2	3	4	5
P1 (Digital Transformation)	P1A (Strengthening digital sovereignty)	4	3	4
	P1B (Data access and protection)	4	4	4
	P1C (Development of innovative technologies)	2	4	2
	P1D (Modernisation of infrastructure)	4	3	4
	P1E (Digital Goals Delivery Plan 2030)	4	4	4
	P1F (Building a functioning digital market)	4	4	4
	P1G (European electronic identity)	4	4	4
P2 (Green Transformation)	P2A (Leader in the fight against climate change)	4	4	4
	P2B (Reducing emissions and using resources more efficiently in all sectors of the economy)	4	4	4
	P2C (Green transformation)	4	4	4
	P2D (The goal of climate neutrality by 2050)	3	4	3
	P2E (Implementing the UN 2030 Sustainable Development Goals)	3	4	3
	P2F (“Fit for 55” package – reducing emissions)	4	3	4
	P2G (Carbon offset mechanism at the borders)	4	1	4
P3 (Social Economy)	P3A (Implementing the social rights pillar)	4	3	4
	P3B (Protecting workers' rights in the digital economy)	4	4	4
	P3C (Ensuring equal opportunities for all)	3	4	3
	P3D (Minimum wage framework, increased wage transparency)	4	4	4
	P3E (More resilient and stronger EU economy)	4	4	4
	P3F (Free movement through the proper functioning of the Schengen area)	2	4	2
	P3G (Single market and rules-based trade)	4	4	4

Appendix 1 cont.

1	2	3	4	5
	P3H (Supporting national reform and investment programmes and stimulating private investment)	0	3	0
	P3I (An ambitious and more resilient European industrial policy)	3	4	3
	P3J (Single currency, financial stability and a fair financial market)	3	4	3
	P3K (Protection against unfair competition from abroad)	4	3	4
	P3L (Measures in the area of taxation)	3	3	3
	P3M (Strategic autonomy)	0	4	0
P4 (Freedom, Security in Europe, Strengthening Democracy and Protecting the European Way of Life)	P4A (Respect for the rule of law)	4	4	4
	P4B (EU response to terrorism, hybrid threats)	4	3	4
	P4C (Elimination of demographic changes)	0	1	0
	P4D (Respecting fundamental rights and combating discrimination)	4	3	4
	P4E (Fighting racism and equal opportunities for all)	4	3	4
	P4F (Comprehensive reform of the EU migration and asylum system)	4	4	4
P5 (the EU as a Global Player)	P5A (Promoting and reforming a rules-based multilateral global order)	4	4	4
	P5B (Close cooperation with strategic partners, primarily the USA)	4	4	4
	P5C (Cooperation with Eastern and Southern Neighbourhood partners)	3	3	3
	P5D (Promoting a dynamic partnership with Africa)	3	3	3
	P5E (Improving defence capabilities for a stronger Europe as part of a stronger transatlantic alliance)	3	4	3
	P5F (Striving for a strong WTO)	2	2	2

Source: Author's own elaboration based on the data from the Portuguese Presidency of the Council of the European Union (2021), the Slovenian Presidency of the Council of the European Union (2021), and the German Presidency of the Council of the European Union (2020).

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Kompleksowe spojrzenie Niemiec, Portugalii i Słowenii na obecny proces integracji europejskiej oraz zmiany demograficzne

Streszczenie: Artykuł analizuje współczesne aspekty polityki europejskiej, koncentrując się na postrzeganiu polityki europejskiej w Niemczech, Portugalii i Słowenii. Głównym celem badawczym jest określenie, w jaki sposób te państwa oraz ich obywatele postrzegają priorytety polityczne Komisji Europejskiej na lata 2019–2024. Zgodnie z tym celem badanie testuje hipotezę, że analizowane państwa członkowskie oraz ich obywatele wykazują zbieżność w kluczowych aspektach tych priorytetów politycznych. Analiza łączy perspektywę narodową i społeczną. Programy prezydencji Niemiec, Portugalii i Słowenii w Radzie Unii Europejskiej zostały przeanalizowane w celu uchwycenia stanowisk państw członkowskich, natomiast badania Eurobarometru posłużyły do oceny opinii publicznej. Okres referencyjny obejmuje czas od 1 lipca 2020 roku do 31 grudnia 2021 roku, kiedy wybrane państwa sprawowały prezydencję w Radzie Unii Europejskiej. Metodologicznie badanie wykorzystuje metody skalowania oraz analizy jednowymiarowe i wielowymiarowe. Analiza skupień została zastosowana w celu wizualizacji podobieństw i różnic pomiędzy stanowiskami państw członkowskich za pomocą dendrogramów. Przetwarzanie danych i analizy statystyczne przeprowadzono z użyciem programów MS Excel oraz IBM SPSS Statistics 28. Wyniki wskazują na wysoki stopień zbieżności w zakresie kluczowych priorytetów UE, w szczególności dotyczących Europejskiego Zielonego Ładu, wzmacniania odpornej i stabilnej gospodarki, pogłębiania współpracy międzynarodowej oraz podejmowania wyzwań związanych z fundamentalnymi wartościami europejskimi. Rozbieżności pojawiają się głównie w obszarze zmian demograficznych, odzwierciedlając priorytety narodowe oraz zróżnicowany wpływ zmian pokoleniowych, wartości związanych z pracą oraz podejść do równowagi między życiem zawodowym a prywatnym. Uwzględnienie

perspektyw pokoleniowych i społecznych umożliwia głębsze zrozumienie odporności, zdolności adaptacyjnych oraz spójności we współczesnym europejskim procesie kształtowania polityk.

Słowa kluczowe: analiza skupień, Unia Europejska, proces integracji, skala Likerta, prezydencja w Radzie UE.

Kod JEL: C82, F15, F55, O10, O52, O57, R10.