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Narrating Solidarity With Ukraine: European Parliament Debates on Energy Policy

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Abstract

The article aims to improve our understanding of the politics of energy policy in the EU in the context of the war in Ukraine. It shows how the energy policy debate is contextualised by the suffering of Ukraine and the country's efforts to resist Russian aggression and full-scale war. An abductive qualitative content analysis of 10 European Parliament debates on economic sanctions against Russia between March 2014 and October 2022 is used to reconstruct four narratives of the EU's transnational solidarity with Ukraine. The following solidarity narratives are compared in terms of underlying notions of solidarity, proposed policy solutions, and their temporal aspects: "solidarity based on the common enemy," "solidarity as mutual sacrifice," "solidarity based on shared independence," and "solidarity based on our resilience." We find that despite the prominence of the solidarity frame in all four narratives, there were latent relevant differences in the urgency of the proposed solutions. Moreover, the references to suffering in these narratives tend to contrast "their" and "our" suffering, rather than calling for help for Ukraine.

Keywords

economic sanctions; energy policy; energy poverty; European Parliament; political discourse; solidarity frame; Ukraine

1. Introduction

Since the annexation of the Crimean peninsula, and especially after Russia started the war in Ukraine, manifestations of solidarity with Ukraine have been taking place worldwide (Kovalevska & Braun, 2023; Kuzemko et al., 2022, p. 3; Moallin et al., 2023; Szabó & Lipiński, 2024). They included actions of the EU, countries, and peoples in support of Ukraine, as well as various symbolic gestures. The upsurge of sympathy

for Ukraine also opened up discussions about what the help to Ukraine should actually entail, to what extent more tension in relations with Russia is justified, and how much the costs and burdens of supporting Ukraine should be borne by the citizens of the EU countries.

Given the growing energy problem resulting from the EU's heavy dependence on Russian oil and gas, the question of the consequences of the war in Ukraine and the impact of the EU's policy responses to this conflict has become increasingly relevant (Kovalevska & Braun, 2023; Osička & Černoch, 2022; Żuk et al., 2023). In particular, the extent to which rising energy costs (Guan et al., 2023) and the risk of energy poverty for EU citizens as a result of cutting off imports of Russian fossil fuels and imposing sanctions on Russia are justified, has become even more contentious. The opinions of politicians, business elites, and societies differed significantly on whether to impose more economic sanctions on Russia and accept that their costs would be passed on to European societies (Portela et al., 2021). These controversies were fuelled by actions and statements made in the public debate. On the one hand, acts of civic transnational engagement became widespread. On the other hand, the public debate in the EU raised concerns such as "freezing in our homes won't help Ukraine" (Rujevic, 2022).

This article provides an exploratory analysis of the political discourse on transnational solidarity with Ukraine in the field of energy policy. Contrary to dominant stances, where energy solidarity is applied to EU countries and extra-European energy relations are focused on Russia (LaBelle, 2024; Ryś, 2022), we zoom in on how references to Ukraine's suffering and fighting since 2014 are made in the European Parliament (EP) debate. In particular, we are interested in how concerns about EU (countries') energy issues and energy policies are contextualized by Ukraine's struggle and suffering. We take a look at discursively constructed solidarity beyond the EU in the politics of energy policy, as a domain in which relations, comparisons, and the willingness of "us" in the EU to bear some costs in the face of Ukrainians' struggle are debated. Our analysis is based on transcripts of EP debates on economic sanctions against Russia between March 2014 and October 2022.

There is already a large body of literature discussing the EU's responses to the Russian invasion of Ukraine through the prism of solidarity (Kuzemko et al., 2022; LaBelle, 2024; Prontera, 2024). Against this background, our focus on the EP's discourse is justified for two reasons. First, despite the non-binding nature of EP resolutions, their impact is undeniable, including in terms of the imposition of economic sanctions (Meissner, 2021). Second, this approach allows us to uncover, under the overarching framework of solidarity, a variety of notions of solidarity and associated policy solutions that are more indirectly related to aid to Ukraine.

2. Transnational Solidarity in the EU Politics of Energy Policy

Transnational aspects of energy politics have been relevant in Europe for decades. However, their importance has gradually increased since 2014, as European countries' dependence on fossil fuels imported from Russia has become increasingly threatening (Guan et al., 2023; Herranz-Surrallés, 2016; Osička et al., 2023). The notion of energy solidarity is well present in this context, but in the EU it is closely linked to mutual relations between EU countries (LaBelle, 2024; Ryś, 2022).

In this article, we understand transnational solidarity as tied to an imagined community or group whose members are expected to support each other in fulfilling mutual rights and obligations (Hund & Benford,

2004). This perspective supports a political understanding of solidarity and recognises its discursive construction and contestation (Lahusen & Grasso, 2018; Szabó & Lipiński, 2024). Given the discursive nature of solidarity, we conceptualise transnational solidarity in energy politics as a domain where solidarities are manifested but also challenged, and where their character and level are contested. As further elaborated, we consider "solidarity discourse" as acts aimed at identifying and regrouping actors, in which the speaker unites some objects (Alharbi, 2018). However, a discursive construction of "us" is not enough to constitute a solidarity discourse. A "commissive act of support" in the form of "policy support" (Alharbi & Rucker, 2023) is essential. We also recognise different types of solidarity as described in sociology and political science. Typologies of factual understandings of solidarity in politics (Zschache et al., 2021) and political frames of solidarity show how these notions are reflected in political discourse. For instance, Thijssen and Verheyen (2022) argue that solidarity frames can be grouped according to whether they focus on homophily or heterophily. Thus, solidarity frames built on homophily or in-group focus include group-based solidarity and compassionate solidarity. Solidarity frames built on different actor profiles or out-group solidarity involve exchange-based solidarity and empathic solidarity (Thijssen & Verheyen, 2022). Consequently, solidarity discourse allows for ambiguity, as it can involve very different notions of "us" or "us"–"them" relations, as well as types of "policy support" (Alharbi, 2018).

Given the political nature of the solidarity discourse, its contestations, and its ambiguities, in this article we embed our understanding of the solidarity discourse in the field of energy policy in a global social policy perspective (Deacon & Stubbs, 2013). This perspective also helps us to situate the politics of energy policy in the broader context of European and global interdependence. The global social policy framework thus points to important moral principles that underpin the politics of energy policy and its discursive construction. Although the ethical aspects of energy policy-making have already been well addressed in the academic literature (Sovacool & Dworkin, 2015; Szulecki, 2020), their conceptualisation refers to the issues within energy policy (such as the equitable distribution or governance of energy, as addressed by the notions of energy poverty, energy justice, or energy democracy). The added value of the global social policy framework is that it emphasises not the globalisation of policies, but the globalisation of policy domains. This means that there are relevant issues beyond energy itself, such as human rights, the suffering of others, or political injustice, which should be taken into account in energy policy.

Solidarity discourse towards Ukraine after the attack by Russia has already been studied, but from the perspective of moral political claims rather than political support. For instance, Szabó and Lipiński (2024) analyse the sympathetic discourse towards Ukraine as discursively constructed in performative moral claims made by political leaders in Poland and Hungary. They find that this discourse includes the bonding dimension, according to which Ukraine is bound to Poland and Hungary by humanity, destiny, or togetherness, in which Ukrainians are perceived as "our friends" representing European values. The authors also discuss the supportive dimension, which focuses on the provision of material and symbolic support and assertions, and the antagonistic dimension, which is mostly conveyed through the attribution of guilt to Russia and moral-cultural divisions between the good coalition and the aggressor.

The ambiguity of the solidarity discourse is also recognised in the field of energy policy. Some authors show the relevance of "symbols and myths" of transnational solidarity in the EU. For example, Manners (2020) stresses that the notion of cosmopolitan solidarity beyond the EU is enshrined in the Treaty on European Union, according to which the Union should contribute to "peace, security, the sustainable development of

the Earth, solidarity and mutual respect among peoples, free and fair trade, eradication of poverty and the protection of human rights" (Treaty on European Union, 2012, Article 3). Energy policy changes in response to the war in Ukraine, analysed through the lens of solidarity, mostly refer to the programmes launched by the EU with the explicit aim of supporting Ukraine through collective weaning from Russian fossil fuels. The REpowerEU programme is discussed in this context as an example of solidarity with Ukraine (Kuzemko et al., 2022; LaBelle, 2024). Similar conclusions are reached in the analysis of the EP's resolutions (Grądzka, 2023; Zheltovskyy, 2022) or politicians' stances, as visible in Ursula von der Leyen's "ideational perspective" expressed through the declaration of Ukraine's "belonging to the European family" (Baracani, 2023). However, different findings, based, among others, on in-depth interviews with politicians, lead other scholars to conclude that the EU's position towards Ukraine is rather pragmatic (Härtel, 2023).

Approaching the energy discourse from a global social policy perspective draws our attention to the broader discursive context of EU energy policy. For example, Dubský and Tichý (2024) prove that energy security is the dominant frame in this field. Similarly, Kovalevska and Braun (2023) show how the European narrative of the Green Deal has shifted from a focus on green policies and sustainability to the threat posed by Russia's war on Ukraine, allowing the EU to merge the discourse of the EU as a climate and peace leader. Accordingly, the distinction between green Europe and anti-green Russia was introduced. The intertwining of war and energy policy thus led to the notion of "reinventing Europe" because "energy transition is not only a technical issue, but also a political and social one" (Kovalevska & Braun, 2023, p. 114).

On the one hand, as shown by numerous studies, the EU's solidarity with Ukraine, including in the field of energy, is evident. On the other hand, the aforementioned focus on energy security, together with its "geopolitical" narratives (Dubský & Tichý, 2024) and the pragmatism of EU policy, opens the possibility for superficial displays of solidarity, where the relationship with Ukraine is framed as supportive, while EU member states pursue their own political and economic interests.

3. Historical and Political Context of the Issue

In February 2014, Russian armed forces, wearing uniforms with no recognisable insignia, began the occupation of the Crimean peninsula. They proceeded to seize control of government buildings, as well as army and security structures in Ukraine. On 16 March 2014, an illegal referendum on the status of the Crimean peninsula was held, accompanied by various instances of fraud, culminating in the signing of the Treaty on Accession of the Republic of Crimea to Russia on 18 March 2014. This event marked the commencement of the Russian military intervention in Ukraine. The annexation of Crimea was followed by the subsequent stage of escalation, as Russian special forces and Russia's proxy groups invaded the Donbas region in April 2014. In 2021, the limited military actions conducted between the Ukrainian Armed Forces and the Russian Armed Forces on the occupied territory in Donbas evolved into a new phase of escalation. This resulted in a full-scale invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022, representing the largest armed conflict in Europe since WWII. The invasion has been marked by a series of troubling incidents, including missile attacks and shelling of civilian facilities, atrocities against civilians, the kidnapping of Ukrainian children, the occupation of parts of Ukrainian territory, and a range of war crimes committed by Russian Armed Forces personnel. These include the illegal seizure of Ukrainian territories in the regions of Kherson, Zaporizhzhia, Donetsk, and Luhansk and their incorporation into the Russian Federation.

In response to Russia's unprovoked military aggression in Ukraine, the EU has taken unprecedented measures, including condemnations, the provision of direct financial and military aid to Ukraine, and the imposition of economic sanctions. These measures have been employed by the EU institutions since the illegal annexation of Crimea. On 17 March 2014, the first set of sanctions was imposed, targeting 21 officials responsible for actions threatening Ukraine's territory. These sanctions were subsequently strengthened over time. The first round of unprecedented condemnation of Russian actions against Ukraine, which led to the imposition of economic sanctions, was in response to the downing of flight MH17 with a missile in July 2014 over Russia-controlled Donbas.

This resulted in the implementation of economic sanctions across four key sectors, including the energy sector. The measures taken by EU institutions were designed to achieve several key objectives. Firstly, they were intended to respond to Russian aggression in light of its annexation of Crimea and the subsequent unleashing of war in eastern Ukraine. Secondly, they were aimed at preventing the outbreak of a full-scale war in Ukraine. Prior to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the European political approach to addressing Russian aggression towards Ukraine was primarily focused on diplomatic efforts and the implementation of limited individual and economic sanctions. This approach was designed to avoid the loss of diplomatic channels with Russia. Prior to the full-scale invasion, the Minsk agreements, as ceasefire agreements, facilitated by the Trilateral Contact Group with mediation from France and Germany, represented an attempt to halt the conflict in Donbas. However, in practice, these agreements remained unimplemented, as Russia refused to acknowledge its military presence in Donbas.

On 24 February 2022, it became evident that previous restrictive measures against Russia were insufficient to restrain armed aggression against Ukraine as a sovereign state. The motives behind the EU's strong solidarity with Ukraine have been analysed from a number of perspectives. These include the moral obligation to protect a victim (Bosse, 2022), the fact that Ukraine shares EU values and is seeking EU membership (Bosse, 2023), and the EU's commitment to observing international law norms such as territorial integrity and sovereignty of states (Bosse, 2023). Other considerations include geopolitical and security issues in response to potential threats to Europe posed by possible direct Russian aggression against Europe (Cardwell & Moret, 2022; LaBelle, 2024).

The economic sanctions imposed in response to Russia's military actions have marked the beginning of a new era of economic warfare, according to Ursula von der Leyen:

> It will have maximum impact on the Russian economy and the political elite. It is built on five pillars: The first is the financial sector; second, the energy sector; the third is the transport sector; fourth are export controls and the ban of export financing; and finally, visa policy. (von der Leyen, 2022)

By February 2024, the EU had accepted 13 packages of sanctions against Russia, making it the most sanctioned state in the world. The debates in the EP on sanctions against Russia provide insight into the challenges and complexities of navigating solidarity in the energy domain amidst the ongoing conflict in Ukraine.

4. Research Methodology

The presented state of the art in the research field and the global social policy framework (Deacon & Stubbs, 2013) led us to ask the following questions: In the context of the war in Ukraine, how is transnational solidarity in the energy policy domain narrated in MEPs' speeches? How is the suffering and strain of people in Ukraine relevant? Whose agency is emphasised? What policy solutions are proposed?

To address these questions, we have selected textual data from the EP's debates about the sanctions against Russia. Ten debates were selected for analysis in the period between 12 March 2014 and 5 October 2022. The dates and titles of the debates are listed in the references list. Purposeful choice of the debates was applied—they preceded the implementation of major EU economic sanctions against Russia which were relevant to the field of energy. Six debates are on the sanctions before the full-scale aggression on Ukraine. Four debates preceded the implementation of the fourth, fifth, sixth, and eighth packages of economic sanctions on Russia, which included bans on new investments in its energy sector and on imports of coal and other fossil fuels, crude oil, and refined petroleum products, and a price cap on maritime transport of Russian oil for third countries. The transcripts of the debates were retrieved from the EP's website and the non-English sections were translated into English.

A qualitative content analysis of the collected textual data was carried out using an abductive approach (Vila-Henninger et al., 2022) with the aim of identifying surprising and theory-developing phenomena. The first stage involved indexing MEPs' statements that contained words such as "energy," "oil," "gas," and "coal," while also implying support for sanctions or more specific policy solutions. This indexing was carried out inductively, through line-by-line reading, with the aim of eliminating false positive text fragments.

The retrieved textual data was coded inductively according to expressed support for sanctions against Russia, the policy solutions, and solidarity understandings. This procedure resulted in the definition of 198 statements totalling approximately 31,000 words. We considered as discourse on solidarity with Ukraine those statements that simultaneously expressed support for sanctions, called for some kind of political action, and made a more or less direct reference to Ukraine. These statements, as specified below, often included words such as "solidarity," but also, for example, "help," "support," or "stand for." This is an example of an attitude that meets the above criteria:

> The answer to all these questions…is given in the small town of Bucha, where *survivors are coping with the atrocities committed against civilians by Russian soldiers*….Today, we are presenting our *sixth package of sanctions*….*My final point…is sanctions on oil*. When the leaders met in Versailles, they agreed to phase out our dependency on Russian fossil fuels….Today, we are addressing our dependency on Russian oil. Let's be clear: It will not be easy because some Member States are strongly dependent on Russian oil. But *we simply have to do it*. So today we will propose to ban all Russian oil from Europe….Putin *wanted to wipe out Ukraine from the map and he will clearly not succeed*. (EP, 2022c, emphasis ours; Ursula von der Leyen, DE, EPP group)

As stated in the quotation, there is a clear reference to Ukraine, including an acknowledgement of the challenges faced by the Ukrainian people, along with a decisive call for political action in the form of the introduction of a new package of sanctions. This quotation illustrates our conceptualization that solidarity is not only about

identifying, regrouping, and uniting objects (Alharbi & Rucker, 2023), but above all, it is a commissive act of support—a "policy support" (Alharbi, 2018) that we regard as constitutive of solidarity discourse.

All but 21 statements in the rudimentary category of positions against sanctions (mostly due to expressed opposition to the war as a whole and proposals for immediate withdrawal) formed the basis for the reconstruction of four narratives of solidarity presented in the next section. Within each narrative, we attempted to inductively reconstruct the notion of transnational solidarity itself, the proposed policy solutions, and the relevant rhetorical figures in order to gain a deeper understanding of the linguistic constructions of solidarity.

We have generally expected solidarity to be an overarching frame of analysed debates, as found in past studies on EP debates on energy policy (Herranz-Surrallés, 2016). Moreover, although we inductively coded the contested notions of solidarity, we have also expected solidarity frames to clearly differ along the axes of homophily vs. heterophily and structural vs. social integration, as described by Thijssen and Verheyen (2022) and supposed that these differences will be parallel to the variety of policy solutions. Our expectations also included the link between the discursive focus on suffering and the sympathetic notions of solidarity (Szabó & Lipiński, 2024). The surprising aspect of notions of solidarity, as presented in the following sections, refers to the temporal characteristics of the proposed solutions. We refer to the notions of solidarity as narratives, recognising the different "story" which lies behind each of them. This entails a concept of the past, characteristics of "us" as Europeans, either in one imagined community (Hund & Benford, 2004) or two communities linked by reciprocal relations, features of "the evil," and future directions.

5. Findings: Four Narratives of Solidarity

The solidarity frame, both in relation to Ukraine and within the EU, was overarching in the analysed debates. Figure 1 illustrates the frequency of solidarity and solidarity-related words according to the presented conceptualisation (Alharbi, 2018) in analysed debates.

Given the dominant solidarity frame, the very use of this word was also applied to internal energy solidarity within EU countries. Transnational solidarity with Ukraine was often discursively linked to the need for solidarity within EU member states. However, since our study used a qualitative approach based on line-by-line coding, for the analysis presented in the following section we have only considered those chunks of text that directly refer to solidarity with Ukraine and its citizens and meet the mentioned criterion of a declared "policy support" (Alharbi, 2018).

5.1. Solidarity in the Fight Against a Common Enemy

Within the MEPs' statements which we qualified as solidarity discourse, we reconstructed a narrative that emphasised the need to take action against Putin, who is creating threats and exercising violence in Ukraine. Here, Putin is portrayed as someone who wants to "conquer (independent) Ukraine" (EP, 2014a, 2015, 2022d), who violates Ukraine's integrity, who threatens (in 2014) Ukraine, Moldova, and the Baltic states, and who pursues an "imperial policy" (EP, 2014a, 2014b, 2014c, 2022b). There is explicit talk of "Putin's political game" (EP, 2021, 2022b), "Putin's bloody regime" (EP, 2022b), or Putin "continuing to murder" in 2022 (EP, 2022b).

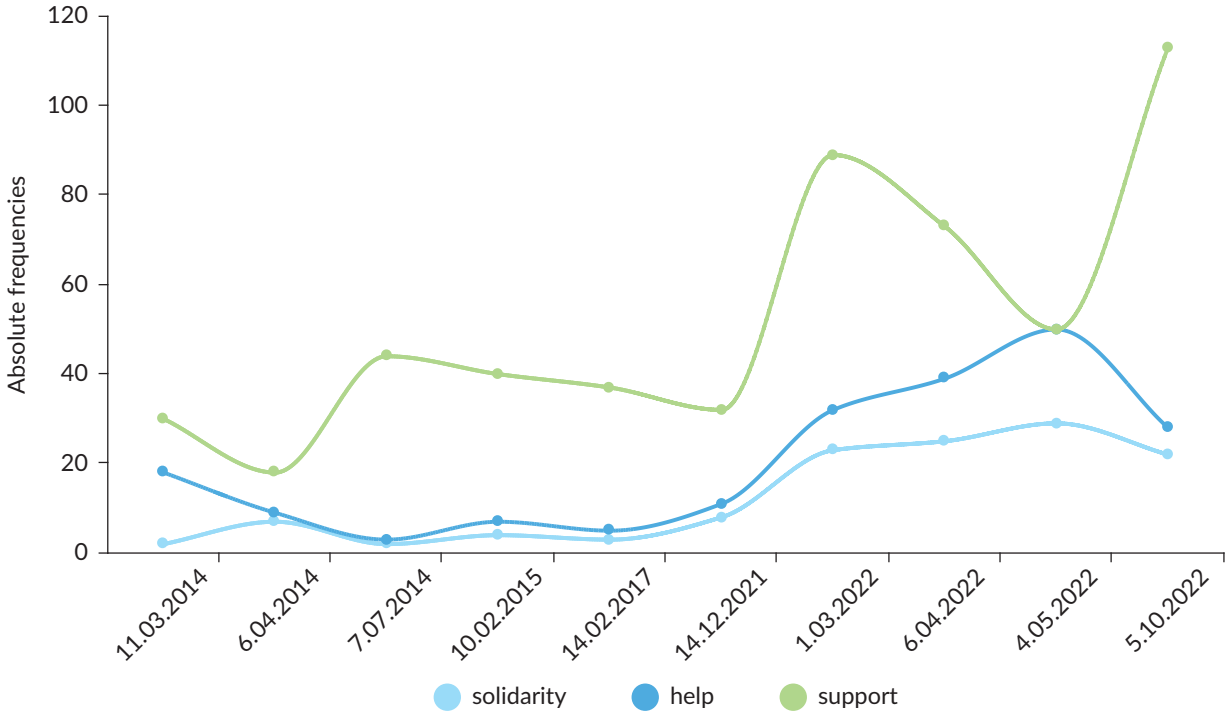

Figure 1. Frequency dynamics of solidarity-related words in analysed EP debates.

Ukraine is presented in this narrative as "our neighbour, partner and friend" (EP, 2021), and it is emphasised that "Ukraine is not Chamberlain's 'far away land'" (EP, 2021). Key references in this narrative are to Ukraine's courage, heroism, and determination rather than suffering, although in 2022, MEPs also spoke of "Ukrainians being killed fighting for democracy" (EP, 2022b) and of "massacres" and war crimes taking place in Ukraine (EP, 2022b, 2022c, 2022d).

The EU's solidarity in this narrative is thus focused on supporting Ukraine in standing up to the aggressor. This includes "punishing Russia" (EP, 2021, 2022a) or "hitting Putin where it hurts the most" (EP, 2014a, 2022b, 2022c) because "Putin understands power [and thus] financial damage to Moscow [must be done by us]" (EP, 2021). Such a construction is expressed in this statement:

> After the annexation of Crimea, the Eastern regions of Ukraine are threatened….So Russia must be stopped now. Europe needs to review its relations with Russia, rapidly reduce its dependence on Russian energy resources, and this can be done in a couple of years. Europe must immediately agree on *effective sanctions that hit Russia where it hurts the most*. (EP, 2014a, emphasis ours; Sandra Kalniete, LV, EPP group)

This construction also includes the need to stop any energy cooperation with Russia, since Putin's oil and gas revenues finance the war. Thus, the metaphors of "blood flowing through the pipeline" (EP, 2022b) or "Nord Stream 2…pumping millions of euros into the pockets of Russian oligarchs" (EP, 2021) are salient here, as in the following example:

> Cut Putin off from the Euro. Every Euro is the Euro for the army and criminals. *Blood flows through the pipeline*. And we must be clear: Stop. Let's stop this! Full embargo, embargo today, now, immediately.

> I'm calling you to be in solidarity, to be united. (EP, 2022b, emphasis ours; Andrzej Halicki, PL, EPP group)

Policy proposals are relatively vague in this narrative. However, they include immediate and strong sanctions, including a complete embargo on all Russian energy sources. In the statements we have used to reconstruct this narrative, there are no references to any costs borne by EU countries or their citizens. However, the need to pay these costs seems to be taken for granted and to be the only moral choice associated with rescuing people in Ukraine, as argued here:

> Ukrainians have only one choice, either to stand up for themselves or die as a nation. We too have a choice. We either betray Ukraine by watching frozen in fear, or *we do everything possible to save this brave nation* and also bolster our security….Economic sanctions must escalate. We need to embargo Russian oil, coal, nuclear and also Russian gas. *Every cent going to Putin's bloody regime is a cent too much*. We cannot bring back thousands of brutally murdered civilians in Bucha, Irpin or Mariupol, but if we act immediately and decisively, *we can save millions from the same horrific fate*. (EP, 2022b, emphasis ours; Viola Von Cramon-Taubadel, DE, Verts/ALE group)

The temporal dimension of the proposed solutions is based on the juxtaposition of the past and the present situation. Speaking of the past, the MEPs accuse the EU of mistakes in energy policy, especially Germany for its policy of appeasement and increasing cooperation with Russia. Against this background, they argue for immediate action to support Ukraine. MEPs urge that "Ukraine has no time, Europe has no time" (EP, 2022b), plead for a quick reaction as "people are dying" (EP, 2022b), and emphasise that "one child per minute leaves Ukraine" (in early 2022; EP, 2022b). The urgency is clear in the following passage:

> The sanctions have been adopted, and Putin continues to murder. They don't work. *Now, now, important decisions must be made immediately*. The entire civilised democratic world must close its borders to Putin. There's *no time. Ukraine has no time. Europe has no time*. Since our previous session, Bucha, Irpień happened, Mariupol was destroyed. There should be a European Council *immediately*….Coal is not enough. We must *immediately abandon oil, gas and all contacts with Russia*—only this will stop this aggressor. Once again I say and I will say it all the time: Europe, courage! *It really is a moment* when we have to show that we are in solidarity. (EP, 2022b, emphasis ours; Beata Szydło, PL, ECR group)

5.2. Solidarity as Mutual Sacrifice

Within textual data that we classified as solidarity discourse, a narrative is visible in which solidarity is presented as standing with Ukraine and being willing to bear the cost of assistance. There are three differences from the notion of solidarity described in the previous section. First, solidarity here is understood as a mutual relationship in which people in Ukraine suffer and fight for "our" freedom. This mutual relationship is explicitly stated in Marek Belka's statement:

> As Russian troops rape Ukrainian women and girls, some have the audacity to mention the unprofitability of moving away from Russian fossil fuels. While the Russians loot Ukrainian houses and shops, trying to take even frying pans out of the country, there are those in Europe for whom

> European prosperity is still more important and, of course, [prosperity] on the Russian market [as well]. While the Russians are trying to murder a European nation, there is one country leader in Europe whose true enemy is the Ukrainian president.…*Let's stand firm for those who fight for us and our values, for the future of our children, so that our sons don't have to die! This is not THEIR war, it's OUR war that THEY must fight*. (EP, 2022b, emphasis ours; Marek Belka, PL, S&D group)

Belka's speech contrasts the suffering of the Ukrainian people with the complacency of some EU political groups. Such an attitude is condemned and attention is drawn to what we morally owe to the people of Ukraine.

Second, a prominent category in this narrative is the sacrifice or moral necessity of bearing the costs of sanctions and aid to Ukraine by the EU and its citizens. This is explicitly stated:

> We must not think that the energy crisis is the worst thing to hit Europe this winter. *It's the war. And our sisters and brothers in Ukraine are paying the ultimate price every day*. (EP, 2022d, empahsis ours; Jakop G. Dalunde, SE, Greens/EFA group)

Similarly, terms such as "courage and sacrifice" (EP, 2022a), the need to "protect the European model, which has a price" (EP, 2022a), "freedom is not free" (EP, 2022a), and no victory being possible "without unity and sacrifice" (EP 2022b, 2022c) are typically used in this narrative. In addition, strong historical references are made and the solidarity of fate between Ukraine and e.g., Poland is pointed out. Polish MEPs emphasise that "the Ukrainian nation is showing great courage and heroism like the Poles in the past" (EP, 2022a).

At the same time, what distinguishes this discursive construction of solidarity from the previous one is the willingness to act in the long term. MEPs argue that "we should be prepared [to act] for a long time" (EP, 2014a, 2015) or "the crisis will be long and hard, but we must persevere" (EP, 2022b). The notion of patience, perseverance, and resistance is presented here as a relevant aspect of standing in solidarity with Ukraine.

5.3. Solidarity as Shared Independence

In the statements of the MEPs which we have qualified as transnational solidarity discourse, a narrative is visible that is based on the strong assumption that the EU's economic ties with Russia in the field of energy have been used by Putin's regime to blackmail the EU. As such, they threaten both the EU's energy security and its ability to provide aid to Ukraine. The rhetorical figures of Putin's blackmail and the use of energy as a tool of political pressure are prominent in this narrative:

> We *cannot afford to blackmail aid to Ukraine*, but we must prevent the further collapse of society. Otherwise, Russian pressure will have the desired effect. (EP, 2022b, emphasis ours; Nikola Vuljanić, CR, GUE/NGL group)

The references to the suffering of the Ukrainians and the construction of solidarity within this narrative are based on the idea of being on the same side of the political conflict with Ukraine and thus defending sovereignty, democracy, and freedom together. The call to cut off Russian influence and energy cooperation,

to stop the construction of Nord Stream 2, to ban the import of Russian fossil fuels, and the plea for energy independence are often raised, as in this quote:

> At this very moment, in the streets, in their homes, Ukrainians are heroically defending freedom. They defend their democracy, they defend their territorial integrity.…Let us therefore massively sanction Putin and the oligarchs.…Let us support the resistance in Ukraine.…Let us launch a major investment plan for climate and energy security, to put renewable energies at the heart of our mix, because they are energies of peace, and to *get out of energy dependencies and political complacency that are killing democracy and kill the climate*. (EP, 2022a, emphasis ours; Yannick Jadot, FR, Greens/EFA group)

The quoted speech shows the entangled discursive relationship between the Ukrainians' struggle, the shared mission of the EU and Ukraine in defending freedom, and the need for a transition to green energy. As is typical of speeches in the EU parliament that refer to the war in Ukraine, the rhetoric of death is widely present—it's spoken of past policies that simultaneously "kill democracy and the climate" (EP, 2022a).

Consequently, in terms of proposed policy solutions and their timing, there's talk of an immediate halt to cooperation with Russia on energy policy, but even more of "speeding up the energy efficiency/climate action" (EP, 2022c), "accelerating the transition in energy independence [through REPowerEU]" (EP, 2022d), "seeking alternative sources of energy supply" (EP, 2021), and "accelerating the Green Deal and concluding international partnerships and energy trade agreements" (EP, 2022a). The terror of war is explicitly used as a rhetorical tool to push for change:

> *We cannot see more Buchas* before we take decisive measures to stop imports of gas and oil from Russia as soon as possible. (EP, 2022a, emphasis ours; Simona Bonafè, IT, S&D group)

5.4. Solidarity as Our Resilience

The fourth narrative that we have reconstructed within general transnational solidarity discourse argues that EU countries and societies need to control the level of their own burden in the energy domain in order to maintain their resilience to help Ukraine. Despite the overarching frame of transnational solidarity with Ukraine "against Putin's criminal war" (EP, 2022a, 2022b, 2022c, 2022d), the refusal to accept that the costs of the war should be borne by EU citizens and companies is the core stance of this narrative.

Thus, there is a rhetoric of "effects of war hitting every European" (EP, 2022c) and the "effects of war being devastating for European families" (EP, 2022b), as "citizens are carrying the financial burden" (EP, 2022b), "households can no longer pay their bills, horrendous electricity and gas prices are driving companies to bankruptcy" (EP, 2022d), and "families are suffocating economically" (EP, 2022c, 2022d). The economic consequences of the war on energy discussed by MEPs included rising energy prices, reduced purchasing power of EU citizens, loss of competitiveness of businesses, expensive shopping baskets, tripled energy costs for companies, and many people not being able to afford energy. This diagnosis highlights, firstly, the multi-level vulnerability of the EU as a result of the war. There are energy-related problems for the EU as a whole, for the countries, for the companies or economies, for the citizens, and especially for the households of people living in poverty.

Secondly, it was underlined that the multi-level effect mentioned above is unevenly distributed across the EU. Differences between countries were pointed out, e.g., the specific case of the "energy island" of Spain. Inequality in the distribution of the energy costs of war was also linked to social groups—it was argued that those citizens who already suffer from poverty are particularly affected by the increase in energy prices and threatened by energy poverty. Overall, this situation was presented not only as an economic issue, but also as a major political problem, potentially affecting social stability in the EU. Consequently, MEPs argued that the costs of sanctions on "our side" "mean much more than turning down the heating by two degrees" (EP, 2022b) and that there is a "need to be responsible to their constituencies" (EP, 2022a) as these costs are also politically dangerous.

The discursive construction of the solidarity link between Ukraine and the EU and its citizens lies here in sharing the burdens of war, as visible in this quotation:

> The biggest *cost is obviously carried by the people who have lived and who still live in Ukraine*. Those who died, whose close ones were killed, those who were injured and are being injured at the moment….There is so much sorrow and so much despair in this suffering. When we are debating…we need to keep in mind that us here in the Chamber are not the ones who will be most hit by [the sanctions]. Rising energy costs are a nuisance to some and an existential threat to others. *We need to support those most in need—the families with small or no income*. (EP, 2022b, emphasis ours; Ska Keller, DE, Greens/EFA group)

As visible here, the links are being established between the suffering of people in Ukraine and the citizens in the EU, as well as some degree of similarity—namely the torment being shouldered on highly vulnerable groups, that is, people in Ukraine "being injured now" (EP, 2022b) and the families with no income in the EU.

However, as mentioned, the so constructed solidarity relationship is assumed to need the EU's ability and capacities to take that action, as underlined by Jörg Meuthen in this statement:

> *If we want to provide help and solidarity, then we must actually be able to do so*. We don't do that by ruining ourselves economically. I can tell you expressly: I think the sanctions that have been taken are correct and fully support their content—including what is now being initiated. But I strongly oppose the demand—which we have here—for a total embargo on energy from Russia at this time. We have to do this gradually. (EP, 2022b, emphasis ours; Jörg Meuthen, DE, non-attached)

As stated by an MEP, "not ruining ourselves" (EP, 2022b) is needed to take solidaristic action towards Ukraine. Two specific policy solutions result from that notion of solidarity. First, it is argued that the EP needs to oppose too-strong sanctions "that hit us stronger than Russia" (EP, 2022b, 2022c). In particular, a complete gas embargo is considered as too heavy a burden on economies and the citizens, as several branches of the economy would collapse and massive unemployment would occur. Moreover, as MEPs argued, "we" need to guarantee well-being to vulnerable citizens of the EU, "we must prevent Vladimir Putin's war from creating social damage in the European Union…and develop its social policies in order to protect the most vulnerable" (EP, 2022c). Second, the vocabulary of the need to cushion (EP, 2022b, 2022c), protect, and alleviate the costs of war was used when suggesting protective measures to lower energy bills. Introduction of "compensatory measures and alternative supplies of goods and energy sources" (EP, 2022b), and the "need to protect citizens against energy crisis and food insecurity" (EP, 2022d) were debated.

Temporal aspects of proposed solutions include the difference of timing in the policy towards accepting the burdens on the EU citizens' shoulders and any support to Ukraine. As stated in the quotations above, it was argued the EU needs to "gradually" withdraw (EP, 2021) from the import of Russian fossils, and "we have to build our resilience in the long-term" (EP, 2022d). Future-oriented protection was often associated with the EU's need to "make it through the winter" (EP, 2022d). Simultaneously however, it was pleaded that immediate action needs to be taken to cushion the negative impact of war on the EU citizens—"an urgent response must be made [or] we don't make it until the end of the month" (EP, 2022d).

Table 1 provides an overview of the reconstructed narratives of solidarity with Ukraine.

Table 1. Four narratives of solidarity with Ukraine in the energy domain.

	Type/source of solidarity	Notion of solidarity	Policy solutions	Rhetorical figures (verbatim expressions emphasised)
1	Common enemy	Fighting together with Ukraine against one enemy; Punishing Putin for his deeds; Rescuing people in Ukraine; Not allowing Putin to earn for warfare on energy selling.	Immediate stark sanctions against Russia; Immediate full embargo on gas, oil, and coal from Russia; High costs of the EU countries and societies implicitly accepted.	Need to stop *blood flowing through the pipelines* (EP, 2022b); Need to *hit (Putin) where it hurts* (EP, 2014a, 2022b, 2022c); *Moral duty* of opposing Putin (EP, 2015); Need to cut the *strings/leash* of Putin (EP, 2022b); Shared fate of fighting with Russia.
2	Mutual sacrifice	Moral obligation to reciprocate "their fight in our war."	High costs of sanctions/energy the EU countries and societies explicitly accepted; Condemning those in the EU for whom their own comfort is more important than solidarity.	Our *courage and sacrifice* is needed (EP, 2022a); Protection of our model *has a price* (EP, 2022a); Freedom is *not for free* (EP, 2022a); We will *face the confrontation* (EP, 2022a); It won't be easy, but *there is no alternative* (EP, 2022b).
3	Joint independence	Standing together with Ukraine in the fight for independence; In order to be able to stand in solidarity with Ukraine, we have to be immune to Putin's energy blackmail; Not allowing Putin to earn for warfare on energy selling.	Rather quick withdrawal from cooperation with Russia, stop import of oil and gas, cease Nord Stream 2 construction; Speed up energy transition and transformation to own green energy; Invest in alternative energy sources.	Need to *free ourselves* from dependency (EP, 2014b, 2022b, 2022d); *Energy independence* (EP, 2014b, 2015, 2017, 2022a, 2022b, 2022d); Not to allow to be *blackmailed* by Russia (EP, 2014b, 2021, 2022a, 2022d).

Table 1. (Cont.) Four narratives of solidarity with Ukraine in the energy domain.

	Type/source of solidarity	Notion of solidarity	Policy solutions	Rhetorical figures (verbatim expressions emphasised)
4	Our (EU) resilience	In order to be able to stand in solidarity with Ukraine, we must not ruin ourselves economically; We need to strengthen our defence capacity.	Oppose total gas embargo "that would ruin us"; Need for affordable and reliable energy sources; Introduce gas price ceiling, decrease taxes; Prevention of energy poverty; Immediate support to those in the EU who are in (risk of) energy poverty; Need to save energy, joint storage, and purchase of gas; Need to invest in renewables and transition, energy efficiency, redistribution of windfall profits.	We can't *ruin* ourselves economically (EP, 2022a, 2022b, 2022d); Total embargo on oil and gas is *economic suicide* (EP, 2022b); *Asymmetric* impact of sanctions (EP, 2022b, 2022c); Need to *cushion/alleviate* the impact of war (EP, 2022b, 2022c); Sanctions *hit us* (EP, 2022b, 2022c). Acting *in stages* (EP, 2022b).

6. Conclusions and Discussion

The presented analysis of 10 debates of the EP on sanctions against Russia between March 2014 and October 2022 helped us to understand how, in the context of the war in Ukraine, transnational solidarity in the field of energy policy is narrated in MEPs' speeches, and how the suffering of people in Ukraine is a context of policy-making in this field.

As expected (Herranz-Surrallés, 2016), we found that the reference to the war in Ukraine led to a wide use of solidarity frames in the EP's discourse—both with Ukraine and within the EU. In doing so, MEPs drew on the symbolic repertoire of the EU, which pursues transnational solidarity through networks of relationships, shared goals, empathy with distant others, and concerted action in support of others (Manners, 2020). Only a few exceptions were made in the speeches, such as refraining from sanctions and a lack of direct solidarity with Ukraine due to the need to guarantee peace.

Thus, the overarching framework of transnational solidarity with Ukraine was dominant. It included emphasis, recognition, and appreciation of the struggle, courage, and suffering of Ukrainians. Emotional and compassionate statements were typical in the debates analysed. This discursive construction of transnational solidarity in the politics of energy policy is in line with previous work that emphasises how the politics and change of energy policy are simultaneously of technical, political, and social relevance (Kovalevska & Braun, 2023), but also highly value-laden and moral. It also proves the usefulness of the global social policy framework (Deacon & Stubbs, 2013), which shows that in order to understand policy-making, we need to consider how not only the policies themselves, but much broader policy areas are globalised.

For example, the terror of war, cruelty, and the suffering of others are issues that are indeed taken into account in the EU's domestic policy debates.

However, our analysis shows that underneath the overarching transnational frame of solidarity with Ukraine experiencing Russian aggression, several very different notions of this solidarity were discursively constructed, proving the differentiation of specific solidarity frames in line with existing studies (Thijssen & Verheyen, 2022; Zschache et al., 2021). We have reconstructed four dominant specific notions of transnational solidarity in the speeches of the MEPs.

The notion of "solidarity based on the common enemy" assumes that the EU stands together with Ukraine against Russia and is ready to help or even "save" the Ukrainians. It also urges that Putin must be punished for his actions. An immediate total embargo on all Russian fossil fuels is proposed, backed up by such rhetorical figures as "blood flowing through the pipelines." Domestic energy policy remains implicit here, presupposing the acceptance of high costs resulting from immediate and far-reaching sanctions. The construction of "solidarity as mutual sacrifice" emphasises the reciprocal relationship between Ukrainians "fighting for us" and "us" morally obliged to sacrifice for "them." Terms such as "sacrifice" and "willingness to pay the price" are typical in this narrative. The political solutions here involve an explicitly stated willingness to bear the long-term costs of energy policy, which is the manifestation of acting in solidarity with Ukraine.

The notion of "solidarity based on shared independence" from Russia, like the first narrative, places the emphasis on the common enemy. Here, however, the focus of action is on freeing oneself from Russian influence rather than on fighting. A similar discursive construction has already been described as the "securitisation narrative" in EU energy policy (Dubský & Tichý, 2024) or as the shift from the perception of Russia and the EU as rivals to the need to reduce the EU's energy dependence on Russia (Tichý, 2020). The underlying idea in this narrative is that the achievement of independence is shared by Ukraine and the EU, but the emphasis is more on "us" needing to break away from energy ties with Russia. The proposed policy in this construct of solidarity involves "our" rather gradual withdrawal from energy links with Russia and speeding the green transformation to achieve a higher degree of energy independence.

The fourth narrative emphasises "solidarity as our resilience." It assumes that in order to show solidarity with Ukraine, we, the EU countries and societies, should not allow ourselves to be "ruined." Thus, only a gradual withdrawal from Russian energy sources is suggested here, while immediate policy solutions are proposed to cushion the negative impact of sanctions.

When we asked how the context of Ukrainians' struggle and suffering is narrated in the process of policy-making within the EU, we expected that the distinction between in-group and out-group solidarity with Ukraine would shape different policy proposals (Thijssen & Verheyen, 2022). However, this distinction turned out to be of little relevance. Although in the first narrative (solidarity based on the common enemy) and the third (solidarity based on common independence) in-group solidarity and being in the European community together with Ukraine is somewhat more emphasised than in the other two narratives, this distinction is not clearly reflected in policy solutions.

We add to the existing theoretical reflection on solidarity frames in politics, first by highlighting the dimension that turned relevant in our analysis. Namely, although all four narratives were very clear in

pointing to the relevance of Ukraine's freedom and well-being, these narratives were very different in how they presented Ukraine's situation, and, accordingly, policy solutions, as requiring an urgent response. The response to the question of the optimal immediacy of actions directed at different actors better reflects the nature of the solidarity-based relationship. There is a clear difference between the first, "common enemy" narrative, which calls for urgent maximum aid to Ukraine in the context of human death and suffering, and the "resilient solidarity" narrative, which argues for the gradual introduction of sanctions and the immediate alleviation of energy poverty for EU citizens. The insight into the temporal aspect of "policy support" (Alharbi, 2018) in solidarity discourse is relevant, as some of the presented solidarity narratives in fact cover the appeal of EU's self-oriented action or the desire to uphold international law rather than to stand in solidarity with Ukraine. This is particularly evident in the fourth narrative, where the rhetoric of solidarity with Ukraine prioritises investing in one's own resilience in order to be in a position to stand in solidarity. This mechanism is analogous to the political strategy of "conceptual flipsiding" that is typically employed in illiberal contexts (Krzyżanowski & Krzyżanowska, 2024).

The very reference to hardship and suffering, especially in contrast to courage and resistance, worked differently than we had expected. Contrary to our anticipation that it would be the strong reference to the suffering of others that would evoke sympathetic solidarity and a strong supportive dimension of solidarity narratives with Ukraine (Szabó & Lipiński, 2024), the opposite actually happened. In the second narrative (solidarity based on mutual sacrifice) and in the fourth (resilient solidarity), where the suffering of Ukrainians due to the war was salient, references to this suffering were often followed by an emphasis on the hardship of EU citizens. "Our" (EU citizens') and "their" (Ukrainians') burdens and costs were compared. It was suggested that "in the past we were brave too," or that in the present "we are freezing in our houses." In this context, a reciprocal relationship of courage and exchange of suffering is also visible. This, in turn, is consistent with policy solutions that strengthen "us" rather than focusing on helping Ukraine.

Applying the global social policy perspective (Deacon & Stubbs, 2013) to our findings helps us to unveil the discursive work of the EU, and more specifically of the MEPs, in constructing the EU as a moral political actor. This actor is constructed as one that takes into account transnational connections and issues beyond energy policy itself, thus encompassing the policy domain that includes issues such as ecology, global power asymmetries, but also war, military threat, and the suffering of others. The focus on these issues is reflected in how the rhetorical figures of war, death, and suffering are linked to the technicalities of energy policy. The figure of "blood flowing through the pipeline" is an example of this. In these highly emotional and committed narratives, the very agency—a litmus test of power relations (Deacon & Stubbs, 2013)—is clearly attributed to the EU, which arranges international connections, organises the transition to green energy, or builds resilience, while there's explicit talk of Ukraine having "only one choice," as quoted in the previous section.

Our analysis points to the need to expand our theoretical conceptions of transnational solidarity to include positions that take into account the temporal dimension and the implied urgency of policy proposals. Links to theories of justice or collective narcissism (de Zavala et al., 2009) could be helpful in understanding why it is actually "their suffering" that opens up reflection on "our suffering," rather than a stark political response. One of the issues that remained beyond the scope of this article, but would shed more light on our understanding of the discursive construction of solidarity, is to add changes in time to our analysis and see which narratives presented become increasingly salient.

The relevance of the study lies in the finding that underneath the transnational solidarity discourse, which according to the conceptual assumptions (Alharbi, 2018) we understood as explicit support for sanctions against Russia in the energy sector with reference to support for Ukraine, different specific narratives are developed by MEPs. They combine various reasons for this solidarity, different types of proposed policy solutions, and different levels of willingness to bear the costs of sanctions by EU citizens and countries. The factual willingness to bear those costs, as shown, is particularly visible in the proposed speed of introducing given measures and who exactly should benefit from them. This perspective adds to publications that have researched the EU response to Russian aggression against Ukraine, but mostly by analysing accepted documents. Our study contributes to this stream of research by demonstrating the contested nature and ambiguities of solidarity narratives. Regarding the relevance of these narratives, on the one hand, our findings are only applicable to 10 selected debates on energy sanctions; on the other hand, we assume that this discursive field reflects political strategies to reshape global relations (Deacon & Stubbs, 2013) and strengthen the EU.

Among the limitations of this study is the exclusive use of the content-oriented perspective, which does not allow us to analyse cleavages between EP groups and their members in terms of the development of different solidarity narratives. Changes in the salience of the narratives presented over time could also be further analysed. As shown (see Figure 1), the frequency of solidarity-related words used in the debates increased sharply in the period when the full-scale war began. At the same time (see Table 1), the core words belonging to the "resilient solidarity" narrative, in fact focused on "policy support" (Alharbi, 2018) out of which EU citizens benefit foremostly, only started to be used in and around 2022, suggesting that the longer the war lasted, the stronger the focus on "our ability" to show solidarity.

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Conflict of Interests

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