

**TOO HOT TO SWALLOW?  
EMOTIONALIZATION IN THE FARM TO FORK  
POLICY NARRATIVES OF THE HUNGARIAN GOVERNMENT**

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*ABSTRACT*

We empirically explore the drive towards emotionalization in policy narratives in a highly technical, yet polarized, policy debate: the Farm to Fork strategy (F2F) of the EU. We do so by leveraging the Narrative Policy Framework (NPF) and applying it to the official statements of the Hungarian Government (opposing F2F). We first develop expectations drawing on the literature. For example, we expect correlations between NPF categories and emotions. The villain should be associated with anger and fear, the victim with compassion-empathy, the hero with pride. The plot can have different emotional associations. The doomsday should be discursively represented to elicit fear. Next, we build a corpus of 53 narratives decomposed in 794 sentences. This corpus is coded first at the level of NPF categories, then for the presence-absence of emotions and, when present, the exact type of emotion. Human coding is benchmarked against a large language model developed in the MORES project. We find that Hungary articulates its F2F position with emotional narratives bereft of empirical substance. When it is politically feasible, Hungary goes for rhetorical entrapment, asking the Commission to account for the lack of evidence-based tests and impact studies. The association NPF category-emotion works well, especially at the level of characters like the hero, the victim, and the villain. Methodologically, we find that manual coding is superior to LLMs because emotions are not elicited by single words but by semantics. It is the way meanings are constructed in a sentence or a story that triggers emotional responses. Our findings contribute to the NPF by specifying how emotions exactly map onto characters, narrators, and the overall narrative. We also make a small methodological contribution to the discussion about large language models, dictionary approaches to emotions, and human coding.

**Keywords:** Discourse; Emotions; Farm to Fork; Green Deal; Hungary; Narrative Policy Framework

**Funding:** Research supported by the project MORES – Moral Emotions in Politics. Mores is funded by the Horizon Europe Program. Grant agreement ID: 101132601 Project's website <https://mores-horizon.eu>

# TOO HOT TO SWALLOW? EMOTIONALIZATION IN THE FARM TO FORK NARRATIVES OF THE HUNGARIAN GOVERNMENT (2020-2024)

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## 1. Introduction

To claim that emotions play an important role in political life is a platitude. Scholars of rhetoric in Ancient Athens and Rome told us that long time ago. Turning to a more contemporary age, after a long period where the emphasis of political scientists was on the three Is (institutions, ideas, and interests) the big E of emotions has indeed taken the scene.

Their political presence is ubiquitous in the mood of public opinion, elections, the rise and fall of political leaders, international relations, and public policies. Research has evolved in at least three major directions. First, what are emotions? This strand of research has examined the nature of emotions, their definition, why they differ from sentiments and beliefs, the classification and types of emotions, and their hierarchical structure, with primary emotions leading on to other, secondary emotions. Second, we find research on emotions as a dependent variable, that is, what causes, or triggers emotions, like attitudes, socialization, networks, and propaganda. Third, emotions have been studied as an independent variable, for example, whether emotions cause polarization, decide elections, and explain the outcomes of negotiations. Although the quality of the answers to the research questions raised by these three strands differs, and there are differences between disciplines like political science and psychology (Marcus, 2023), together the three pathways define a popular research field – where many questions have been answered on the three research trajectories.

At the margin of the field, and therefore in need of more conceptual and empirical work, are questions about the ‘how’ and the ‘where’ so to speak. We know a lot about the ‘do’ -- like ‘do emotions cause polarization?’ or ‘does populist electoral discourse arouse anger?’ -- but a bit less about how exactly emotions emerge and are articulated in the official public discourse issue by issue. This can be done in various ways of course. We make this choice: given the strong relationship between emotions and public discourse in contemporary debates about what public policies should do about the major social problems, we examine how emotions play a role in policy narratives.

The ‘where’ is also interesting. This can mean two different things. One is the ‘where’ of the level of observation. Many studies, often with an experimental research design, emphasize the level of the individual. This is the micro level of analysis of emotions in individuals and their behavior. Of primary importance here is the connection between emotions and beliefs. A bit less known are the meso and macro levels. The unit of analysis here is a group (for psychologists) and, for political scientists, a coalition, or a policy process, or a country. This is the level we wish to explore, in synch with recent literature. For instance, Guo et al. (2024) draw on socio-legal and psychological theories on compliance to test the role of emotions in obeying to pandemic restrictions. Ravazzi (2023) embeds emotions in organizational theory to make sense of differentiated levels of resiliency that emerge in emergency response processes where improvisation, not standard operating procedure, is

the main pattern of behavior. Gabehart et al. (2023) apply the Advocacy Coalitions Framework (ACF) and discourse analysis to study legislative testimony from four policies debated during the 2021 Colorado Legislative Session. They find that the expressed emotions are coalition-specific and align with beliefs. Finally, Pierce et al. (2024) blend the ACF and the Narrative Policy Framework (NPF) to evaluate the role played by, and effects of, specific emotions -such as fear and anger- in strategizing opposing coalitions' policy narratives.

But we said that the 'where' has another dimension. Do we look at a country, a multilateral organization or the subnational level? On this, we wish to shed light on what apparently is a hard case for emotional policy processes: the European Union (EU). Indeed, the policy process of the EU is often portrayed in the social media and the news as a political, power-based clearing house. Will Orban be silenced by the other 26 leaders at the next EU summit? Or, thinking of another example, can the Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni leverage her good relationship with President Trump to tip the balance of EU decision-making in her favour? In this image then, EU decisions emerge as the resultant of the power forces of the big players, including the heads of state but also the European Commission and the European Parliament. One needs to have power resources and a sense of strategy, rather than emotional appeal, to win the day. Emotions are of course displayed, but power matters more.

Another tabloid version of the EU, fueled among other things by the rhetoric of the European Commission about evidence-based policy and 'better regulation' (Radaelli, 2023), is that the EU develops policy proposals in a technical mode. After all, only experts understand complicated issues like the Common Agricultural Policy and the Excessive Deficit Procedure. The legislative train of the European Parliament lists 100 measures already adopted for the Green Deal, with 25 more already announced. In this version, the EU policy process, whether it is in the early stages when the Commission makes proposals for legislation or in the phase of delegated and implementing acts, is more likely to be dominated by arguments about science, data, and evidence in general. Outside the limelight, the daily grind of the policy process (Wincott, 1995: 603) does not exactly look like the archetype of an emotional showcase. Where is the room for emotional policy processes in impact assessment, policy appraisals, and technical working groups, then? This intriguing question justifies our choice of the EU processes, especially the highly technical ones. We hasten to add that technical processes can also be contested and polarized – with some member states obstinately leveraging their power resources against the technical proposals made by the European Commission.

To recap, we contribute to the literature on emotions with the following choices in research design: on the 'how' we conceptualize and observe how emotions work in narratives; on the 'where' we work on the meso level of a policy sector of the EU. This is not to deny that power and expertise matter -- of course they do. Neither it is to make causal claims about emotions – like emotions cause changes in public policies. Rather, our choice invites us to explore, as we said, the space for emotions in the EU policy process. A space that, one could argue, is constrained between high politics and evidence-based argumentative walls. Since we are interested in the policy process and in discourse, narratives are an obvious choice. We need a conceptual hook on narratives, however. Our hook is the Narrative Policy Framework (NPF), which is one of the established lenses on the policy

process (Kuenzler et al. 2025). Interestingly, although the NPF has always claimed that the presence of emotions is relevant in policy narrations, the empirical findings are scarce and the measurement of emotions not very accurate (Kakmhaji et al. 2025; lit review under way). Consequently, ours is an original conceptual and empirical contribution to the NPF literature.

In terms of substance, we empirically identify and analyze the drive towards emotionalization in policy narratives in a highly technical, yet highly polarized, policy debate: the Farm to Fork strategy (F2F) of the European Union. Empirically, we build a corpus of 794 sentences of the Hungarian government and analyze it with appropriate technique to reveal the association between narration and emotions. Why Hungary? Although other countries have presented arguments about the limitations of the design of F2F, Hungary has been the most stubborn opponent of the proposals made by the European Commission. Note that by examining a highly technical, highly polarized meso-level of the EU policy process (that is, F2F) we do not bracket away the technical arguments and the political power of leaders (Orban is a case in point!) when we observe emotions.

For theorists of the NPF, our contribution is, yet again, about the ‘how’: how exactly emotions feature in the structural features of the narratives? To understand this, we need to say a few words about the NPF and its assumptions and presuppositions.

In the next section we will introduce the NPF and our expectations. Section 3 presents the broad contours of the case (F2F). Section 4 is dedicated to the construction of our data. Section 5 presents our findings, and Section 6 discusses them and presents some conjectures for future research.

## 2. Concepts and expectations

The NPF maintains that public policy is shaped not just by facts and interests, but also by the stories actors tell, and stories are inherently emotional. Also, the NPF presupposes that policy narratives have structural features. This means that all narratives of public policy share some elements, although they can be diverse in all other aspects. We now describe these elements that give a text or a speech a typical narrative form.

The setting is the discursive construction of where the story takes place, like when Hungary refers to “Brussels” or “Our agriculture”. It shows the problem we are talking about in the story. It often contains details about the facts and properties of this kind of narrative stage. There are different characters in a story. The hero, we shall find out in our Hungarian narratives, is almost invariably the narrator, although we may imagine that this character could sometimes be the farmer or the Hungarian consumers. The villain perpetrates an immoral or wrong action, and the victim suffers because of what the villain has done or is doing or will be doing. We can also expect to find two characters that are not common in the NPF literature, that is, the ally and the beneficiary. The ally is the character of those who will assist the hero and the victims in turning things around. This character is potentially relevant in our story because the Hungarian government refers to the Visegrád countries as a bloc of countries working more or less with the same political and policy

goals in Europe. Whether this is true or false, it does not matter, because we are talking about policy narratives, that is, the discursive representation of reality put forward by a narrator. The beneficiary is the category comprising of those who will benefit from doing good. The plot is the series of events, cause-and-effects pathways that support the story. In the NPF literature, we often find fragments of a plot, not a complete explanation of how the prime forces generated and end results through the actions of the characters. Narrators in politics have short shrift for complicated causal narratives, especially if they are populist, emotional narrators. The moral is the call for action, that is, what should be done and why this is the good thing to do for, say, Hungary or the or the Visegrád Group. Final category we consider here: the doomsday scenario. This is the discursive presentation of a future where things go very wrong – unless we, the audience, listen carefully to the solution put forward by the narrator-hero. It is the dystopian future that should transport the audience into a non-desirable scenario to see how bad things may happen.

A key element of the NPF is the assumption that individuals in public policy are purposeful, meaning that they want something from policy decisions. Yet they have bounded rationality, which means that they cannot calculate the payoffs of alternative courses of action. And these type of policy actors can be persuaded by narratives. The NPF indeed talks of a *homo narrans* – someone that is persuaded not just by the quality of the evidence or the calculation of the balance of power, but by what the story is and how a story is told. And this opens an important pathway for emotional narratives. Specifically, we claim that emotions are aroused by narrators and empirically appear in relation to the NPF structural features. For example, the hero may be discursively portrayed in ways that elicit pride; the villain is associated to contempt; the narrative of the victim brings in compassion. These associations are what we are going to test empirically. The fact that policy narratives possess universal structural features allows the researcher to abstract from the idiosyncrasies of narrative content and focus on the systematic linkages that are observed between specific narrative elements and emotions. However, the literature on emotions within the NPF is scant. The measurement of emotions, within the NPF, is not very advanced: we find simple measures of affect for example, or one-two emotions, not a full range. The first example we found is the dissertation by Michael Jones (2010); his operationalization of the emotions appeared in Jones and Song (2014), Jones (2014a; 2014b), and Jones et al. (2017). Some more recent NPF publications with emotions-related variables include McBeth et al. (2022), Flores et al. (2023), Peterson et al. (2022) and, on risk communication, Shanahan et al. (2019).

To get closer to emotions, we focus on the following research questions are largely unexplored within the NPF:

- Do populist governments deploy emotional narratives in relatively sophisticated settings, that is, outside electoral campaigns and the communication of the government directly targeting its electorate?
- What is the list of emotions we should consider for the empirical analysis of policy narratives?

- If emotions are present, do emotional or positive emotions prevail? The Hungarian government has been on the opposing side of the fence. Does this lead to a negative posture in emotionalization, like eliciting fear, anger, and frustration?
- How are emotions linked to narrative elements (especially, characters)? Is it true that specific emotions are systematically attached to/evoked by different characters?

Turning to expectations, we expect populist narratives to be blunt, highly emotional, and simple, in line with the scholarship on the discourses of populist leaders during electoral campaigns and in parliament (examples: Bardella, Farage, and Salvini). An important point is that these expectations have been developed on the basis of discourses of populist leaders that address mass political opinion. But we do not know much about the populist narrative-emotional register in technical fora like F2F. One may instead expect populists to engage with technical registers and leave the emotions out when they address the ‘technocrats’ in Brussels. An intriguing feature of the F2F policy process is that is both technical and very politicized, as shown by the presence of tractors in Brussels in the most-heated moments.

We also expect correlations between NPF categories and emotions. The villain should be associated with anger and fear, the victim with compassion-empathy, the hero with pride. The plot can have different emotional associations. The doomsday should be discursively represented to elicit fear. But overall, we expect characters to be loaded with emotions – more than the setting, the moral, the plot and the doomsday scenario.

We also expect the narrative to be dynamic, to move with the events and absorb external events that show up during the time period under observation (2020-2024). We do not expect populists to change their mind, but rather to factor in, metabolize events and capture them in their narratives – spinning the events in their favor, so to speak.

Finally, we are agnostic about how to methodologically identify emotions. Is it better to rely on human coders or large language models? We will discuss the options and show how we dealt with this choice.

### **3. Case selection and case description**

Launched in May 2020, the Farm to Fork Strategy (F2F) was introduced as a central pillar of the European Green Deal, aiming to reshape the EU’s food system to make it more sustainable, resilient, and health-oriented. Its genesis lays in a growing scientific and political consensus that agriculture and food consumption significantly drive climate change, biodiversity loss, pollution, and non-communicable diseases. The COVID-19 pandemic further exposed vulnerabilities in global food supply chains, strengthening calls for systemic reform.

The strategy's vision was ambitious (see tab.1) promising to deliver a fair, healthy, and environmentally friendly food system. It outlined a broad set of targets for 2030, including a 50% reduction in pesticide use, a 20% reduction in fertilizers, a 50% cut in antimicrobial use in

agriculture, and the expansion of organic farming to cover 25% of EU farmland. It also promised actions to improve animal welfare, food labelling, and consumer empowerment, while promising support for farmers through innovation, digitalization, and reforms to the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP).

Table 1 - Farm-to-Fork in a nutshell	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Reduce environmental impact of food production:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cut pesticide use by 50% by 2030</li> <li>• Reduce fertilizers use by 20%</li> <li>• Decrease antimicrobial use in farming by 50%</li> </ul> </li> <li>• <b>Promote sustainable agriculture:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increase organic farming to 25% of total agricultural land by 2030</li> <li>• Encourage biodiversity and regenerative practices</li> </ul> </li> <li>• <b>Make food systems more resilient:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ensure food security while mitigating climate change</li> <li>• Encourage shorter supply chains and local food systems</li> </ul> </li> <li>• <b>Improve health and nutrition:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Promote healthy, sustainable diets and reduce food waste</li> <li>• Require clearer food labeling and better consumer information</li> </ul> </li> <li>• <b>Support farmers and fishers in the transition:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provide financial and technical assistance to help producers meet new sustainability standards</li> </ul> </li> </ul>

Source: Authors (2025)

From its inception, the strategy faced noticeable criticism. First of all, the achievement of F2F targets and objectives cuts across a number of existing policies, showcasing the structural complexity of integrating F2F transversally across existing sectoral legislation, policy bundles and mixes, and sub-systems (Bazzan et al. 2022). Second, since the beginning F2F targets were considered overly ambitious, substantially pitting food security and sustainability goals against each other (Hennessy et al. 2024; Wesseler 2022). Third, F2F's anticipated impacts were immediately perceived as deeply asymmetric – across Member States, regions, and farms' size (Beckman et al. 2022). Fourth, such perception was undoubtedly reinforced by the act that the F2F strategy was not the object of in-depth stakeholder consultation. In fact, unlike legislative proposals, the F2F was launched as a Commission Communication, meaning it was not subject to a comprehensive impact assessment with the related call for evidence.<sup>1</sup> This procedural decision drew sharp criticism from farmers'

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<sup>1</sup> The strategy, the Commission reasoned in 2020, set out a broad action plan for non-legislative initiatives, amendments to existing legislation and new legislation. Impact assessment and consultation processes – the Commission argued – would be taking place at the time of presenting formal proposals for new legislation or changes to existing directives and regulations.

associations, some member states, and industry lobbies, who warned that the strategy's targets were not sufficiently backed by economic and feasibility studies. A handful of reports (see Hennessy et al. 2024 for a review), including one by the European Commission's own Joint Research Centre (Barreiro-Hurle et al. 2021), later suggested the strategy could lead to production drops, rising food prices, and trade distortions if implemented without global coordination.

These immediate challenges to the strategy were reinforced by political and geo-political factors. From 2021 onward, the F2F began to lose political momentum. The Russian invasion of the Ukraine, inflation, and energy crises shifted EU priorities toward food security and price stability. Conservative and far-right parties increasingly framed F2F as unrealistic and driven by pro-environmental ideology rather than societal needs and empirically identifiable benefits. This opposition culminated in widespread tractor protests across Europe in 2023–2024, especially in France, the Netherlands, and Belgium. Farmers denounced regulatory burdens, environmental targets, and declining incomes, calling for a rethink of green transition policies. In response, the European Commission and several member states began to deprioritize or dilute F2F goals. As a result, almost all the key legislative components of the strategy stalled, were delayed, or shelved. In more detail:

\_Sustainable Use of Pesticides Regulation (SUR): Proposed in 2022, this regulation faced strong opposition and was ultimately withdrawn in 2024 after the European Parliament rejected it.

\_Sustainable Food Systems Framework (FSFS): Announced for 2023, this flagship initiative has yet to be presented, with no clear timeline for its introduction although an inception impact assessment and consultation were carried out. It should be re-framed in the context of the Vision for Agriculture and Food COM(2025) 75 Final, 19 February 2025.<sup>2</sup>

\_Food Labelling Reforms: Plans for revised front-of-pack nutrition labeling and sustainability labels, initially slated for 2022 and 2024 respectively, have not been submitted.

\_Animal Welfare Legislation: While a proposal concerning the welfare of animals during transport was introduced in 2023,<sup>3</sup> other aspects, such as animal keeping, slaughter, and product labelling, remain pending.

As of mid-2025, most of the F2F strategy's legislative pillars have either been abandoned, downgraded, or subsumed into broader, less prescriptive policy frameworks. While the strategy remains nominally in place, its transformative agenda has effectively been politically sidelined. The Von Der Leyen Commission *de facto* put F2F in abeyance by launching quite late in the day the so-called strategic dialogue with 29 major stakeholders.<sup>4</sup> To add legitimacy to the Commission's *advocacy mix*, technocratic arguments is accompanied by the deployment of instruments that promote

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<sup>2</sup> See <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52025DC0075> The Vision was criticized by environmental groups as the death of farm to fork, see <https://www.greenqueen.com.hk/eu-vision-for-agriculture-and-food-plant-based-protein-climate/>

<sup>3</sup> See [https://food.ec.europa.eu/animals/animal-welfare/eu-animal-welfare-legislation/animal-welfare-during-transport\\_en#revision-of-regulation-ec-no-12005](https://food.ec.europa.eu/animals/animal-welfare/eu-animal-welfare-legislation/animal-welfare-during-transport_en#revision-of-regulation-ec-no-12005)

<sup>4</sup> [https://commission.europa.eu/topics/agriculture-and-rural-development/strategic-dialogue-future-eu-agriculture\\_en](https://commission.europa.eu/topics/agriculture-and-rural-development/strategic-dialogue-future-eu-agriculture_en)



bottom-up participation, such as different forms of stakeholder engagement and in-depth dialogue. This was not the case for F2F where the so-called strategic dialogue ... arrived at the end!

To sum up, F2F was contested since its very beginning, its content and process were object of fierce criticism, most of all due to its ambiguous impacts – which were not even quantified/assessed. Contextual factors like the Russian invasion of the Ukraine added to those challenges leading to the 2023-2024 tractor movement which represented the culmination of years of widespread discontent with the strategy and was cannily and strategically exploited by policy actors such as the Visegrád 4 group and, most of all, the Hungarian government. F2F's demise has for sure many fathers! Yet, it is undeniable that a savvy communicator like Viktor Orban was extremely effective in surfing the protest wave in 2023-2024 and, also helped by the Hungarian Presidency of the Council in the second semester of 2024, picture himself as F2F's undertaker ([BBC 2024](#)).

The Hungarian advocacy against F2F epitomizes hence an extremely representative voice of the anti-F2F front - a voice that openly engaged in populist emotional advocacy against the strategy. More pertinently perhaps, F2F provided the perfect stage for emotionalized policy narratives.

#### **4. Data generation and validation**

To answer our questions and test the expectations, we constructed a corpus for the Hungarian government. The corpus we analyze spans from May 2020 (when F2F was officially launched) up to the end of 2024 (when F2F was de facto phased out/put in abeyance and Hungary terminated its Presidency of the European Council). All texts in our corpus are official, institutional documents. In terms of narration, this means that the narrator is always an institution and we are dealing with institutional policy narratives.

The corpus was constructed as follows. We focused only on official sources in the English language. The choice of working only with material in English is because the EU-level advocacy of the Hungarian government is always in English, i.e. addressed to a European audience, be it the European Commission, the other Member States or the Council's formations, especially the Agriculture and Fisheries Council configuration (Agrifish).

In more detail, we perused the following sources: the webpage of the Hungarian government ([abouthungary](#)), the webpage of the Permanent Representation of Hungary to the European Union and the webpage of the Hungarian Presidency of the EU Council. All entries tagging the Ministry of Agriculture, Farm to Fork and the Agrifish Council were pre-selected and read for relevance. At the end of this selection process, we were left with 53 individual policy narratives, from the first entry of the 22<sup>nd</sup> of May 2020<sup>5</sup> to the press release concerning the last Agrifish Council presided by Hungary, in December 2024. They were extracted from the official website of the Hungarian Government (19

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<sup>5</sup> Right after the F2F Communication was released by the European Commission, the Hungarian Ministry of Agriculture, István Nagy, gave an interview to the Hungarian news agency MTI whose content was later published under the section 'news' on the government's website)

entries), the webpage of the Permanent Representation of Hungary to the European Union (23 entries) and the webpage of the Hungarian Presidency of the EU Council (11 entries).

The question now is: what shall be done with this corpus to systematically garner its narrative structure and emotional content? The answer is two-fold. First of all, we observe, from the methodological point of view, our analysis takes place at the sentence level, hence all of the narratives were dissected into individual sentences. Each sentence was then coded according to two different approaches: narrative form and emotional content. On the one hand, we manually coded each sentence according to its belonging to one of the elements of the narrative form, i.e. setting, character (either hero, villain, victim, ally, or beneficiary), plot, moral, and doomsday. So at this stage we were only concerned with the NPF categories.

Second, we performed, first, a manual (i.e. human-based) coding of the emotion evoked by each sentence (meaning, we tagged each sentence with one of the NPF categories) and, second, an automated emotional coding based on a BERT model. The automated coding was for us a benchmark to check the accuracy of our coding. The BERT model was adapted, perfected and calibrated on the goals of the project by the MORES consortium and called roBERTa.<sup>6</sup>

The BERT model, with the roBERTa adaptations, is designed to capture joy, anger, fear, sadness, disgust, and the residual category of “no emotion”. Since our analytical framework is the NPF and more generally theories of the policy process (Weible 2024), we anchored our choice of emotions to the work of Pierce (2021 and 2024) on public policy processes, with some adaptations suggested by our knowledge of the nature of the controversies between Hungary and the European Commission. We knew for example that disgust was not something to be elicited in an official statement of the Hungarian representative in the Council, while frustration with “Brussels not listening” was likely to appear, although not included in roBERTa. We also wanted a relatively large catalogue of emotions, to avoid missing something we might not have thought about. This stands in contrast to the work on emotions carried out until now within the NPF, where, as we said, we typically find one emotion or a few, or just the broad category of ‘affect’.

## 5. Empirical analysis

Our catalogue starts with the positive emotions:

\_Hope

\_Joy

\_Pride

\_Enthusiasm This is a large category in Pierce (2021) and also for us. It includes or is elicited by sentences also referring primarily to Commitment, Defiance, Resolve, and Determination.

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<sup>6</sup> For a technical discussion of these improvements, see [https://huggingface.co/docs/transformers/en/model\\_doc/roberta](https://huggingface.co/docs/transformers/en/model_doc/roberta)

A positive emotion with high relational quality is Empathy-Compassion. We therefore included it in our list, reasoning that narratives may have sought to elicit sympathy for the farmers, for example.

Turning to negative emotions, and here again broadly following Pierce, we have:

\_Anger

\_Fear

\_Frustration

Anger includes or is strongly connected to Hatred, Moral disgust, and Contempt. Fear can appear on its own, or in connection with Anxiety. Fear is the response to a perceived (in our case, narrated) threat, whilst a narrator can elicit and induce anxiety by talking about threatening events that have not happened yet. Tab.2 presents the emotions considered in our study.

**Table 2 – Emotions in this study**

<b><i>EMOTION</i></b>	<b><i>TYPE</i></b>	<b><i>Includes the following...</i></b>
<b>1 Hope</b>	Positive	
<b>2 Joy</b>	Positive	
<b>3 Pride</b>	Positive	Commitment, Defiance, Resolve, Determination
<b>4 Enthusiasm</b>	Positive	
<b>5 Empathy</b>	Positive	
<b>6 Anger</b>	Negative	Hatred, Moral disgust, Contempt
<b>7 Fear</b>	Negative	Anxiety
<b>8 Frustration</b>	Negative	

Source: Authors (2025)

To ensure the validity of the coding, we followed a hybrid and multi-layered approach. In an initial stage, each sentence was coded by an individual researcher. In a second stage, carried out a week later, the coding was repeated from scratch by the same researcher and discrepancies were adjusted to guarantee consistency. This iterative scoring, carried out by a single knowledgeable coder, beyond facilitating reproducibility, trades some reliability (achieved by adding other coders) for a deep understanding of a policy text and its context. The material was then passed to a further knowledgeable coder who performed a second round of scores meant to validate the scores of the first round. Discrepancies on the NPF categories were resolved by the two researchers by looking into the specialized literature and discussing the individual scores. For what concerns the emotional tags assigned to the narrative units, when the human scores were different, the result of the automated analysis, if present, was used to assign the final value. In this sense we used roBERTa to benchmark our exercise.

Those cases where the human coded emotions differed, and the BERT model did not render any result, were discussed and agreed upon individually.

Once broken down in individual sentences, the Hungarian corpus includes 794 units. On average, each entry is 14.98 sentences-long, the longest entry being the portion of the 2024 Program of the Hungarian Presidency of the EU Council devoted to agriculture (48 sentences). Each of the entries possesses the minimum elements to make it a narrative according to the NPF: a policy problem/setting and a character.

## 5.1 Qualitative Remarks

Before discussing the quantitative evidence, we observe the quality of the overall advocacy of the Hungarian government on F2F. This advocacy is highly narrative. The narrator typically identifies with the hero (character self-attribution). In terms of qualitative remarks, the narrative advocacy is calibrated on the type of narrative stage in which the F2F battle took place (that is, a EU level *policy battle* mainly waged against the Commission and several Member States and bolstered by public protests). The narratives also track down pretty closely the diachronic steps of the Hungarian public advocacy against the Green Deal in general and F2F in particular. To clarify: the narrative and the moral are stable, the points are always the same. But, we found that the elements were calibrated around the main events and meetings of a given particular period, with Hungary moving toward a more collective register when speaking on behalf of the Visegrád allies.

The content of the Hungarian F2F discourse is rather straightforward, as well as consistent. The narrative is blunt, direct, hammering on the same points. Already in the first chronological entry, we find Minister Nagy declaring that F2F is a death sentence to European agriculture. The Commission is the Goliath strangling small countries and farmers with impossible tasks and targets; the farmers, therefore, are the victims, and the Hungarian government is the (tiny) David trying to protect the victims from the Brussels villain. Its advocacy, hence, is eminently an opposing/contrarian narrative.

To say ‘NO – We do not want to change’ you do not need as much detail as when you are trying to persuade Europeans to change the way they produce and consume food. This is reflected in the fact that the narratives are noticeably vague on policy detail, data, or evidence-based arguments. This makes sense because, as we said, the narrator is geared toward criticizing and attacking a position rather than building consensus for a new policy. As a result, when data and evidence are deployed, they are used to counter a report published by a perceived opponent. However, their framing is simply furious, the rhetoric accompanying them livid and even openly intimidatory:

“In a report published last week on agricultural subsidies in Hungary by the European Greens Group in the European Parliament, entitled ‘Where does the EU money go?’ the ill-informed author, a certain Leonárd Máriás, who is better known in Hungary as a regular contributor to staunchly anti-Orbán news sites like Mércé and – Soros-funded – Átlátszó.hu, makes a series of factually incorrect and biased

statements. The report, which takes aim at the agricultural subsidies regimes of Central and Eastern European countries, can be best described as a tsunami of lies with complete disregard for the facts.”<sup>7</sup>

There is one interesting twist in the observations we are making about evidence. There are sentences where the Hungarian narrator displays the rhetorical entrapment technique. The Commission did not present an impact assessment for F2F. In May 2020 (that is, Nagy’s “Green Deal is a death sentence for European agriculture” doomsday moment) this lack of impact assessment is remarked as a negative fact in a sentence. Nagy goes on to argue in the next sentence that:

“During the drawing up of strategies that are so comprehensive and have such a major effect, a responsible decision can only be made based on studies that analyse their expected effects in a suitable manner”<sup>8</sup>

Thus, the Commission is trapped in its own evidence-based principles. If it does not respect these principles, it must not proceed with policy proposals, especially those that are so far-reaching as the Green Deal.

Yet, facts seem to matter little amid this flamboyant rhetoric. Almost all the narratives default on a moral (that is, the policy solution, or call for action) that consists of a postponement of/block to F2F policies across the board. The main motivation is that its targets are unachievable and would lead to the death of European agriculture and a steep increase in prices. Consider also that in the period 2020/2021, after the F2F communication was issued and various legislative proposals were being prepared, the Covid-19 pandemic was still a major issue that could be used by the Hungarian narrators to make the case for at least a postponement of the most ambitious and far-reaching F2F initiatives.

Then, in terms of narrative dynamics across time, a major exogenous, contextual circumstance was rapidly picked up by the anti-F2F advocacy, that is, the Russian invasion of the Ukraine and its impacts on food markets, both the markets of the EU and global. The inflow of cheap Ukrainian grains in the EU was narrated as an existential threat by Hungary and served perfectly the purpose of strengthening the argument against F2F. Key to this, is the unilateral imposition of a ban on Ukrainian grain as a means to both preserve the profitability of Hungarian products and to show how the higher environmental standard imposed by F2F targets were self-defeating in a time of crisis. Hungary first, then, like in this sentence: “István Nagy, the agriculture minister, said Hungary is maintaining the import ban on Ukrainian agricultural produce as the interests of Hungarian farmers ‘always come first’”.<sup>9</sup>

Three other contextual elements influenced the Hungarian narrative in 2023 and 2024. They are the tractor protests (2023-2024), quickly patronized by Hungary, Orban and the V4 countries; the fact that Hungary presided over the EU Council in the second half of 2024; and the 2024 EU Parliamentary elections with the subsequent renewal of Von der Leyen. In light of these factors, the

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<sup>7</sup> <https://abouthungary.hu/blog/where-does-the-eu-money-go-to-small-and-middle-sized-farming-businesses>

<sup>8</sup> <https://2015-2019.kormany.hu/en/ministry-of-agriculture/news/if-brussels-implements-the-green-deal-based-on-the-recommendations-of-the-european-commission-it-could-mean-a-death-sentence-for-european-agriculture>

<sup>9</sup> <https://abouthungary.hu/news-in-brief/nagy-hungarian-farmers-always-come-first>

Hungarian rhetoric, while embracing the motivations and opposing advocacy of the tractors, becomes also less inflammatory and more institutional, reflecting both the coordination role played by the rotating Council presidency and the fact that after the elections, under the new Von der Leyen Commission, F2F had already morphed into the much-supported strategic dialogues and the ‘Vision’ we mentioned. Importantly, this allowed the Hungarian government to claim a policy victory during its Council presidency. The arc of F2F policy process, with its endogenous and exogenous factors, peaking in a widespread stakeholder contestation that allegedly killed the strategy, is then ostensibly reflected in the narrative arc of the Hungarian narrative corpus.

## 5.2 Quantitative Analysis

After the qualitative presentation of the corpus, we move now to the structure of the Hungarian narrative, that is, its *form* - this is our NPF focus. In a second step, we will connect narrative categories and emotions. Focusing on the narrative form first allows us to draw more systematic conclusions on the narrative strategy of the narrator, most of all if we assume that the emotional load embedded in the structural elements serves to convey the narrative content with more persuasion and traction on the audience. In terms of narrative elements, the Hungarian corpus is so composed (tab. 3)

**Table 3 – Narrative elements of the Hungarian corpus**

Narrative element	Percentage
Setting	10.58%
Character	35.64%
Hero	21.03%
Villain	5.29%
Victim	7.93%
Ally	1.38%
Plot	36.4%
Moral	15.99%
Doomsday	1.38%
Total	100%

Source: Authors (2025)

The narrator-hero is always the Hungarian Government (character self-attribution, as we said), typically expressed through the voice of Minister Nagy or State Secretary Feldman. The plot category stands at 36.4 per cent, but this does not mean that the narrator is systematic. Quite the opposite: we find fragments of plots, cause-and-effect elements that are isolated and not supported by evidence. The narration is poor on data, policy technicalities and supporting evidence. Even if Hungary is addressing the highly sophisticated stage of the EU, it does not feel the need to articulate a causal story in depth. This could be because of the choice to press on emotions instead of evidence – a point to which we will soon turn.

The Hungarian narrator may be rather superficial in deploying the plot of policy motivations and development, but almost each of the 53 entries has a call for action, as if there was the pressure or need to state ‘this is what it should be done’. The doomsday scenario, when present, has the same function: to move the audience towards the feasible, desirable scenario and avoid the doomsday.

Importantly (in light of what we said about narrators that “just say NO”), the moral systematically defaults on the defense of the status quo, that is, strengthening the CAP and pausing/halting F2F to substitute it with the strategic dialogues, i.e. forms of multilateral, intergovernmental and stakeholders-oriented bargaining. To achieve that, the argument goes on, we need agency, that is, actors. And here we find the hero, the victim and the villain. The self-characterization of the Hungarian Government as the hero is absolutely systematic: out of 167 sentences coded as hero character, only 3 of them do not cast Hungary, or the Hungarian government, as the hero of the story. The same goes for the assignment of the victim role to the farmers (regardless of the noticeable heterogeneity of this actor – think of the differences between small and big farms, agro-industry versus rural farming) and the depiction of the European Commission as the main culprit/villain.

Other villains are featured: Hungarian opposition parties, EU green parties and groups and, most interestingly, large agrifood firms that benefit from cheap Ukrainian export (“Nagy said in the interview that the European Union was protecting so-called Ukrainian farmers who were in fact US, Saudi and Dutch companies and investors”, 18/09/2023, <https://abouthungary.hu/news-in-brief/nagy-leaders-of-the-european-union-are-not-protecting-the-eus-interests>).

The European Commission can usefully be narratively portrayed as “Brussels”: we readers know from the beginning of the story that the “Brussels” folks are not going to provide a bright future and we should feel anxious about this entity. Take these two sentences: “Brussels can’t see that and supports Ukrainian producers rather than European farmers” “Brussels is endangering the future of European agriculture with its proposals”. Now, the first sentence is also a good example of how roBERTa cannot detect any emotion because there is no word pointing to an emotion. Instead, in the second sentence the gerund allows roBERTa to come to the same conclusion about emotions as the human coders. It is then time to move to emotions.

Let us start with the presence of emotions across the corpus by considering human coding (tab.4). Importantly, this draws on the researchers’ contextual knowledge of the policy process and its actors, revealing emotional content also where one is not apparent.

**Tab. 4 - Emotions across the corpus – human coding**

Emotion	Percentage
No emotion	45.21
Fear (including anxiety)	11.84
Enthusiasm	8.18
Hope	7.80
Pride	7.43
Anger	6.93
Empathy	6.30
Frustration	4.40
Joy	1.38
Other: non-identifiable emotional sentences (emotions not included in our list)	0.5%
Total	100%

Source: Authors (2025)

As mentioned, the same units were coded automatically by the large language model roBERTa, trained to detect these emotions: Anger, Disgust, Fear, Joy, Sadness and none of them. Table 5 presents the results.

**Tab. 5 - Emotions – roBERTa values**

Emotion	Percentage
Anger	6%
Fear	3.35%
Joy	1.86%
Sadness	0.5%
None of them	88.3%
Total	100%

Source: Authors (2025)

In sum, according to the automated emotional coding of the corpus, the narratives are not particularly loaded with emotions, but an expert reading and coding of the same corpus reveals a much heavier reliance on emotional discourse. To elaborate on what we said about “Brussels” a minute ago: an automated coding driven by a trained LLM reads each sentence at its face value, lacking the contextual understanding and policy knowledge that may lead a human coder to detect emotional content in a word-by-word neutral sentence. To make another example: a sentence like “We cannot impose unrealistic quotas or burdensome rules on farmers and companies, but should offer practical support for them” is coded as “None of them” by the model, but a human coder would immediately link the adjectives *unrealistic* and *burdensome* to frustration or even anger. Moreover, one sentence can indeed have an emotional content on our list of emotions but fall



outside the scope of the five emotions embedded in the model. As we said, the model was in any case useful to confirm that we did not miss any emotional sentence (there are no sentences qualified as emotional by roBERTa and non-emotional by us) and to adjudicate cases where the two coders had come to a different conclusion about the type of emotion.

To then go back to the human-assisted emotional analysis, our expert human coding reveals a noticeable emotional load. Negative and positive emotions are almost the same (23,2 versus 24.9 per cent). This is somewhat surprising since we expected negative emotions to dominate. Having said that, the prevalent emotion is however negative and fear + anger together get close to 20 per cent. Anger is also on top of the roBERTa coding calculation of emotions.

To look into the relationship between narratives and emotions, we provide a simple indicator of narrative emotionalization where 0 indicates that no sentence is emotionalized and 1 that all are. To do this, we divide the number of sentences showing emotion by the total number of sentences. This indicator has a value of 0.55. This rough indicator tells us that more than half of the sentences featured in the corpus are indeed emotional. We are in quite uncharted territory here, because we are not aware of other studies using indicators like ours, but if the number of emotionalized sentences passes the 50% mark (i.e.  $> 0.5$ ) we would say that the narrative, considered in its overall dimension, is highly emotional. Considering that we are talking about institutional communication between a government and its partners, and not about the advocacy of a pressure group that is 'outside the tent' of decision-makers, this level of emotionalization has surprised us.

Let us now look at how emotions map onto narrative elements. Starting with the setting, we find that the policy problem and the policy background where the narrative takes place are rarely emotionalized (71.4 per cent of setting sentences show no emotions). Yet, when it is, the driving emotion is fear (19.05 per cent), reflecting the wish of the narrator/hero to set the stage for a doomsday story (see below). When the setting is emotionalized and no doomsday is implied, it is typically counterbalanced (entries 20 and 21) by the hero who leverages hope in promoting specific policy solutions (elements of the moral).

We now move to the plot, another narrative element where emotions are not so prominent. The plot includes procedures, processes, actions that will follow a meeting, the identification (in the narrative) of the Conclusions of a Council meeting, and so on. In short, sentences like Ministers discussed this, the Parliament discussed that. Two-thirds of the sentences that contain plot elements do not display any emotion.

The opposite holds true for characters. It is in these categories (most of all the hero, the victims and the villain) that we expect to find a consistent resort to emotions. In general, out of the 283 sentences coded as revolving around the characters (which together make up 35.6 per cent of the total), only 48 (17 per cent) were scored as showing no emotions. In other words, the indicator of narrative emotionalization discussed above would be as high as 0.83 for the characters!

When it comes to our expectations regarding the emotionalization of the individual characters, we start with the hero. We find that the hero's role, actions and purposes are, as expected, mainly

framed through positive emotions such as enthusiasm (28.7 per cent), pride (21.6 per cent), and hope (7.8 per cent). As expected by looking at the aggregate characters' sample, only 22 per cent of sentences attributed to the hero category do not feature any emotion (as opposed to the 45.2 per cent of the whole corpus). Among the negative emotions, only fear plays a role featuring in just less than 10 per cent of the hero-related sentences. This presence of fear is justified because, in some instances, the hero must act to avoid doomsday.

To give some examples beyond the numbers, a sentence like the following, clearly connects the hero with pride, even if the context is institutional (mentioning the European Court of Auditors):

“As a vital element in the operation and transparency of the system, Hungary has one of the most stringent and sophisticated monitoring systems in relation to the disbursement of agricultural subsidies, which is not only subject to strict accreditation but is also regularly reviewed by the European Commission and the European Court of Auditors.”

Moving to the villain, the connection between its role in the narratives and anger (74 per cent) and frustration (14.3 per cent) is crystal-clear (e.g. “Brussels is endangering the future of European agriculture with its proposals”). Interestingly, the share of non-emotional sentences among the villain category drops here to an incredibly low 9.5 per cent. This aspect is even more marked when we look into the victim category, where only 3 per cent of sentences are emotion-free. No victim without emotion, then. The victim, hence, (not surprisingly) is the most emotionalized category with 35 per cent of sentences loaded with fear and 20.6 per cent with anger and frustration respectively. Empathy features in only 14.3 per cent of the sentences attributed to the victim. The exemplary sentence for the victim reads as:

“European farmers have had to face many challenges in the recent past, such as extreme weather events caused by climate change, high input costs, the negative effects of war, or market disruptions caused by increasing imports from third countries. At the same time, they have to meet increasingly stringent production standards and cope with increased administrative burdens”.

The sentences linked to the moral of the story typically offer strong suggestions, either directly or indirectly (pointing to a certain ideal, first best state of reality -policy objective(s)- to be achieved). As such, they are less emotionally loaded than narrative elements like characters. 45.7 per cent of sentences associated with the NPF category of moral are indeed emotion-free, reflecting the average of the whole sample. The dominant emotions are, not surprisingly, in the positive spectrum, with hope dominating (23.6 per cent), followed by empathy (7.9 per cent) and enthusiasm (7.1 per cent). From the point of view of the narrative structure, the moral elements are linked to the hero. The hero may act driven by and driving anger or fear, but this character ends up expressing hope in or enthusiasm for a positive finale through moral-connected statements. Negative emotions are rather rare (fear featuring in 7.9 per cent of the moral sentences), indicating that the narrator/hero is not interested in evoking doomsday scenarios.

This was one of our expectations, that is, the resort to doomsday scenarios as a *trope* of emotionalized populist narratives. This is proved in quality, a bit less so in quantity, apparently. In fact, doomsday sentences are rare in the corpus (1.4 per cent). Yet, despite rare, they are critical to

the interpretation of the Hungarian overall narrative in that they underpin the whole structure of the Hungarian advocacy. Remember that the May 2020 doomsday speech by Nagy is the master document of the Hungarian opposition to F2F. This is the speech on the Green Deal as death sentence for European agriculture.<sup>10</sup> A powerful villain endangers the victims and only the intervention of the hero can avoid the disaster. Rare as they are, the doomsday sentence are qualitatively crucial and, most importantly, they are loaded with negative emotions, fear (82 per cent) and anger (18 per cent).

## 6. Conclusions

We have analyzed the institutional policy narratives of a populist government in relatively sophisticated EU settings like the ones of F2F. These technical settings are also rich in contestation and pressure groups have been very vocal. So the question we had in mind when planning this study was whether the Hungarian government would play the card of technical institutional narratives, still reach in characters, plots, moral but not particularly emotional, or go for emotionalization. Can populist institutional discourse be emotional? The other research questions were about the emotions that are more or less important (the list of emotions, so to speak), the balance between positive and negative emotions, and the connection between NPF categories and emotions.

The Hungarian government articulates its position with policy narratives that are emotional. As expected, they are blunt, basic AND emotional narratives. There is not much difference in who the individual narrator is within the Hungarian government. The narrative always comes from the same hymn sheet. Positive and negative emotions are more or less present in the same quantity. We expected the prevalence of negative emotions in the opposition to F2F but empirically this is not the case. The new NPF categories we piloted (Ally and Beneficiary) are irrelevant (ally is rare, beneficiary absent) but they show up in the narrative of the European Commission (according to our raw data) so it is worth keeping both in mind in future research on this topic.

As far as technical registers of story-telling go, they are absent. To argue for NO CHANGE is not demanding in terms of evidence. It is those who want to change who have to explain in detail why the change is needed. But this lack of evidence-related elements comes with an interesting exception: rhetorical entrapment. The Hungarian government is most likely not interested in cost-benefit analysis, risk assessment, foresight and other evidence-based tools used in policy appraisal. But when the European Commission does not carry out an impact assessment, and indeed this procedure was not used by F2F, Hungary points to that absence, accusing the Commission to be political and not evidence-based.

Our main curiosity, in terms of theories of the policy process, was the association between narrative elements and emotions. This relationship has been conceptualized, but not much empirically studied

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<sup>10</sup> <https://2015-2019.kormany.hu/en/ministry-of-agriculture/news/if-brussels-implements-the-green-deal-based-on-the-recommendations-of-the-european-commission-it-could-mean-a-death-sentence-for-european-agriculture>

in the NPF literature. Our case shows that the NPF categories map onto emotions. The plot and the setting are not high in emotionalization. However, as expected, the range of emotions we considered shows up massively in the characters. Our index of emotionalization is indeed particularly high when we turn to characters. The hero is mainly associated with pride. The villain triggers anger and frustration. The victim is almost invariably associated with emotions. The moral is dominated by hope, empathy and enthusiasm.

There are some dynamics over time, especially when major exogenous factors like the invasion of the Ukraine impact on the EU. The inflow of Ukrainian grains is factored into the narrative of opposition to the Green Deal. The same applies to the tractors protesting in Brussels. When Hungary takes on institutional roles, the tone slightly changes, but the points made in relation to F2F are always the same. With the turn to strategic dialogues, Hungary has a reason to claim a kind of victory, so the narrative becomes less flamboyant. The narratives make the same points over and over again, but they follow the arc of the events.

Methodologically, manual coding is superior: emotions are not elicited by single words but by semantics. It is the way meanings are constructed in a sentence or a story that triggers emotional reactions in the audience. Referring to the European Commission as “Brussels” is already an emotional posture, differentiating ‘them’ from ‘us’. We remain skeptical of dictionary approaches to the detection of emotions in sentences like this. But large language models can be used to benchmark and to solve divergences of opinions among human coders.

Future research should look at the narrative of the European Commission, since there were at least two visions in the F2F saga. We cannot make full sense of a contested policy by considering one narrator only. How do the two narrators differ in their policy narratives and emotions? Do they talk to each other - or do they behave like the two proverbial ships crossing at sea in the night? It would also be useful to look into this chicken and egg question: is the character that brings emotions, or are emotions that make up a character? This question emerges from the strong correlation we found between characters and emotions. Finally, the big normative question is ‘so what’? Assuming we understand everything about populist narratives in sophisticated yet highly contested policy areas, what should those who care about liberal democracy and European integration do? Should we fight fire with fire, that is, populist emotional narratives with pro-European emotional narratives?

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