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INSTITUTIONAL BRANDING AND COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES AS FACTORS IN SHAPING PUBLIC OPINION ON EU CLIMATE POLICY

ІНСТИТУЦІЙНИЙ БРЕНДИНГ І КОМУНІКАЦІЙНІ СТРАТЕГІЇ ЯК ЧИННИКИ ФОРМУВАННЯ СУСПІЛЬНОЇ ДУМКИ ЩОДО КЛІМАТИЧНОЇ ПОЛІТИКИ ЄС

Petropavlovska Svitlana

Candidate of Economic Sciences, Docent,
Associate Professor at the Department of Marketing,
National University «Kyiv Aviation Institute»
ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3879-7559>

Boichuk Kateryna

Undergraduate Student in Political Science,
University of Vienna
ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0007-8306-0226>

Петропавловська Світлана Євгенівна

Національний університет «Київський авіаційний інститут»

Бойчук Катерина Михайлівна

Віденський університет

This article examines the role of institutional branding and communication strategies in shaping public opinion regarding the European Union's climate policy. A conceptual model is proposed in which institutional trust acts as a mediator between communication signals and perceptions of policy fairness. Based on descriptive and statistical analysis of secondary data from pan-European surveys, hypotheses regarding the relationship between trust in EU institutions, assessments of the fairness of climate measures, and the level of support for them have been tested. Graphs provide statistical evidence of a correlation between trust in the EU and, consequently, the perception of climate policy as fair. The results confirm the significance of institutional branding as a strategic resource for legitimacy and demonstrate that the communicative framing of compensation mechanisms significantly influences public perception of reforms.

Keywords: institutional branding, communication strategies, public opinion formation, climate policy, green transition, trust.

У статті досліджується роль інституційного брендингу та комунікаційних стратегій у формуванні суспільної думки щодо кліматичної політики Європейського Союзу. Актуальність теми зумовлена зростанням значення суспільної підтримки для реалізації політики зеленого переходу, який супроводжується нерівномірним розподілом витрат і вигод, а також високим рівнем невизначеності для громадян. Метою дослідження є розробка концептуальної моделі, що пояснює взаємозв'язок між інституційною довірою, комунікаційними сигналами та сприйняттям справедливості кліматичної політики ЄС. Методологічну основу становить мультидисциплінарний підхід політичної науки та маркетингу, у межах яких інституції ЄС розглядаються як бренд, а комунікаційні стратегії – як інструмент формування довіри та легітимності. Використано описово-статистичний аналіз вторинних даних загальноєвропейських опитувань, що дає змогу оцінити зв'язки між рівнем довіри до інституцій ЄС, сприйняттям справедливості кліматичних заходів та підтримкою відповідної політики. Отримані результати свідчать про наявність системного зв'язку між інституційною довірою та оцінками справедливості кліматичної політики. Показано, що вищий рівень довіри до інституцій ЄС асоціюється з більш позитивним сприйняттям розподільних і процедурних аспектів політики, що, своєю чергою, підвищує її суспільну прийнятність. Доведено, що комунікаційний фреймінг, зокрема акцент на компенсаційних механізмах і соціальній справедливості, знижує невизначеність і посилює ефект довіри. Інституційний брендинг виступає як механізм, що трансформує абстрактні політичні цілі у зрозумілі та легітимні для громадян наративи. Прак-



тична цінність дослідження полягає у можливості використання запропонованої моделі для вдосконалення комунікаційних стратегій у сфері кліматичної політики. Отримані результати можуть бути застосовані для підвищення ефективності публічної комунікації, зміцнення довіри до інституцій та забезпечення вищого рівня підтримки реформ у контексті зеленого переходу в умовах багаторівневого врядування.

Ключові слова: інституційний брендинг, комунікаційні стратегії, формування суспільної думки, кліматична політика, зелений перехід, довіра.

Statement of the problem. The green transition is viewed as a just and inclusive process of transforming economies towards low-carbon models, minimising social risks and ensuring employment. Citizens' perceptions of it are shaped by distributive, procedural and recognised justice [5; 24]. Despite technological and economic considerations, public support is a key factor in the success of climate policy. In this context, decarbonisation serves not only as a regulatory instrument but also as a communicative process for establishing legitimacy.

Analysis of recent research and publications. Over the last decade, the EU's climate policy has become a central pillar of the European political economy, anchored in the 2050 climate-neutrality goal and codified in the European Green Deal [10]. European Commission documents further frame this transformation as a socio-economic restructuring that entails costs, compensation, solidarity, and legitimacy [11]. Syntheses of public-opinion research by Drews and Van den Bergh [8] indicate that support depends on perceived distributive justice, expected private costs, and efficiency, particularly for price instruments that directly affect households. Complementing this, Carley and Konisky [5] show that transitions perceived as unfair erode support, whereas fair policy design and implementation strengthen legitimacy.

International analyses by Davidovic and Haring [7] link institutional trust to the adoption of costly or politically sensitive climate policies; cross-national differences in support are partly explained by the quality of governance and political trust. In the same vein, Fairbrother, Johansson Sevä, and Kulin [14] argue that political trust shapes how climate concerns translate into support for carbon pricing and other price instruments; when trust is low, environmental beliefs do not necessarily convert into policy backing. Extending this, Kulin and Johansson Sevä [20] differentiate between trust in partial and impartial institutions, identifying the institutional locus of trust within multilevel governance. Beyond trust and costs, equity considerations also structure evaluations of green transitions. Schaffer [23] finds that support rises

when compensation is clear, transparent, and targeted, reducing concerns about opportunism or misallocation. From an energy-justice perspective, Sovacool and Dworkin [24] contend that policy acceptability rests on distributive, procedural, and perceived fairness. Conversely, Tatham and Peters [25] demonstrate that political vulnerability emerges when policies are framed or experienced as unfair, as illustrated by the French fuel-tax protests.

Research likewise underscores the communicative and symbolic dimensions of climate governance. Karens, Eshuis, Klijn, and Voets [18] provide experimental evidence that branding public institutions can increase citizen trust and support for complex policy choices. From a corporate-branding and social-responsibility perspective, Maon, Swaen, and De Roeck [21] argue that consistent, values-based communication strengthens legitimacy amid heightened risk and sensitivity. Related work on place branding by Foroudi, Gupta, Kitchen, Foroudi, and Nguyen [15] shows how image and reputation shape audience perceptions. Applied to the EU context, signaling solidarity, fairness, and long-term benefits can improve perceived fairness of Green Deal measures.

Despite these advances, notable gaps remain. Economic impact, institutional trust, and communication are often examined in parallel rather than within an integrated framework of public-opinion formation, which underestimates how communicative cues structure interpretations of goals, beneficiaries, and compensation. Moreover, although trust frequently appears as an explanatory variable, fewer studies investigate how it is built or undermined through branding, framing, and reputational messaging during contentious climate reforms. For a multilevel polity such as the EU, the interaction between supranational communication and national political and media narratives remains under-theorized, despite its likely importance for shaping transnational perceptions of justice and legitimacy.

Highlighting previously unresolved parts of the overall problem. Despite a substantial body of research, a number of aspects of the problem remain under-explored. First and

foremost, the existing literature predominantly analyses support for climate policy either through material interests and distributional consequences, or through the general level of political trust, without systematically integrating the communication dimension into explanations of public opinion formation [8; 7]. As a result, communication strategy is often viewed as a secondary or background factor, even though it is precisely this that largely determines how citizens interpret policy objectives, its target audience, compensation mechanisms and expected consequences.

The question of how EU institutions shape citizens' perceptions of the fairness of climate policy through communicative signals remains under-researched. Most studies highlight the importance of trust as an explanatory variable, but rarely explore how trust is formed, maintained or eroded through communication, symbolic positioning and reputational messaging. In other words, the procedural dimension has not been sufficiently studied: not only whether EU citizens trust the institutions, but also how EU institutions construct the foundations for this trust through communication in the context of conflictual and costly policies.

Another unresolved issue is the weak integration of marketing approaches to institutional branding into research on climate policy. In political science, the EU is largely analysed as a system of governance, whereas from a marketing perspective it can be viewed as a brand that produces meanings, values and expectations for different audiences [18; 15]. It is precisely this dimension that is particularly important for explaining why the same climate measures can be perceived either as an expression of fair solidarity or as a sign of bureaucratic pressure and unequal distribution of costs. Thus, there is a lack of research explaining the link between institutional branding, trust and the legitimacy of climate reforms.

It should be emphasised separately that studies of public opinion on climate policy often focus on outcome variables – support for taxes, attitudes towards carbon regulation, willingness to pay a higher price for energy – but rarely analyse the intermediate mechanisms shaping these positions. One such mechanism is the perception of fairness, which effectively acts as a cognitive-normative filter between institutional trust and willingness to support reform. Although some studies highlight the importance of fairness, this variable is not always conceptualised as a product of communicative influence and is not

considered in relation to an institution's brand characteristics [5; 23].

Similarly, the question of how exactly the framing of compensation mechanisms influences public perception of policy remains under-explored. Existing research shows that citizens are significantly more supportive of climate measures if they see a clear, transparent and targeted compensation system [4]. At the same time, it is less clear how these very compensation instruments should be communicated so that they actually strengthen trust and reduce feelings of injustice. Consequently, there is a lack of work in which compensation is analysed not only as a material instrument, but as an element of the communication strategy and brand communication of EU institutions.

Another gap concerns the multi-level nature of communication within the EU. Climate policy is shaped at the supranational level, but its public interpretation largely takes place within national political and media contexts. This means that public opinion regarding EU policy does not emerge within a single communication space, but at the intersection of European messages, national narratives, local economic interests and party competition. Despite the importance of this aspect, the academic literature lacks integrated models that explain exactly how EU institutional communication interacts with national narratives and influences the formation of public opinion regarding the fairness of the green transition [2; 19].

Furthermore, insufficient attention has been paid to the fact that public opinion on climate policy is shaped not only by rational-economic considerations but also by symbolic ones. Citizens assess policy not only in terms of expected costs or benefits, but also in terms of whether it aligns with the image of an institution they consider competent, honest, responsive to public needs, and capable of acting in the interests of diverse groups. This is precisely why the EU's communication strategy must be viewed more broadly than simply informing the public about the content of reforms: it is a tool for building legitimacy, trust and a sense of fairness. In this respect, the relationship between institutional branding and the shaping of public opinion remains insufficiently explored, both empirically and conceptually.

Thus, the unresolved aspect of the overall problem lies in the lack of a comprehensive approach that would combine: 1) research into public support for climate policy; 2) approaches to institutional trust and legitimacy; 3) analysis of

communication strategy as a factor in shaping public opinion; 4) a marketing understanding of institutional branding as a mechanism for symbolically influencing citizens' perceptions of policy fairness. It is precisely by filling this gap that we can more accurately explain why citizens support or do not support EU climate policy, as well as how communication strategies can enhance its public acceptability.

Formation of the objectives of the article (task statement). The aim of the article is to develop a conceptual model explaining the relationship between institutional trust, communication strategies and the perception of the fairness of the European Union's climate policy. The research aims to integrate approaches from political science and marketing, within which EU institutions are viewed as a brand and communication as a tool for building trust, legitimacy and public support for reforms.

To achieve this objective, the following tasks have been identified:

1) to summarise theoretical approaches to the analysis of support for climate policy, institutional trust and perceptions of fairness [8; 5];

2) to substantiate the role of institutional trust as a mechanism for reducing uncertainty in policy perception [16; 7];

3) to integrate marketing approaches to institutional branding and communicative framing into the analysis of climate policy [18; 15];

4) to formulate hypotheses regarding the relationship between trust, fairness and support for climate measures;

5) propose a design for an empirical study based on data from the European Social Survey.

Summary of the main research material. Comparative studies of climate policy show that public support is shaped primarily by perceptions of the distributional consequences of policy. The most consistent determinants of support are assessments of fairness, expected costs and the effectiveness of measures [8]. This is particularly evident in the case of instruments with a direct impact on households, such as carbon or energy taxes, where citizens assess policy through the prism of the distribution of costs and benefits [5].

When costs are concentrated on specific groups or regions, the likelihood of the policy being perceived as unfair increases, which reduces its political acceptability. Conversely, the presence of transparent and reliable compensation mechanisms reduces resistance, as citizens are less concerned about opportunistic behaviour on the part of the state [4; 23]. Thus, perceptions of

fairness act as a key mediator between policy characteristics and the level of support for it.

In the context of the European Union, these processes are complicated by the multi-level nature of governance. EU climate policy combines supranational objectives with national implementation, and also includes mechanisms for the inter-state redistribution of resources [1]. As a result, citizens evaluate policies not only in terms of internal fairness, but also through their perception of European solidarity and the balance between countries [19].

In such circumstances, institutional trust plays a key role. It functions as a cognitive heuristic, enabling citizens to assess complex policies in conditions of limited information. Higher levels of trust are associated with greater expectations of competence, impartiality and the effective use of resources, which increases willingness to support even costly policy measures [16; 14; 7].

This study proposes to expand the traditional understanding of trust by integrating marketing approaches to institutional branding. Within this approach, EU institutions are viewed as a brand that shapes citizens' perceptions through communication signals. Clearly positioning the institution as a reliable, competent and socially responsible actor can strengthen trust and influence policy evaluation [18].

Communication framing plays a key role in this process. In particular, an emphasis on compensation mechanisms, the protection of vulnerable groups and long-term benefits can reduce uncertainty and enhance the perception of policy fairness. Research on branding shows that consistent communication of values and social responsibility strengthens legitimacy even in the case of policies with short-term costs [21].

Furthermore, the place branding approach demonstrates that perceptions of an institution are shaped not only by policy outcomes but also by its image and reputation. In the case of the EU, this means that the communication strategies of the Green Deal serve as a tool for shaping expectations of fairness and trust [15].

Integrating these approaches allows us to view institutional trust not merely as an explanatory variable, but as the result of communicative interaction between institutions and citizens. Accordingly, trust acts as the mechanism through which communication strategies influence perceptions of the fairness of climate policy.

The theoretical basis for this mechanism is Easton's systemic model, within which the political system transforms input demands into policy decisions, whilst citizens' assessments

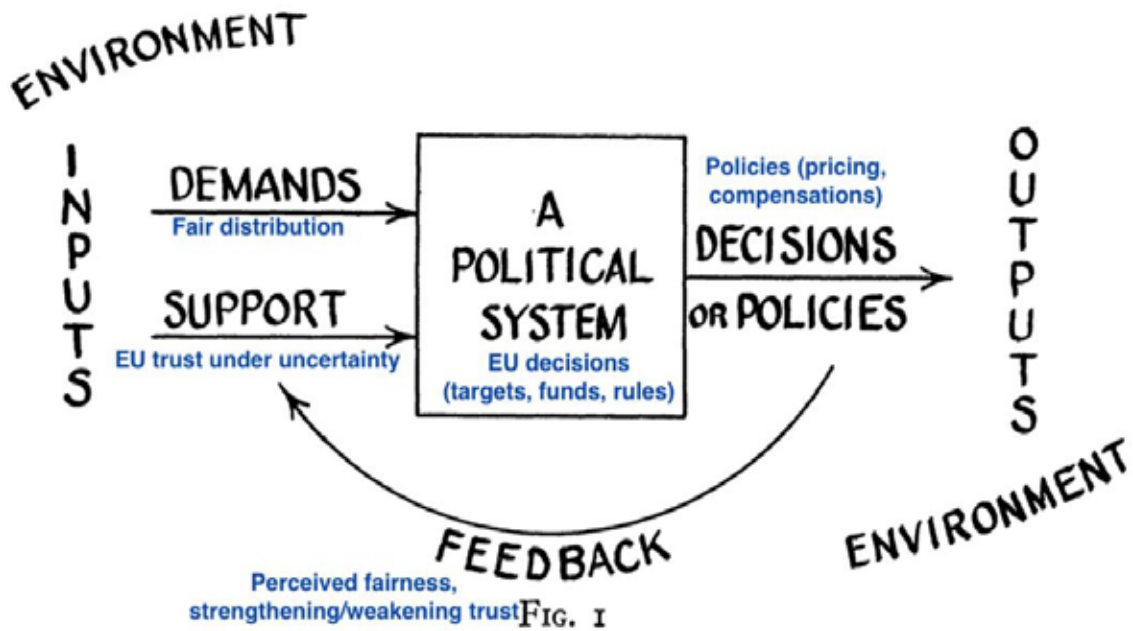


Figure 1. Conceptual model of institutional trust and fairness in climate governance in the EU

Source: compiled by the author based on Easton, 1957 [9]

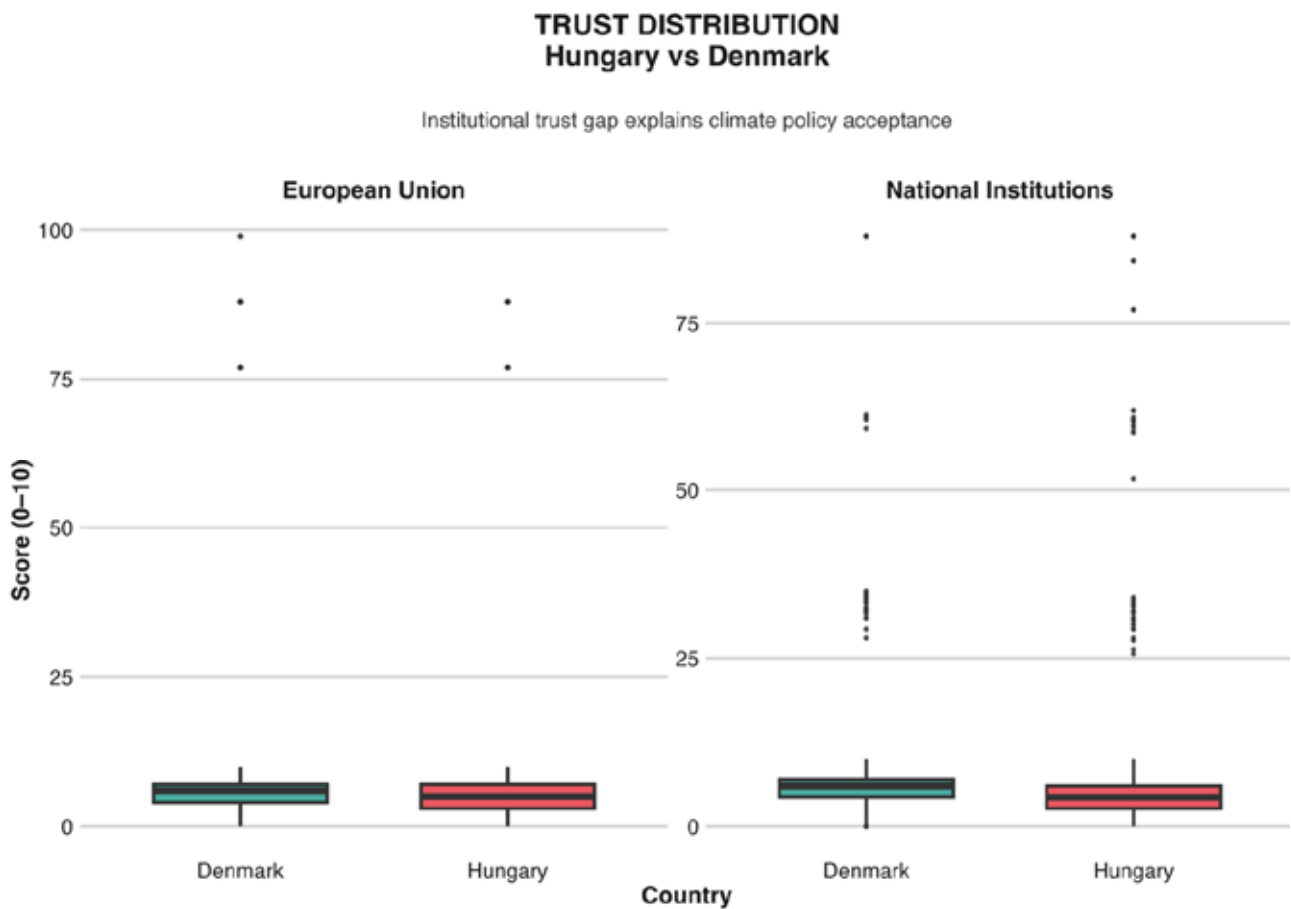


Figure 2. Distribution of Trust in the European Union and National Institutions in Denmark and Hungary

Source: compiled by the author based on European Social Survey (ESS Round 9) data [13]

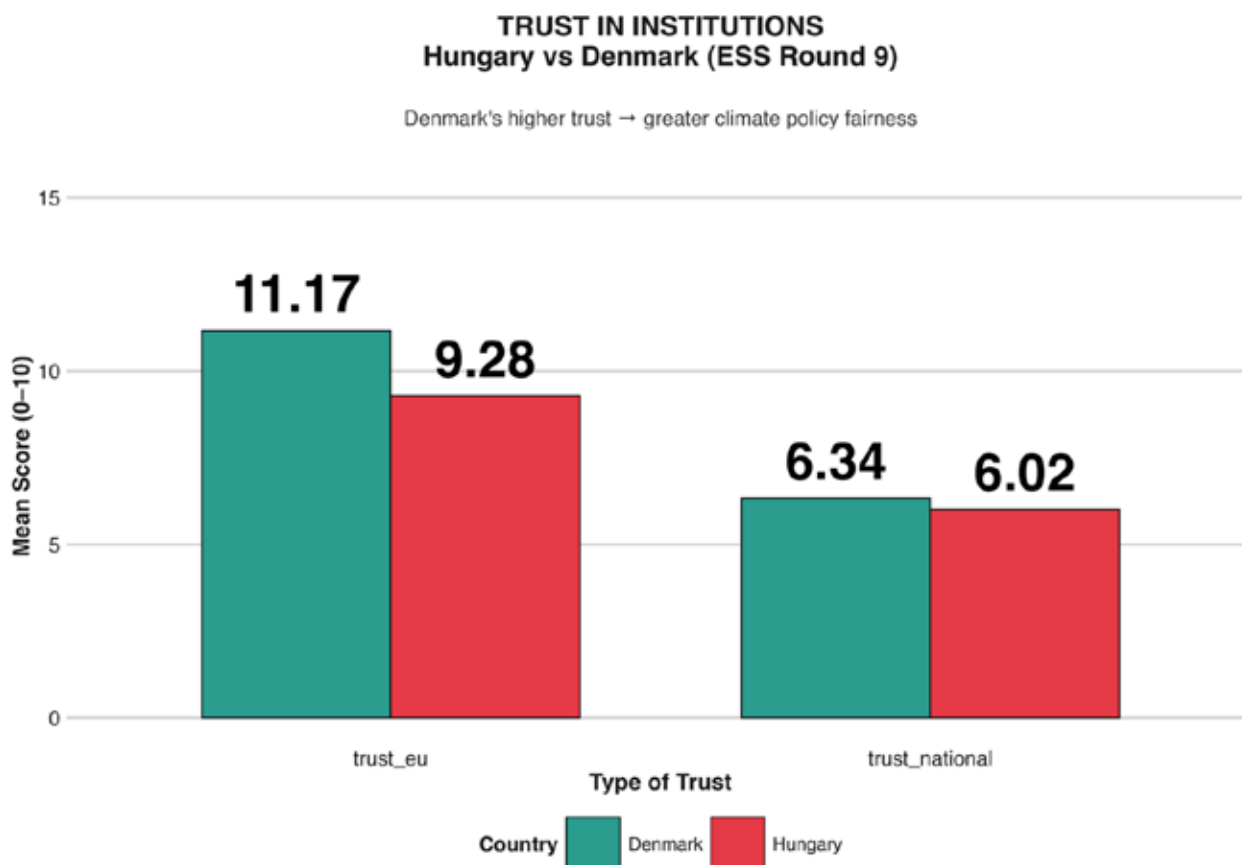


Figure 3. Mean Levels of Trust in the European Union and National Institutions in Denmark and Hungary

Source: compiled by the author based on European Social Survey (ESS Round 9) data [13]

form the feedback loop [9]. In this context, trust in the EU

acts as a form of diffuse support that shapes the interpretation of policy outcomes. If a policy is perceived as fair, this reinforces support; if as unfair, it undermines it [25].

Descriptive statistics from the European Social Survey data are used to illustrate the theoretical model. A comparison of Denmark and Hungary demonstrates significant differences in levels of trust in EU institutions.

The results show that countries with higher levels of institutional trust exhibit a more positive attitude towards climate policy, which is consistent with previous research [14].

Further analysis of the distribution of individual trust ratings confirms this pattern.

Thus, even basic descriptive statistics demonstrate an empirically consistent trend: institutional trust is linked to perceptions of policy fairness, which provides a basis for further quantitative testing of hypotheses.

Conclusions. This article substantiates a conceptual model that combines institutional

trust, communication strategies and perceptions of fairness as key factors in shaping public opinion on the European Union's climate policy. The results confirm that support for the green transition policy is determined not only by economic parameters, but primarily by how citizens interpret it through the prism of trust and fairness.

Institutional trust acts as a mechanism for reducing uncertainty, shaping expectations regarding the competence and impartiality of policy, which increases willingness to support even costly measures. At the same time, trust is largely shaped through communication processes.

The key conclusion is that a communication strategy serves as a tool for transforming trust into public support. In particular, framing policy by emphasising the fair distribution of costs, transparency of compensation and the protection of vulnerable groups enhances its legitimacy. Thus, communication fulfils not only an informative but also a normative function, influencing assessments of fairness.

Institutional branding allows the EU to be viewed as a brand that shapes citizens' perceptions through signals of reliability, competence and solidarity. Consistent communication of these characteristics strengthens trust and facilitates the acceptance of climate reforms.

Within a systemic approach, trust acts as a form of diffuse support, whilst perceptions of fairness serve as a feedback mechanism that

determines policy stability. This underscores the strategic role of communication in ensuring the long-term legitimacy of climate measures.

In practice, the results show that effective climate policy requires a clearly structured communication strategy focused on transparency, consistency and social justice. Future research prospects involve a deeper analysis of communication mechanisms in various national contexts.

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