Przegląd Europejski – European Studies Quarterly, **ISSN: 1641-2478**
vol. 2026, no. 3
Copyright © by Marek Ćwiklicki, Anna Mirzyńska, Magdalena Zajączkowska, 2026
Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 (CC BY 4.0)
http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/
DOI: https://doi.org/10.31338/1641-2478pe.3.26.7

Between formal adoption and recontextualisation: the substantive hollowing of the circular economy concept in Polish parliamentary and media discourse[1]

Marek Ćwiklicki, *Krakow University of Economics (Cracow, Poland)*
E-mail: marek.cwiklicki@uek.krakow.pl
http://orcid.org/0000-0002-5298-0210

Anna Mirzyńska, *Krakow University of Economics (Cracow, Poland)*
E-mail: anna.mirzynska@uek.krakow.pl
http://orcid.org/0000-0001-5446-938X

Magdalena Zajączkowska, *Krakow University of Economics (Cracow, Poland)*
E-mail: magdalena.zajaczkowska@uek.krakow.pl
http://orcid.org/0000-0001-7449-8698

Abstract
This article examines why Poland's formal adoption of EU Circular Economy framework failed to produce substantive policy change. Combining documentary analysis of legislative instruments with frame analysis of 65 parliamentary and media statements (December 2015 – June 2025), the authors identify three mechanisms – cognitive narrowing, motivational subordination, and hierarchical destabilisation – associated with substantive hollowing, i.e. formal adoption with progressive erosion of transformative content. Findings from the analysed corpus suggest that compliance rhetoric systematically displaced systemic framing across all reception phases with implications for how ideational Europeanisation is studied beyond formal compliance.
Keywords: circular economy, Europeanisation, recontextualisation, formal adoption, substantive hollowing

[1] The publication presents the findings of scientific research conducted as part of the Project No. 023/GAZ/2025/POT, financed via a subsidy granted to Krakow University of Economics.

Między formalną adaptacją a rekontekstualizacją: merytoryczne wyjałowienie koncepcji gospodarki o obiegu zamkniętym w polskim dyskursie parlamentarnym i medialnym

Streszczenie

W artykule zbadano, dlaczego formalne przyjęcie przez Polskę ram unijnych gospodarki o obiegu zamkniętym nie przełożyło się na istotną zmianę polityki publicznej. Łącząc analizę dokumentów legislacyjnych z analizą ramową 65 wypowiedzi parlamentarnych i medialnych z okresu od grudnia 2015 r. do czerwca 2025 r., autorzy identyfikują trzy mechanizmy – zawężenie poznawcze, podporządkowanie motywacyjne oraz destabilizację hierarchiczną – powiązane ze zjawiskiem substancjalnego wyjałowienia, rozumianego jako formalne przyjęcie idei przy jednoczesnej stopniowej erozji jej transformacyjnej treści. Wyniki analizy wskazują, że w badanym korpusie narracja zgodności regulacyjnej stopniowo wypierała systemowe rozumienie gospodarki o obiegu zamkniętym. Ustalenia te wnoszą wkład do badań nad europeizacją idei, pokazując ograniczenia analiz opartych wyłącznie na formalnej zgodności instytucjonalnej.

Słowa kluczowe: gospodarka o obiegu zamkniętym, europeizacja, rekontekstualizacja, formalne przyjęcie, merytoryczne wyjałowienie

1. Introduction

Poland has formally adopted the European Union's Circular Economy (CE) framework: key directives have been transposed, implementation deadlines largely met, and a national roadmap published, resembling pace-setting adoption (Börzel 2002). From a formal legal standpoint, compliance is on track. However, when parliamentarians and journalists represented in the analysed corpus discuss the circular economy, they often describe something different from the EU's intentions. Therefore, how can a country adopt a policy idea on paper and transform its meaning in practice?

The academic literature on Europeanisation has built tools for tracking legislative transposition: whether directives are adopted on time, whether legal texts match the EU's requirements, and whether implementation follows them. These tools leave unexamined the meaning that domestic actors attach to what they transpose. A Member State can achieve full compliance, while constructing a domestic understanding of the policy idea that is narrower, shallower, and driven by motives the EU never envisaged. The present study contributes precisely to this conceptual dimension – the gap between formal acceptance and discursive content. As Radaelli (2003) argued, Europeanisation operates not only through vertical adaptational pressure, but also through horizontal mechanisms of framing and ideational convergence, yet most empirical work has focused on the former while neglecting the latter.

This article addresses three linked **research questions:**

1) how did Poland transpose and implement the European Union's CE framework, and what patterns of formal compliance characterised this process?
2) how was the CE concept discursively framed by Polish political and media actors during its domestic reception?

3) to what extent did formal legislative adoption correspond to ideational reception, or did these two processes diverge over time?

The article extends the Europeanisation literature beyond compliance by demonstrating that formal transposition and ideational reception of the idea are analytically separable processes whose divergence can be tracked through systematic frame analysis. The concept of substantive hollowing (defined as the progressive loss of a policy idea's constitutive breadth, motivational depth, and hierarchical standing of a policy idea during domestic reception, despite formal adoption of its legislative content) defines this pattern. Secondly, a dual-layer periodisation by nesting national reception phases within EU benchmark periods disentangles benchmark-level inertia from reception-level evacuation, enabling the identification of inertia as a distinct decoupling type. Moreover, the article applies the recontextualisation framework for transnational policy analysis (Lendvai, Stubbs 2007; Singh et al. 2013), which is based on Bernstein's structural mechanism (see: Bernstein 2003), to the study of how EU policy ideas are reshaped as they enter domestic political arenas.

2. Literature review

2.1. Compliance and its limits

The Europeanisation literature has produced a rich material on how EU legislation reaches the Member States, yet its dominant frameworks treat transposition as the endpoint. Falkner et al. (2005) classified Central and Eastern European members within a "world of dead letters," Börzel (2003) explained transposition variation through the gap between EU requirements and domestic structures, and Treib (2014) synthesised these strands into a framework linking political preferences, institutional capacity, and compliance results. Collectively, these frameworks operationalise compliance as the dependent variable.

However, they do not capture the meaning that domestic actors construct around the transposed policy. Radaelli (2003, 2004) distinguished vertical from horizontal Europeanisation operating through framing and ideational convergence. Schmidt (2008) developed discursive institutionalism foregrounding ideas and discourse as explanatory variables. Despite this literature, the mechanisms, through which EU policy ideas are specifically reshaped, remain under-theorised along two dimensions. The first is motivational: whether the rationale that actors attach to a transposed concept constitutes an independent axis of variation. Schmidt's coordinative-communicative distinction implies differential motivational depth across arenas (see: Schmidt 2010), yet the conditions, under which motivational content is systematically evacuated, have not been operationalised. The second dimension is hierarchical: whether a transposed idea achieves a stable organising position in the domestic policy field. Bernstein's recontextualisation framework implies that the ideational reception is positionally structured (see: Bernstein 2003), but the conditions, under which the hierarchical status of a policy idea destabilises, remain unspecified.

2.2. The circular economy as a contested policy idea

The circular economy is appropriate to studying ideational transfer because it operates as a deliberately broad programmatic and umbrella concept whose boundaries remain contested (Homrich et al. 2018). Kirchherr et al. (2023) analysed 221 definitions of CE, finding systematic contextual variation. Korhonen et al. (2018) argued that CE's theoretical incoherence makes it inherently open to selective appropriation. Savini (2021) demonstrated how the deployment of CE in urban governance narrows the concept to a managerial and waste-oriented concept, while Velenturf and Purnell (2021) argued that definitional absence enables compliance claims without transformative substance. This interpretative openness is reinforced by the broader policy architecture, in which CE operates. Research on the ideational dimension of the *European Green Deal* indicates that its declared paradigm shift coexists with the persistence of earlier growth-oriented and competitiveness-oriented assumptions, particularly in areas shaped by material interests (Burgoński 2023).

This plasticity makes CE a strong case for studying ideational transfer: a concept with more rigid boundaries would limit interpretative flexibility. Whether the CE concept, as defined in the Commission's Communication COM(2015)614, undergoes systematic content reduction, motivational reframing, or positional displacement during Polish reception therefore remains empirically unaddressed.

2.3. Poland's transposition of circular economy, and the implementation gap

The analytical period begins with the *EU Action Plan for the Circular Economy* (European Commission 2015), which initiated the institutionalisation of circular economy objectives in the Member States. Subsequently, Poland introduced legislative and strategic measures supporting the transition towards a circular economy, including amendments to the Act on Waste implementing the 2018 EU waste directives, the governmental *Road Map towards the Transition to Circular Economy* (see: *Road Map…* 2019), Extended Producer Responsibility instruments, and the integration of resource efficiency goals into national strategic policies (Domenech, Bahn-Walkowiak 2019). Poland's transposition is broadly consistent with the profile of "dead letters" identified by Falkner and Treib (2008): formal adoption rates improved while implementation depth remained uneven. This pattern was confirmed by the Supreme Audit Office evaluation (NIK 2025) of CE implementation gaps.

The comprehensiveness of formal transposition is analytically essential: it establishes that the discursive narrowing documented in this study cannot be attributed to legislative gaps. Polish law formally references the key dimensions of the EU CE framework. The question this article addresses, therefore, is not whether Poland transposed CE legislation, because it did, but whether the idea underlying the legislation was adopted with comparable comprehensiveness in political and media discourse.

3. Theoretical framework

3.1. Recontextualisation theory

Bernstein (2003) proposed the framework identifying the mechanisms, through which ideas are selectively appropriated, refocused, and repositioned when they cross institutional boundaries due to the receiving field's own rules. Applied initially to pedagogic discourse, Bernstein's framework has since been extended to policy translation (Lendvai, Stubbs 2007; Singh et al. 2013; Brett et al. 2023). The present study applies this framework to policy-discursive reception, on the grounds that parliamentary and media discourses constitute distinct recontextualising fields governed by their own selection rules.

Bernstein distinguishes between the official recontextualising field (ORF) representing state agencies and legislative bodies that select, appropriate, and refocus ideas, and the pedagogic recontextualising field (PRF), comprising media and expert commentary that further reshape meaning. Parliamentary discourse corresponds to the ORF, and the media discourse – to the PRF. These structural properties lead to the expectation that these two arenas will exhibit qualitatively distinct recontextualisation logics, reinforced by Schmidt's (2008) prediction that coordinative and communicative discourses reshape policy ideas in structurally distinct ways: Bernstein provides the mechanism (selection rules), Schmidt specifies the content (ideational engagement depth).

3.2. Analytical dimensions and propositions

Four analytical dimensions operationalise the recontextualisation mechanisms this study tracks, drawing on Entman's functional typology for the cognitive and motivational registers and on supplementary frameworks for the relational and temporal registers (see: Entman 1993). Entman's framing typology for dominant meaning was selected, because it distinguishes functionally between what an idea names (problem definition), what it explains (causal attribution), what it evaluates (moral evaluation), and what it prescribes (treatment recommendation). Therefore, it captures which registers of a policy idea survive recontextualisation.

The compatibility between Bernstein's selection rules and Entman's functional typology rests on a structural parallel: both frameworks treat meaning as produced through selective activation rather than transmission. Bernstein's recontextualising fields operate by stripping, repositioning and refocusing ideas, because they cross institutional boundaries; Entman's four functions (problem definition, causal attribution, moral evaluation and treatment recommendation) map onto the dimensions, along which such stripping and repositioning are empirically traceable. Cognitive narrowing (P1) is detectable through problem definition and treatment recommendation, registering which constitutive elements of CE are retained or dropped. Motivational subordination (P2) is detectable through causal attribution, which captures what rationale actors attach to the concept. Hierarchical destabilisation (P3) is detectable through the relational register, operationalised here through Bernstein's own positional vocabulary rather than Entman's one.

Table 1: Description of analytical dimensions.

Analytical dimension	Description	Sources	Operationalisation
Cognitive framing	retention vs. marginalisation of the constitutive elements of Communication COM(2015)614	Entman (1993)	Cognitive narrowing (P1)
Motivational framing	rationale attached to CE invocations	Entman (1993), Benford, Snow (2000)	Motivational subordination (P2)
Relational framing	CE's hierarchical position relative to co-occurring concepts	Bernstein (2003)	Hierarchical destabilisation (P3)
Temporal framing	correspondence between discursive shifts and milestones	Béland, Cox (2010)	Inertia detection (supporting)

Source: the authors' own elaboration.

Three propositions translate the concept of substantive hollowing into observable discursive patterns, each derived from the theoretical architecture above (see *Table 1*).

Proposition 1 (cognitive narrowing) operationalises selective activation (Korhonen et al. 2018; Savini 2021), predicted by Bernstein's account of how receiving fields reduce complexity. We expect that analysed Polish discourse will reference only a subset of the ten constitutive elements, concentrating on elements proximate to existing domestic infrastructure while marginalising those requiring fundamental restructuring.

Proposition 2 (motivational subordination) operationalises the motivational gap in Schmidt's discursive institutionalism (see: Schmidt 2010). We anticipate that Polish actors will frame CE primarily as a compliance obligation rather than the transformation envisaged by the EU, with a substantial share of statements invoking CE without any explicit motivation.

Proposition 3 (hierarchical destabilisation) operationalises the positional instability implied by Bernstein's framework (see: Bernstein 2003). We predict that analysed Polish discourse will assign CE an unstable hierarchical position: simultaneously superordinate and subordinate across contexts. Destabilisation is defined as the co-presence of all three positions (superordinate, coordinate, subordinate) within the same arena and period, and by the co-occurrence of multiple positions within individual statements.

4. Materials and methods

4.1. Research design

We apply a dual-layer periodisation that situates national reception phases within two EU reference contexts. The periodisation developed in Path I served as the sampling

framework for Path II. All identified statements were assigned to one of the four reception phases before the purposive selection of discursively substantive CE statements was conducted.

The benchmark layer is defined by the key strategic documents shaping the development of the circular economy at EU level. Period I (2015–2019) is anchored in the *EU Action Plan for the Circular Economy*, COM(2015)614 (see: European Commission 2015), which established the circular economy as a policy framework linking resource efficiency, waste prevention and economic competitiveness. Period II (2020–2024) is anchored in the updated *A New Circular Economy Action Plan: For a Cleaner and More Competitive Europe,* COM(2020)98 (see: European Commission 2020), which reinforces and further operationalises the concept within the broader policy architecture of the *European Green Deal*, placing stronger emphasis on product lifecycle governance, value chains and sustainability transition.

We took as a reference (the benchmark) the ten-element description of CE derived through a systematic close reading of the Commission's Communication COM(2015)614 to confirm sustained recognition at the EU level. These elements are: design, business models, consumption, production, waste management, secondary raw materials, bioeconomy, resource value and efficiency, innovation and financing, and systemic dimension. They correspond to the constitutive components of the CE framework, distinguished from sectoral implementation mechanisms and are consistent with independent operationalisations (Velenturf, Purnell 2021; cf. Kirchherr et al. 2023).

Both Commission's Communications preserve the constitutive CE elements despite positioning them within different policy contexts: the Commission's Communication COM(2015)614 foregrounds resource efficiency and waste prevention, while the Communication COM(2020)98 embeds these issues within the *European Green Deal* with stronger emphasis on product lifecycle governance and sustainability transition. Consequently, statements aligned with framing of Communication COM(2015)614 are treated as appropriate in *Period I*, but as indicative of inertia in *Period II*.

The second layer constitutes national formal adoption. *Table 2* presents milestones that established four phases (two matched to each benchmark period) representing the progressive formalisation of CE within Polish public policy.

Table 2: Key domestic policy milestones by phase or periodisation anchors.

Phase	Period	Key domestic acts
1a: Inception	2015–2017	*Strategy for Responsible Development* of 2017 (pl. *Strategia na rzecz Odpowiedzialnego Rozwoju)* – first domestic strategic document embedding CE within the national policy framework.
1b: Programmatic framing	2018–2019	*Road Map towards the Transition to Circular Economy* of September 2019 (pl. *Mapa drogowa GOZ)* – closes the conceptual phase; establishes CE as an operational policy programme

2a: Sectoral regulation	2020–2023	Amendment to the Act on Waste (pl. *Ustawa o odpadach*, Dz.U. 2021 poz. 2151); Act on single-use plastics (pl. *Ustawa SUP*, entered into force in May 2023); *Productivity Strategy 2030* from July 2022 (pl. *Strategia Produktywności 2030*).
2b: Legislative codification	2024–2025	*Mapa drogowa GOZ* expired at the end of 2023; *Krajowy Plan Gospodarki Odpadami 2028* becomes primary planning document.

Source: the authors' own elaboration.

Considering both layers creates the nested design, because each of them operates on different dynamics. Benchmark-level inertia and reception-level evacuation operate on different temporal scales. The nested design, drawing on Béland and Cox's account of temporally structured ideational change (see: Béland, Cox 2010) and Pierson's argument for sequence as an explanatory variable (see: Pierson 2004), tracks both dynamics independently.

We applied a dual decoupling typology operating at two analytically independent levels. At the benchmark level (Layer 1), the statements are classified according to the phase-appropriate reference frame of the EU. It extends the concept of decoupling in public policies (Zhelyazkova et al. 2016) from its canonical focus on implementation gaps (Meyer, Rowan 1977) towards the ideational divergence between the discourse of the adopting polity and the content of the source framework (Heidbreder 2013; Lee 2017). At the reception level (Layer 2), an orthogonal evacuation dynamic tracks the progressive disappearance of deeper framing functions (causal attribution and moral evaluation within each benchmark period. Inertia captures temporal decoupling (Dolowitz, Marsh 2002); evacuation captures ideational thinning (Radaelli 2003).

4.2. Discursive corpus

The corpus construction followed a two-stage procedure. First, all potentially relevant parliamentary and media records published between December 2015 and June 2025 were identified. Parliamentary sources included Sejm and Senate plenary debates, committee and subcommittee proceedings, parliamentary interpellations, and governmental responses to interpellations. Media sources included national newspapers and opinion weeklies representing diverse ideological orientations. The source base was searched using the keywords „circular economy" (pl. *gospodarka o obiegu zamkniętym*) and their linguistic variants occurring in Polish public discourse. This procedure produced an initial corpus of 1327 records.

For Path II, a purposive sampling strategy was applied to identify statements containing substantive interpretations of the CE concept. Records were retained if CE constituted a meaningful element of the statement's argumentation, and if the statement contained at least a partial definition, interpretation, explanation, or evaluative framing of the concept. References limited to legal titles, institutional names, agenda items, or purely technical mentions were excluded. This procedure yielded

a final analytical corpus of 65 statements, comprising 42 parliamentary and 23 media statements, appropriate for qualitative frame analysis, where analytical depth takes precedence over sample representativeness (Matthes, Kohring 2008). The distribution reflects the empirical availability of discursively substantive references to the circular economy within the broader source base rather than a predetermined quota between arenas.

Table 3 demonstrates the distribution of statements across phases and arenas. The corpus is unevenly distributed across phases; cross-phase comparisons involving *Phase 1b* (N = 8) and *Phase 2b* (N = 10) are therefore treated as suggestive rather than conclusive, given their limited within-phase sample sizes. *Phase 2b* additionally reflects a partial observation window, because data collection closed in June 2025.

Table 3: Coded statement frequency across periods, phases, and arenas.[2]

Benchmark	Phase	Period	Parliament	Media	Total
Period I COM(2015)614	1a: Inception	12.2015–2017	14	8	22
	1b: Programmatic framing	2018–2019	3	5	8
Period II COM(2020)98	2a: Sectoral regulation	2020–2023	18	7	25
	2b: Legislative codification	2024–6.2025	7	3	10
	Total		42	23	65

Source: the authors' own elaboration.

4.3. Frame analysis and codebook

Frame analysis distinguishes four functions: problem definition (PD), causal attribution (CA), moral evaluation (ME), and treatment recommendation (TR) derived from Entman's (1993) typology (Matthes, Kohring 2008). Each statement was coded using a three-tier ordinal scale anchored at 1.0 (full alignment with the EU reference frame), 0.5 (partial alignment) and 0.0 (misalignment or absence).

The two scoring decisions need to be clarified. Within Causal Attribution (CA), codes 'Formal-legislative only' (CA5) and 'Absent motivation' (CA6) both score 0.0, but are analytically distinct. CA5 captures active recontextualisation (explicit substitution of compliance rationale for transformative motivation), while CA6 captures passive omission (no motivational content articulated). This is methodologically important distinction, because they imply different evacuation mechanisms.

A composite alignment score was computed as the unweighted mean of the four framing functions (PD, CA, ME, TR). Equal weighting was adopted because the four func-

[2] Note: N = number of coded statements per phase.

tions represent distinct dimensions of frame alignment and no theoretical basis exists for assigning differential weights. The composite score is only a descriptive summary rather than the primary basis for assessing hollowing. The substantive argument relies principally on the distribution and temporal evolution of specific functions, particularly causal attribution (CA) and moral evaluation (ME), whose increased weighting would strengthen rather than weaken the hollowing interpretation.

Coding was applied non-exclusively. This means that statements could reference multiple constitutive elements, motivations, and hierarchical positions. For hierarchical coding, a single statement could be classified as both superordinate and subordinate, when the text positioned CE in multiple hierarchical relations. The coding procedure was conducted by two researchers. A pilot coding phase was undertaken on a subset of 10 statements (15.4% of the corpus) representing different reception phases and both discursive arenas. Coding discrepancies were discussed and resolved through iterative review of the coding framework and the original textual context. Following this process, the operational definitions of the coding categories were refined before the remaining material was analysed. Where multiple codes applied, the dominant framing function determined the assignment; statements exhibiting simultaneous superordinate and subordinate positioning were additionally recorded as mixed coding.

Statements are classified at the benchmark level as aligned (composite ≥0.5), partially divergent (0.25–0.49), inertial (≥0.5 against the prior benchmark frame, but <0.5 against the current one; *Period II* only), or divergent (<0.25). At the reception level, CA6 and ME5 frequencies are tracked within each benchmark period to detect progressive ideational thinning independently of benchmark classification.

5. Research results

5.1. Cognitive framing (*Proposition 1*)

Narrowing is evidenced if three or fewer elements exceed 60% frequency while the majority fall below 30%, and if the range contracts across reception phases. Against the baseline of complete formal transposition (Section 2.3), the discursive picture demonstrates systematic narrowing (see *Table 4*).

Table 4: Frequency of constitutive elements by arena (N = 65).[3]

Element	Parliament (n)	Parliament (%)	Media (n)	Media (%)
5. Waste management	33	78.6%	15	65.2%
6. Secondary raw materials	32	76.2%	16	69.6%
8. Resource value & efficiency	30	71.4%	12	52.2%

[3] Note: Non-exclusive coding; percentages do not sum up to 100%.

4. Production	23	54.8%	9	39.1%
10. Systemic dimension	19	45.2%	13	56.5%
3. Consumption	12	28.6%	13	56.5%
1. Design	10	23.8%	5	21.7%
2. Business models	9	21.4%	3	13.0%
9. Innovation & financing	8	19.0%	8	34.8%
7. Bioeconomy	5	11.9%	1	4.3%

Source: the authors' own elaboration.

Three elements were among the most frequently coded in both arenas: waste management (78.6% parliamentary, 65.2% media), secondary raw materials (76.2%, 69.6%), and resource value and efficiency (71.4%, 52.2%). Several other elements were less frequent, particularly bioeconomy appearing in only 11.9% of parliamentary and 4.3% of media statements. The pattern satisfies the cognitive narrowing criterion: three elements exceed 60% frequency, while design (23.8%/21.7%), business models (21.4%/13.0%), and bioeconomy (11.9%/4.3%) fall well below 30%.

Within the analysed corpus, the narrowing intensified across reception phases in a pattern that did not follow the legislative timeline. In *Phase 1a*, the parliamentary discourse referred to a wide range: consumption appeared in 50.0% of statements, business models – in 42.9%, innovation – in 35.7%. By the period, in which formal transposition was completed (*Phase 2a*), consumption had declined to 5.6%, business models – to 5.6%, and innovation – to 5.6%.

Based on the results above, *Proposition 1* is supported: discursive narrowing proceeded despite comprehensive formal transposition, and its structured character (contraction rather than random fluctuation) is consistent with the prediction that recontextualisation is governed by the receiving field's selection rules (Lendvai, Stubbs 2007).

5.2. Motivational framing (*Proposition 2*)

Subordination is evidenced if compliance and absent-motivation codes jointly exceed 70% and if motivational absence increases across phases. The most consequential finding was the prevalence of unmotivated CE invocations: 52.4% of parliamentary and 39.1% of media statements referenced CE without any stated reason (see *Table 5*).

Table 5: Motivational framing by arena.[4]

Motivation	Parliament (n)	Parliament (%)	Media (n)	Media (%)
No stated motivation	22	52.4%	9	39.1%
Formal/compliance	14	33.3%	11	47.8%

[4] Note: Non-exclusive coding; percentages do not sum to 100%.

Ecological	6	14.3%	7	30.4%
Economic	4	9.5%	3	13.0%
Ideological	4	9.5%	3	13.0%
Security	3	7.1%	1	4.3%

Source: the authors' own elaboration.

When more than half of parliamentary references do not contain any explicit justification, the concept has shifted from a political choice to a bureaucratic one, which is consistent with Zucker's account of institutional taken-for-granted solutions (see: Zucker 1987). Among statements articulating a motivation, formal-legislative compliance dominated in both arenas (33.3% parliamentary, 47.8% media). Compliance and absent-motivation codes jointly account for 85.7% of parliamentary and 87.0% of media statements, exceeding the 70% threshold specified for P2.

The analysed corpus suggests a pattern of progressive motivational emptying. In *Phase 1a*, only 14.3% of parliamentary statements lacked motivation. By *Phase 2b*, 100% of parliamentary statements (N = 7) invoked CE without any explicit motivation – though this finding must be interpreted cautiously given the small sample. The within-period pattern is more robust: CA6 increases from 23% to 75% within *Period I* (N = 30) and from 44% to 90% within *Period II* (N = 35).

Based on the results above, the *Proposition 2* is supported: compliance logic and motivational absence jointly dominated both arenas, with motivational absence increasing progressively across reception phases.

5.3. Hierarchical framing (*Proposition 3*)

The EU positioned CE as consistently superordinate as a paradigmatic concept organising waste, industrial, and innovation policies. A stable reception would demonstrate CE overwhelmingly in this position (see *Table 6*). Instead, analysed Polish discourse assigned CE shifting hierarchical positions across and within statements.

Table 6: Hierarchical position of CE by arena.[5]

Hierarchy position	Parliament (n)	Media (n)
Superordinate	24	20
Coordinate	9	2
Subordinate	7	10
Not coded	4	1

Source: the authors' own elaboration.

[5] Note: Non-exclusive coding;
Multiple hierarchical positions may be coded for a single statement.
"Not coded" indicates insufficient textual evidence for hierarchical classification.

In parliamentary discourse, CE appeared as superordinate in 24 statements (57.1% of codings), coordinate in 9 (21.4%), and subordinate in 7 (16.7%). Media discourse exhibited an even more striking pattern: CE was positioned as superordinate in 20 statements (87.0%) but simultaneously subordinate in 10 (43.5%) statements, meaning that a substantial share of media statements assigned CE both superordinate and subordinate positions within the same text. This within-statement co-presence of opposing hierarchical positions constitutes the strongest evidence of destabilisation: in media actors routinely framed CE as an overarching concept relative to waste and recycling, while simultaneously subordinating it to the *European Green Deal* or broader EU regulatory frameworks – a pattern visible in 8 of 23 media statements.

Temporally, CE was positioned predominantly as superordinate in *Phase 1a*, consistent with the introduction of a new overarching concept. In the *Phase 2a*, subordination increased, particularly in relation to the *European Green Deal*. Critically, Polish actors did not adopt the broader EGD framing that would have assigned CE a coherent subordinate role; instead, CE oscillated between superordinate and subordinate codings within the same phase, indicating that its structural position was never consolidated.

Proposition 3 is supported: CE's hierarchical position was unstable across both arenas and all reception phases, with within-statement destabilisation particularly pronounced in media discourse.

5.4. Frame alignment scores

The dimension-level pattern corroborates the proposition evidence. Causal attribution registered the lowest scores (parliamentary: 0.17; media: 0.24), reflecting the displacement of substantive motivation by compliance logic and motivational absence (see *Table 7*). Moral evaluation was similarly low (parliamentary: 0.18; media: 0.30).

Table 7: Frame alignment scores by arena.

Dimension	Parliament (N=42)	Media (N=23)	EU Reference
Problem definition	0.48	0.61	1.00
Causal attribution	0.17	0.24	1.00
Moral evaluation	0.18	0.30	1.00
Treatment recommendation	0.56	0.61	1.00
Composite alignment	**0.35**	**0.44**	**1.00**
Frame distance	**0.65**	**0.56**	**—**

Source: the authors' own elaboration.

Problem definition and treatment recommendation scored higher, indicating that analysed Polish discourse retained more of the EU's descriptive and prescriptive substance than its diagnostic or evaluative dimensions. The observed asymmetry represents the substantive hollowing mechanism.

Table 8: Frame alignment scores by reception phase.

Phase	N	Composite	Distance
1a: Inception	22	0.46	0.54
1b: Programmatic framing	8	0.29	0.71
2a: Sectoral regulation	25	0.37	0.63
2b: Legislative codification	10	0.28	0.72

Source: the authors' own elaboration.

Within each benchmark period, alignment declines: from 0.46 to 0.29 within *Period I*, and from 0.37 to 0.28 within *Period II*. Across benchmark periods, the mean composite alignment score was lower in *Phase 2a* (0.37) than in *Phase 1a* (0.46), despite the Communication COM(2020)98 setting a more ambitious reference frame (see *Table 8*).

5.5. Dual decoupling classification

Among the 65 coded statements, only 15 were classified as aligned (23%). Partial divergence was the modal category with 36 statements (55%), while inertia and full divergence together accounted for 14 statements (22%). The inertia category – identifiable only through the benchmark layer – captures actors whose framing remained anchored in Communication COM(2015)614 during *Period II* (see *Table 9*).

Table 9: Dual decoupling classification (N = 65).[6]

Type	Parliament (n)	Media (n)	Total (%)
Aligned (≥0.5)	7	8	23.1%
Partial divergence	25	11	55.4%
Inertia	7	4	16.9%
Divergence	3	0	4.6%

Source: the author's own elaboration.

6. Discussion

The findings demonstrate that formal transposition and discursive reception constitute analytically separable processes that can diverge systematically. Poland achieved comprehensive legislative alignment with the EU's requirements concerning CE, while the analysed corpus of parliamentary and media statements reveals three co-occurring

[6] Note: Aligned = consistent with the benchmark frame;
Partial divergence = selective retention of benchmark elements;
Inertia = alignment with the previous benchmark frame but not the current benchmark;
Divergence = substantial departure from both benchmark frames.

mechanisms, through which the concept was discursively reconstructed. This pattern extends the concept of decoupling (Meyer, Rowan 1977; Falkner, Treib 2008) from implementation gaps towards ideational divergence. It demonstrates the gap between what EU legislation intends a concept to mean and how domestic actors interpret it. The evacuation indicators confirm the reception-level dynamic: CA6 and ME5 increase within each benchmark period across all sufficiently represented benchmark classifications, indicating that motivational evacuation operates independently of a statement's benchmark-level alignment status. The dual decoupling typology operationalises this distinction, with inertia capturing temporal freezing representing the inappropriate transfer (Dolowitz, Marsh 2002) and evacuation capturing ideational thinning (Radaelli 2003). This pattern is also broadly consistent with the "dead letters" profile: formal adoption rates improved while the substantive depth of reception contracted. Therefore, the discursive evidence quantifies a dynamic where compliance metrics cannot capture.

The temporal trajectory is consistent with a sequential cascade model, in which cognitive narrowing is followed by motivational subordination and subsequently by hierarchical destabilisation. The observed pattern suggests that the progressive reduction of CE's constitutive breadth may be associated with a weakening of its justificatory foundations and, in turn, with increasing instability in its hierarchical positioning. Importantly, the present study does not establish a causal mechanism. Rather, it identifies a temporal sequence and recurring co-occurrence pattern across reception phases that is compatible with a cumulative hollowing process. This sequential pattern is manifested differently across arenas. Media discourse demonstrates paradoxical characteristics: higher composite alignment (0.44 vs. 0.35) than parliament, yet systematic within-statement positional contradiction (35% of media statements assign CE both superordinate and subordinate roles). This suggests that media 'breadth' operates through incoherence rather than substantive depth - a finding that complicates Schmidt's coordinative-communicative distinction. Parliament's narrower composite (0.35) reflects operational focus, while media's higher composite masks positional instability. Process-tracing would be useful for exploring the causal relations involved. Nevertheless, the identified co-occurence is a meaningful finding in its own right.

The findings can be alternatively interpreted. First, the narrowing could reflect sensible prioritisation, with planned future expansion. If so, one would expect the range of referenced elements to broaden over time. Instead, it was reduced: references to business models declined from 42.9% in *Phase 1a* to 5.6% in *Phase 2a*. The dual-layer periodisation strengthens this test: a reduction occurs within each benchmark period, but not due to change of the benchmark. Second, motivational silence could indicate full internalisation. However, a fully internalised idea would retain substantive content, not shed it (Zucker 1987). The co-occurrence of cognitive narrowing and motivational silence is difficult to reconcile with a straightforward internalisation interpretation; individually ambiguous but jointly diagnostic of hollowing. Third, hierarchical instability could reflect normal transitional unsettling. Yet the instability persisted across all four reception phases, what suggest that it is structural rather than transitional.

One might argue that narrowing the CE to waste management constitutes sensible administrative adaptation. This article demonstrates that the distinction between adaptation and hollowing cannot rest on compliance grounds alone. The difference lies in degree and pattern, because CE was conceived as economic transformation encompassing ten constitutive elements, not an extension of waste policy. Throughout all phases of reception, we observed that the discourse retains three out of ten elements, with causal attribution and moral evaluation gradually diminishing. This pattern cannot be explained by adaptation to the national context alone. Moreover, treating compliance motivation as the baseline renders ideational Europeanisation invisible, thus exposing the blind spot identified by Radaelli (2004).

The findings have direct relevance for how EU institutions assess policy reception. Current compliance monitoring would classify Poland's reception of the CE as broadly on track. If the Commission seeks genuine policy convergence rather than formal compliance, it requires tools for tracking ideational reception alongside legal transposition.

The motivational evacuation documented here extends Schmidt's (2010) coordinative-communicative distinction by demonstrating that both arenas converge toward motivational absence rather than diverging in depth – a pattern that compliance-based monitoring cannot register. This leads to a broader implication for the Europeanisation literature: substantive hollowing offers a mechanism explaining why formally transposed legislation remains what Falkner et al. (2005) termed "dead letters." Formal adoption rates increase, while the idea driving the legislation is progressively emptied of its constitutive content, motivational depth, and hierarchical stability.

Where Radaelli (2004) argued that Europeanisation research must attend to horizontal framing processes, the dual decoupling typology operationalises this claim into a tractable monitoring instrument, capable of detecting ideational divergence that legal metrics are structurally ill-equipped to reveal. The recontextualisation framework of Lendvai and Stubbs (2007) was analytically productive beyond its original application, confirming its transferability as a tool for studying EU ideational policy transfer across institutional levels and national contexts.

7. Conclusions

This article examined the gap between Poland's formal adoption of EU circular economy legislation and the meanings attached to the concept within an analysed corpus of parliamentary and media statements. Three mechanisms – cognitive narrowing, motivational subordination and hierarchical destabilisation – were consistently associated with the pattern described here as substantive hollowing. Bernstein's recontextualisation explained this not as failure but as the predictable reshaping of an idea by the receiving field's rules. The recontextualisation framework, applied here to CE policy, demonstrates its analytical portability: by tracking how receiving fields selectively reshape imported ideas, it provides a transferable method for studying ideational Europeanisation across policy domains and Member States.

Our research has some limitations. Firstly, the single-country design cannot determine whether these mechanisms are Poland-specific or regionally common, pointing to the need for comparative application across Central and Eastern European member states. Secondly, the uneven corpus distribution constrains temporal results. Finally, the proposed reinforcing pattern among the three mechanisms is consistent with temporal evidence but cannot be confirmed with a cross-sectional design. The process-tracing would be required for causal claims.

For EU institutions, formal transposition coexisting with substantive hollowing means that legal metrics alone will not reveal genuine adoption. The dual decoupling typology offers a method of adding an ideational layer to compliance monitoring. For Polish policymakers, the progressive shedding of CE's broader elements suggests a widening gap between domestic discourse and EU ambitions under the Green Deal. *The Circularity Gap Report* (Keys et al. 2022), placing Poland's circularity rate at 8.4%, may reflect the discursive narrowing documented here.

Future research should pursue three directions: longitudinal extension beyond 2025 to capture the effects of the Commission's Communication COM(2020)98 on Polish CE discourse; application to other broad EU policy ideas to test the transferability of the substantive hollowing concept; and process-tracing the causal sequence among three mechanisms to move beyond the cross-sectional limitations of the present design.

Marek Ćwiklicki – Full Professor of Public Management and a Head of Department for Public Management at the Krakow University of Economics in Poland. The Chairman of the Polish Society of Public Management. Member of IRSPM, ENPA, NISPACee. Research interests: organisation theory, business research methodology, and public management.

Marek Ćwiklicki – prof. dr hab., Kierownik Katedry Zarządzania Publicznego Uniwersytetu Ekonomicznego w Krakowie. Prezes Zarządu Polskiego Towarzystwa Zarządzania Publicznego. Członek międzynarodowych organizacji badawczych zajmujących się administracją publiczną i zarządzaniem publicznym: IRPSM, ENPA, NISPACee. Zainteresowania badawcze: teoria organizacji, metodologia badań, zarządzanie publiczne, przedsiębiorczość społeczna.

Anna Mirzyńska – M.A., Research Assistant at the Department of Public Management, Krakow University of Economics. Research interests: discursive institutionalism, circular economy policy, Europeanisation, and the role of ideas in public policy formulation.

Anna Mirzyńska – mgr, asystentka badawcza w Katedrze Zarządzania Publicznego Uniwersytetu Ekonomicznego w Krakowie. Zainteresowania badawcze obejmują instytucjonalizm dyskursywny, gospodarkę o obiegu zamkniętym, europeizację polityk publicznych oraz rolę idei w procesie formułowania polityk publicznych.

Magdalena Zajączkowska – PhD in Economics, Assistant Professor at the Department of Public Management, Krakow University of Economics. Master of Law (Jagiellonian University). Poland's

representative in OECD/NEA WPNE, Director of the Postgraduate Programme in ESG Management, and Head of the Competence Centre for Sustainable Transition at KUE. Member of the Polish Economic Society, Polish Association for European Studies, and IAEE. Research interests: EU climate and energy policy, ESG, sustainable transition.

Magdalena Zajączkowska – dr nauk ekonomicznych (UEK), adiunkt w Katedrze Zarządzania Publicznego Uniwersytetu Ekonomicznego w Krakowie. Absolwentka prawa na Uniwersytecie Jagiellońskim. Przedstawicielka Polski w OECD/NEA WPNE. Kierowniczka studiów podyplomowych *Menedżer ESG* oraz Centrum Kompetencji Zrównoważonej Transformacji UEK. Członkini PTE, PTSE oraz IAEE. Zainteresowania badawcze: polityka klimatyczno-energetyczna UE, ESG, zrównoważona transformacja.

References:

BÉLAND Daniel, COX Robert Henry (eds) (2010), *Ideas and Politics in Social Science Research*, Oxford University Press.

BENFORD Robert D., SNOW David A. (2000), *Framing Processes and Social Movements: An Overview and Assessment*, „Annual Review of Sociology", vol. 26(1).

BERNSTEIN Basil (2003), *The Structuring of Pedagogic Discourse*, Routledge. DOI: 10.4324/9780203011263

BÖRZEL Tanja A. (2002), *Pace-Setting, Foot-Dragging, and Fence-Sitting: Member State Responses to Europeanization*, „JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies", vol. 40, no. 2. DOI: 10.1111/1468-5965.00351

BÖRZEL Tanja A. (2003), *Shaping and Taking EU Policies: Member State Responses to Europeanization*. „Queen's Papers on Europeanisation", p0035

BRETT Nancy, MAGNUSSON Thomas, ANDERSSON Hans (2023), *From Global Climate Goals to Local Practice — Mission-Oriented Policy Enactment in Three Swedish Regions*, „Science and Public Policy", vol. 50, issue 4. DOI: 10.1093/scipol/scad010

DOLOWITZ David P., MARSH David (2000), *Learning from Abroad: The Role of Policy Transfer in Contemporary PolicyMaking,* "Governance", vol. 13(1).

DOMENECH Teresa, BAHN-WALKOWIAK Bettina (2019), *Transition Towards a Resource Efficient Circular Economy in Europe: Policy Lessons From the EU and the Member States*, „Ecological Economics", vol. 155. DOI: 10.1016/j.ecolecon.2017.11.001

ENTMAN Robert M. (1993), *Framing: Toward Clarification of a Fractured Paradigm*, „Journal of Communication", vol. 43(4).

EUROPEAN COMMISSION (2015), Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions: *Closing the Loop – An EU Action Plan for the Circular Economy*, COM(2015)614 final, Brussels, 02.12.2015.

EUROPEAN COMMISSION (2020), Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions: *A New Circular Economy Action Plan: For a Cleaner and More Competitive Europe*, COM(2020)98 final, Brussels, 11.03.2020.

FALKNER Gerda, TREIB Oliver (2008), *Three Worlds of Compliance or Four? The EU-15 Compared to New Member States,* „JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies", vol. 46(2).

FALKNER Gerda, TREIB Oliver, HARTLAPP Miriam, LEIBER Simone (2005), *Complying with Europe: EU Harmonisation and Soft Law in the Member States*, Cambridge.

HEIDBREDER Eva G. (2013), *European Union Governance in the Shadow of Contradicting Ideas: The Decoupling of Policy Ideas and Policy Instruments*, „European Political Science Review", vol. 5(1).

HOMRICH Aline Sacchi, GALVÃO Graziela, ABADIA Lorena Gamboa, CARVALHO Marly M. (2018), *The circular economy umbrella: Trends and gaps on integrating pathways*, „Journal of Cleaner Production", vol. 175. DOI: 10.1016/j.jclepro.2017.11.064

KEYS Andrew, SUTHERLAND Ana Birliga, SIGÜENZA Carlos Pablo (2022), *The Circularity Gap Report: Poland*, Amsterdam, https://www.circularity-gap.world/poland (06.10.2022).

KIRCHHERR Julian et al. (2023), *Conceptualizing the Circular Economy (Revisited): An Analysis of 221 Definitions*, „Resources, Conservation and Recycling", vol. 194. DOI: 10.1016/j.resconrec.2023.107001

KORHONEN Jouni, HONKASALO Antero, SEPPÄLÄ Jyri (2018), *Circular Economy: The Concept and Its Limitations*, „Ecological Economics", vol. 143(C). DOI: 10.1016/j.ecolecon.2017.06.041

LEE Jusil (2017), *Why Have Policies Often Remained Symbolic? Understanding the Reasons for Decoupling between Policy and Practice*, „Review of Policy Research", vol. 34(5).

LENDVAI Noémi, STUBBS Paul (2007), *Policies as Translation: Situating Transnational Social Policies*, in: Susan M. Hodgson, Zoë Irving (eds), *Policy Reconsidered: Meanings, Politics and Practices*, Bristol.

MATTHES Jörg, KOHRING Matthias (2008), *The Content Analysis of Media Frames: Toward Improving Reliability and Validity*, „Journal of Communication", vol. 58(2).

MEYER John W., ROWAN Brian (1977), *Institutionalized Organizations: Formal Structure as Myth and Ceremony*, „American Journal of Sociology", vol. 83(2).

NIK (2025), *Informacja o wynikach kontroli: Wdrażanie gospodarki o obiegu zamkniętym*, Najwyższa Izba Kontroli, Warszawa, https://www.nik.gov.pl/kontrole/wyniki-kontroli-nik/pobierz,NIK-P-23-013-KGP-Wdrazanie-gospodarki-o-obiegu-zamknietym-1,typ,kk.pdf (01.07.2025).

PIERSON Paul (2004), *Politics in Time: History, Institutions, and Social Analysis*, Princeton.

RADAELLI Claudio M. (2003), *The Europeanization of Public Policy*, in: Kevin Featherstone, Claudio M. Radaelli (eds), *The Politics of Europeanization*, Oxford.

RADAELLI Claudio M. (2004), *Europeanisation: Solution or Problem?*, „European Integration Online Papers", vol. 8, no. 16.

ROAD MAP towards the Transition to Circular Economy (2019), Annex to Resolution No 136/2019 of the Council of Ministers of 10 September 2019, Warsaw, https://circulareconomy.europa.eu/platform/sites/default/files/md_goz_final_en_r4_4.pdf (10.09.2019).

SAVINI Federico (2021), *The circular economy of waste: recovery, incineration and urban reuse*, „Journal of Environmental Planning and Management", vol. 64, no. 12. DOI: 10.1080/09640568.2020.1857226

SCHMIDT Vivien A. (2008), *Discursive Institutionalism: The Explanatory Power of Ideas and Discourse*, „Annual Review of Political Science", vol. 11. DOI: 10.1146/annurev.polisci.11.060606.135342

SCHMIDT Vivien A. (2010), *Taking ideas and discourse seriously: explaining change through discursive institutionalism as the fourth "new institutionalism"*, „European Political Science Review", vol. 2(1). DOI: 10.1017/S175577390999021X

SINGH Parlo, THOMAS Sue, HARRIS Jessica (2013), *Recontextualising policy discourses: a Bernsteinian perspective on policy interpretation, translation, enactment*, „Journal of Education Policy", vol. 28, no. 4. DOI: 10.1080/02680939.2013.770554

TREIB Oliver (2014), *Implementing and complying with EU governance outputs*, „Living Reviews in European Governance", vol. 9(2014). DOI: 10.12942/lreg-2014-1

VELENTURF Anne P.M., PURNELL Phil (2021), *Principles for a sustainable circular economy*, „Sustainable Production and Consumption", vol. 27. DOI: 10.1016/j.spc.2021.02.018

ZHELYAZKOVA Asya, KAYA Cansarp, SCHRAMA Reini (2016), *Decoupling practical and legal compliance: Analysis of member states' implementation of EU policy*, „European Journal of Political Research", vol. 55, issue 4. DOI: 10.1111/1475-6765.12154

ZUCKER Lynne G. (1987), *Institutional Theories of Organization*, „Annual Review of Sociology", vol. 13. DOI: 10.1146/annurev.so.13.080187.002303

Received: 08.04.2026. Accepted: 06.08.2026.