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The Green Front: Analysing Far-Right Climate Narratives in the 2024 European Elections

Diplomová práce

ADÉLA POKORNÁ

Vedoucí práce: Miriam Matejova, Ph.D.

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Author: Adéla Pokorná
Faculty of Social Studies
Masaryk University
Department of Environmental Studies

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Anotace

Tato práce analyzuje klimatické a environmentální narativy používané radikálními pravice-
vými populistickými stranami v Evropských volbách 2024, se zaměřením na jejich mobilizační
taktiky. Pomocí obsahové analýzy studie zkoumá, jak tyto narativy, rámované nativismem, au-
toritářstvím a populismem, využívaly environmentální a klimatická témata k oslovení voličů.
Zjištění ukazují, že dominovaly narativy proti globalizaci a národní kontrola přírodních zdrojů,
zatímco autoritářské prvky byly méně výrazné. Práce rovněž zdůrazňuje, jak ekonomické vý-
zvy a socio-politické změny formovaly tyto narativy.

Abstract

This thesis analyses the climate and environmental narratives used by radical right-wing populist parties in the 2024 European Elections, focusing on their mobilization tactics. The study uses content analysis to explore how these narratives, framed through nativism, authoritarianism, and populism, utilised environmental and climate themes to appeal to voters. Findings show that anti-globalism and resource nationalism were dominant, while authoritarian elements were less prominent. The thesis also highlights how economic challenges, and socio-political shifts shaped these narratives.

Declaration

Prohlašuji, že jsem diplomovou práci na téma **The Green Front: Analysing Far-Right Climate Narratives in the 2024 European Elections** zpracovala sama. Veškeré prameny a zdroje informací, které jsem použila k sepsání této práce, byly citovány v textu a jsou uvedeny v seznamu použitých pramenů a literatury. Též prohlašuji, že jsem nástroje AI využila v souladu s principy akademické integrity a že na využití těchto nástrojů v práci vhodným způsobem odkazuji.

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Glossary

AI	– Artificial Intelligence
AfD	– Alternative for Germany
CAP	– Common Agricultural Policy
ECR	– European Conservatives and Reformists
EFDD	– Europe of Freedom and Direct Democracy
EGD	– European Green Deal
EKRE	– Conservative People's Party of Estonia
ENF	– Europe of Nations and Freedom
EP	– European Parliament
EPP	– European People's Party
ESN	– Europe of Sovereign Nations
EU	– European Union
FFF	– Fridays for Future
FN	– National Front
FPÖ	– Freedom Party of Austria
FSC	– Forest Stewardship Council
FVD	– Forum for Democracy
ID	– Identity and Democracy
IGTV	– Instagram Television
IPCC	– Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change
LGBTQ	– Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Questioning
LN	– Lega North
MEPs	– Members of the European Parliament
NATO	– North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NF	– National Front
PVV	– Party for Freedom

GLOSSARY

RN	– National Rally
SD	– Social Democrats
SDG	– Sustainable Development Goals
SIA	– Paris International Agricultural Show
SPD	– Freedom and Direct Democracy
UNFCCC	– United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change
VB	– Flemish Interest
WWII	– World War II

1 Introduction

Far-right parties, later defined as radical ring-wing populist parties, are on the rise across Europe. This rise coincides with the intensifying impacts of the climate crisis. Frequent and prolonged heatwaves are becoming increasingly common across the continent (Copernicus and World Meteorological Organisation, 2024), while major flood events, like those in 2021, have endangered the lives of thousands of European citizens (Yorke, 2023). Firefighter crews across Europe are being regularly deployed to Mediterranean countries to extinguish wildfires (European Commission, 2023).

Furthermore, while 2023 was recorded as the warmest year in history based on global temperature measurements (Copernicus and World Meteorological Organisation, 2024), Geert Wilders's far-right populist Party for Freedom (PVV) won the Dutch parliamentary elections. In the 2024 European Elections, the far-right parties Rassemblement National (RN) and Freiheitliche Partei Österreich (FPÖ) secured victories in their respective countries, France and Austria (Strupczewski, Kar-Gupta and Melander, 2024). The German Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) experienced a surge in opinion polls throughout 2023 (Kinkartz, 2023) and achieved its best federal election results ever, finishing second in the European elections in 2024. Other far-right parties across Europe are also gaining popularity, especially among young people (Montero Lopez, 2024), a category of voters previously known for voting for green parties, especially in Germany (Schauenberg, 2024).

The dynamic complexity of anthropogenic climate change is reflected in current environmental and climate policies, particularly at the European level, which directly affects the European Union (EU) member states and their citizens (cf. Zimmermann and Gengnagel, 2023). Side effects of climate and environmental policies, including economic hardship and burdens for some industries and citizens and uncertainty in climate science, are creating a breeding ground for populist far-right parties and groups (Hess and Renner, 2019; Knüppers, 2024).

1.1 Aim of the Thesis

This thesis investigates how radical right-wing populist parties in Europe shaped their environmental and climate change communication for the 2024 European Parliament elections in order to mobilise voters. It compares these narratives to those presented in previous elections and focuses specifically on parties within the Identity and Democracy political group. The research investigates how factors such as the European Green Deal (EGD), escalating climate impacts, and associated social and economic challenges may be influencing far-right environmental and climate communication. By examining how these elements are reflected in the discourse of the radical right-wing populist parties within the European elections, the research investigates the current state and possible trajectory of communication regarding climate and environmental policies within this political spectrum.

The main research question that guides the thesis research is:

How did populist far-right parties in Europe develop and present their climate and environmental narratives to mobilize voters in the context of the June 2024 European Elections?

This is further explored through a related sub-research question, which examines how the far-right visually communicated climate and environmental themes to mobilize voters' support:

How did radical right-wing populist parties in Europe present the climate and environmental issues in their visual communication to mobilize voters in the context of the June 2024 European Elections?

To answer these research questions, I develop a theoretical framework based on Cas Mudde's theory of radical right-wing populist parties' core ideological features: nativism, authoritarianism, and populism. This framework is supported by findings from the recent literature studying the communication and mobilization strategies of European right-wing populist parties in both national and European contexts. From this theoretical framework, I derive a set of four working hypotheses to answer the main research question and two to answer the sub-research questions: three focused on communication strategies related to environmental protection and climate change from a nativist perspective, one focused on an authoritarian perspective, and one on a populist perspective.

This study conducts a cross-country analysis, focusing on seven far-right populist parties from Austria, the Czech Republic, Germany, France, Italy, Spain, and the Netherlands. This research focuses on the parties that were part of the Identity and Democracy (ID) political group in the European Parliament during the 9th legislative term, noting specific exceptions outlined in the methodology chapter. A quantitative comparative analysis is carried out to test the working hypothesis and investigate the underlying reasons for the varying positions on environmental and climate issues outlined in the research questions. In addition to the quantitative content analysis, a qualitative visual analysis is performed to assess the content of the visual communication. The dual use of deductive content analysis and supplementary visual analysis methods provides a robust research framework.

1.2 Literature Review and Significance of Research

Together with a long history of research on the communication strategies of populist far-right groups on topics like immigration (cf. Mudde 2007, 2019; Wodak 2015), there is a growing body of studies on environmental concerns within far-right politics (cf. Dobson 2016, Forchtner 2019, Lubarda and Forchtner, 2023) and on how climate change denial has become a central characteristic of the European far-right (cf.

Forchtner and Kølvråa, 2015; Forchtner *et al.*, 2018; Lockwood, 2018). What still needs to be further explored is how right-wing populist parties prioritize and communicate environmental and climate policy issues and how they use these issues and connected narratives to mobilize voters.

Most studies that explore these topics examine the language used by politicians or political parties (e.g., Forchtner, 2019a; Schaller & Carius, 2019). They demonstrate how far-right parties exhibit varying degrees of resistance to climate change mitigation policies and promote scepticism about the science behind climate change. Scholars in previous research have focused on the narratives and strategies of voter mobilization in the context of environmental and climate topics, highlighting several aspects. One of them suggests that far-right communication and mobilization regarding climate and environmental topics are driven by populism, particularly anti-elitism (Lockwood 2018; Huber 2022). Another perspective attributes it to nationalism (Forchtner and Kølvråa 2015; Kulin *et al.*, 2021) or anti-egalitarianism (Jylhä and Hellmer 2020; Krange *et al.*, 2019). Another study suggests that far-right groups, concretely within the European Parliament, are hijacking climate change discussions to promote their existing agendas, such as opposition to the European Union (EU). They achieve this by framing their arguments in a way that appears separate from the science of climate change. Even seemingly ordinary economic concerns, like high taxes and burdensome regulations, can be linked back to climate policies (Forchtner and Lubarda, 2023) in order to attract voters. Similarly, Vicenová *et al.* (2022) argue, in the context of a Slovak far-right party, that green issues are utilized as a vehicle to convey the party's ideological stances and advance other aspects of the far-right agenda, as evidenced by their examination of speeches in the Slovak parliament.

Furthermore, Yazar and Haastard (2023) highlight the emphasis on regional identity to mobilize civic engagement against environmental and climate issues, which roots are discussed in the next chapter. Similar observation was acknowledged by Flynn Martino (2024) while studying AfD's ethno-nationalistic agenda. Accordingly,

Tosun and Debus (2021) argue that right-wing populist parties can, in general, leverage environmental issues to increase their vote share.

According to Schwörer and Fernández-García (2023), one of the main drivers of the radical right-wing populist parties is an effort to challenge the political establishment, which is increasingly focused on climate change, by appealing to a niche of voters who are against the climate agenda. Rather than a clear stance on climate change, the driver is a political fight. On the other hand, factors like the success of green parties do not influence the stance or frequency with which the climate issue is addressed. This may be because of the significant ideological differences between the party families and their distinct electorates, according to Spoon *et al.* (2014). However, Schwörer and Fernández-García (2023) found that the mass mobilization by Fridays for Future (FFF) has significantly influenced the far-right's focus on climate issues in Europe. Since the movement's emergence in 2018, there has been a noticeable increase in climate change appearing in populist far-right parties' manifestos. This was also evidenced by an analysis of German far-right digital networks, where a focus on Greta Thunberg or FFF activism was a recurring theme (Knüpfer and Hoffmann, 2024).

Overall, populist far-right actors craft a unique vocabulary to frame issues connected to climate change and environmental policies. Knüpfer and Hoffman (2024) show how the German AfD uses religious terms like "climate cult" to mobilize voters. Similarly, religious metaphors and accusations of indoctrination are common tactics of the populist far-right groups in the European Parliament (Forchtner and Lubarda, 2023). In this context, a relatively small number of qualitative studies have aimed to understand how right-wing populist parties express climate scepticism or positive attitudes to their voters, particularly since many of these parties have traditionally supported environmental conservation issues in general, as noted by Hanson (2024), especially studying the overarching political environment of the contemporary far-right in the European Union.

Therefore, this thesis analyses how radical right-wing populist parties frame environmental and climate change policies in the context of the 2024 European

Elections. This campaign unfolded against the backdrop of the Russia-Ukraine conflict and the real-life implications of the Green Deal (e.g., evidenced by farmer protests across Europe in early 2024) (Bassot, 2024). Two key factors motivate this research: First, environmental and climate policy agendas have undergone significant shifts during the last parliamentary term of the European Parliament. Second, the impacts of the climate crisis are likely to affect far-right voters disproportionately. Research by Enger and Weisstanner (2020) suggests a significant portion of far-right voters come from low-income backgrounds, who are generally more vulnerable to climate change due to rising costs of essential goods and services, particularly healthcare, food, and energy (European Economic and Social Committee, 2023). Additionally, far-right voters often reside in non-urban areas dependent on agriculture (Rickardsson, 2021), a sector highly susceptible to climate change impacts.

The first chapter of this thesis conceptualizes far-right parties and their political communication, providing a broad framework for this research. The second chapter explores far-right positions on climate and environmental issues, along with their strategies for voter mobilization, from historical perspectives to contemporary communication, including visual elements. The third chapter focuses on the context of the study, specifically the far-right parties represented in the European Parliament and the upcoming 2024 European Elections. The fourth chapter outlines the methodology used in the thesis, while the fifth chapter presents the analysis results. Finally, the sixth chapter concludes by discussing the findings and comparing them with current research.

2 Political Communication of the Far Right Parties

This thesis is concerned with the political communication surrounding environmental and climate issues, with a particular focus on the strategies employed by populist far-right parties. Before addressing the relationship between these parties and environmental or climate concerns, far-right parties, also known as radical right-wing populist parties, will be conceptualized, as explained in the first section. This conceptualization relies on the theoretical framework developed by Cas Mudde (2007, 16-3), which highlights the core elements of their ideology: nativism, authoritarianism, and populism, all of which are essential to the research of this thesis. Following this, attention will be given to aspects of far-right political communication, including visual communication, in order to provide an understanding of their approach to environmental and climate issues in the next chapter.

2.1 Conceptualising Radical Right-Wing Populist Parties

Radical, extreme, fascist, or populist political parties, depending on the definition, saw an unexpected resurgence in Europe during the 1980s and 1990s (Zaslave, 2009). Similar to the emergence of Green, New Left, and regionalist political parties, these groups form a diverse and heterogeneous collection of parties and movements (ibid.). Initially, literature from left-wing critics largely influenced the study of the contemporary far right in what is termed the post-1980 'third wave'. According to Dutch political scientist Cas Mudde, this resulted in studies that were predominantly opinionated, speculative, emotionally charged, and highly politicized—often biased by a 'fascist' or 'neo-fascist' perspective. However, the current landscape appears markedly different. Political scientists argue that since the 1980s, something distinct from fascism or neo-fascism has emerged—a phenomenon characterized as a populist radicalization of mainstream concerns known as 'radical right-wing populism' (Copsey, 2013).

Therefore, the term ‘far right’ serves as an umbrella concept encompassing both ‘(populist) radical’ and ‘extreme’ forms of right-wing politics. It is a general label used to group together political entities situated at the far end of the ideological left-right spectrum (Pirro, 2022). The debate within the social sciences has focused on distinguishing between ‘(populist) radical right’ collective actors, primarily parties that follow the rules of the democratic game, and ‘extreme right’ actors, mostly movements and groups aiming to overthrow the democratic system (ibid.).

2.1.1 Nativism, Authoritarianism, and Populism

This thesis defines the party family of interest as the radical right-wing populist, asserting that parties, despite the programmatic diversity, in this category share a core ideology comprising nativism, authoritarianism, and populism, as defined by Mudde (2007, 16-3). Nativism refers to a xenophobic form of nationalism where an ideal mono-cultural nation-state is envisioned, viewing all non-natives (i.e., immigrants) as threats to the nation. Authoritarianism involves a strict belief in maintaining order and enforcing it within society through discipline and law-and-order policies. Populism, a thin ideology, sees society as fundamentally divided between two opposing and homogeneous groups: the pure people and the corrupt elite, advocating for politics to represent the general will of the people (Mudde, 2004). The interplay of these three elements defines the populist radical right party family (Zaslove, 2009).

Populist radical right parties are the most successful political group to have arisen in post-war Europe. Additionally, they are the only new political family significant in Western and Eastern Europe. Overall, radical right-wing populist parties have only had a limited impact on European politics (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2013).

In this thesis, the subjects studied are parties affiliated with the Identity and Democracy (ID) political group within the European Parliament in the 9th legislative term, with exceptions described in the Methodology section. According to scholars (Brenner and Sartorius, 2023; Guisan, 2022), the members of the ID political group

could fulfil the definition of radical right-wing populism as defined by Cas Mudde. Nevertheless, Ahlmeyer (2007) claims that radical right-wing populist parties do not consider themselves a "monolithic" group, as they fail to form alliances. Although the ID political group, founded in 2019 (Kantola and Miller, 2021), presented as relatively stable over the legislative term (Brenner and Sartorius, 2023), it experienced tensions during the 2024 European Elections campaign when the members of the German AfD were expelled (von Pezold *et al.*, 2024).

2.2 Political Communication of the Far Right

Although there are multiple definitions of political communication, Brian McNair (2011, p.4) describes it as "*purposeful communication about politics between different actors.*" This includes various aspects such as communication from politicians and other political figures aimed at achieving political objectives, communication directed at these figures by non-politicians—such as voters, political analysts, or activists—and discussions and commentary about these figures in news, editorials, and other forms of media discourse. Traditionally, political communication took the form of political speeches, but in today's world, speeches reach their widest audience through a variety of media channels, including political manifestos, newsletters, and, importantly, social media platforms.

Research on elections is a central focus in both political communication studies and strategic political communication. In democratic systems, discussing election campaigns is essential because they are the period when parties and candidates present their political agendas to the electorate and are held accountable for their actions during the previous term. This period determines who will govern in the coming years (Larsson and Ihlen, 2015). According to Enjolras *et al.* (2013, p. 158), their research showed that young people, in particular, follow politicians on social media to help them decide whom to support. Additionally, many voters often delay making their final decision until late in the campaign (Box-Steffensmeier *et al.*, 2015).

Focusing more closely on radical right-wing populist parties, key themes in their political communications include an emphasis on the people, the homeland, traditions, danger, and the party's image. A central theme, according to Krasteva and Lazaridis (2016), is “othering”—in other words, the “us versus them” mentality. This is reflected in the party's portrayal of itself and its supporters, as well as the land and cultural values, in contrast to the perceived threat posed by others. This aligns with Mudde's theory, particularly regarding the nativist and populist worldview. The implications of these themes on environmental and climate issues in the communication of radical right-wing populist parties are discussed in the following chapter.

2.2.1 Political Visual Communication of the Far Right

Visual content has long been a fundamental component of political communication. However, with the advancement of digital technologies, its significance has amplified dramatically. From print media and television to the internet and social media, visuals have become increasingly prevalent and influential in shaping public opinion.

The widespread availability of mobile devices and internet access has made politicians more visible than ever before in history. Moreover, images on social media platforms have emerged as strategic tools for political figures to engage and persuade voters (Farkas and Bene, 2021). On social media platforms, such as Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, and the rapidly growing TikTok, visuals are inextricably linked to the accompanying text and the apps' features. These elements collectively contribute to the construction of our understanding of the world (Rose, 2014).

The far-right has been particularly adept at leveraging the internet to disseminate their ideology and cultivate a following. They frequently employ memes and other visual content to attract attention and advance their propaganda and mobilization efforts (Klein, 2020). These visual pieces of culture play a pivotal role in normalizing far-right ideas and mainstreaming them within broader society (Miller-Idriss, 2018).

With a closer look at the concrete strategies for voter's mobilisation, McSwiney *et al.* (2021) examine the specific communication strategies used by far-right groups

in Denmark. They identify several key tactics: firstly, these radical right-wing parties often draw a direct connection to their fascist past, using militaristic styles and symbols that incite violence against the left. Secondly, they emphasize Western identity, cultural heritage, and values, frequently highlighting Christian symbols. Finally, the parties engage with popular culture, employing internet memes to communicate their messages, particularly in a transnational context. However, the strongest focus in their visual political communication is on self-representation (Dean, 2019).

Research on visual climate and environmental communication is not as extensive as studies focusing on verbal and written climate communication (Hopke and Hestres 2018). Although climate change communicators have examined how emotions such as fear, guilt, helplessness, and vulnerability are evoked by verbal communication—and how these emotions can either engage or deter audiences—there is growing interest in the impact of images in climate change communication. However, the relationship between these images and the emotions or meanings they convey has been less thoroughly explored (Nerlich and Jaspal 2014). The specific rhetorical, textual, and visual communication strategies used by far-right political entities in relation to environmental and climate issues are discussed in the following chapter.

3 Far Right, Climate and Environment

This chapter explores the far-right stances on environmental and climate issues and their communication, with a focus on how these narratives have evolved over time. The first section examines the historical roots of far-right environmental perspectives, particularly their connection to National Socialism and Fascism. It outlines how these movements romanticized nature, linking it to racial purity and nationalist ideologies.

The second section discusses the contemporary European radical right-wing populist parties, analysing their environmental and climate-related communication strategies. This section identifies key themes such as climate scepticism, economic nationalism, and opposition to global climate policies.

The third section delves into the visual communication employed by these far-right groups, focusing on how they use imagery of nature to reinforce far-right messages. This analysis highlights the symbolic power of visual representations in shaping far-right environmental narratives, illustrating the strategic use of national landscapes and folklore in their political messaging.

3.1 Far Right Communicating Nature: Echoes of National Socialism

Although the application of far-right ideologies may vary, all these features refer to the historical National Socialism and Fascism. Nazi and fascist ideologies, built on ideas of racial purity and eugenics, used a variety of social anxieties to stir up hatred against Jews and other groups. Historically, nationalism has primarily romanticized nature, perceiving it as pristine and untouched by human influence (Brüggemeier *et al.*, 2005, p. 8; Forchtner, 2019b). Far-right groups might emphasize this "naturalness" as untainted by contemporary trends or ideas. This connection allows them to portray nationalism as an inherent and natural order, not a human construct (Forchtner, 2019a, p. 4). Although a bond towards nature is not inherently part of all radical right-wing (populist) groups, those who strongly emphasise historical National Socialism might feel closer to nature (Turner and Bailey, 2022).

Building upon the concept of Völkisch nationalism, a product of 18th century German Romanticism, Nazi ideology constructed a tenuous link between race and nature. Völkisch nationalism idealized a pure German race with a deep connection to the land and a rural lifestyle, rejecting the influences of modernity (Hare and Link, 2019; Rash, 2012). The late 19th century's "homeland protection" movement, *Heimatschutz*, fostered similar ideas. Many *Heimatschutz* activists found themselves aligned with the Nazi regime, as the movement's emphasis on ethnicity, racism, and conservation became central tenets of Nazi ideology (Brüggemeier *et al.*, 2005, p. 8). This emphasis on nature served as the foundation for the Nazis' warped interpretation of Social Darwinism, which they manifested in the concept of "*Blood and Soil*". This concept linked race (blood) with national territory (soil) to justify expansion for 'pure' Germans (Biehl and Staudenmaier, 2011).

Illustratively, Adolf Hitler in *Mein Kampf* found beauty in nature's undeniable laws and criticized humanity's arrogance (Williams, 1996). Nature, for him, embodied the permanent state of competition and struggle for dominance, which he believed to exist between "races of people" (Hawkins, 1997, p.58). Another example of the relationship towards the environment from Nazi regime was that the regime, for example, banned vivisection and implemented some animal protection measures aimed at projecting an image of ecological awareness and care for nature and homeland (Biehl and Staudenmaier, 2011, p. 98). Building on National socialism, Ecofascism, on the other hand, represents a distinct ideology (Zimmerman, 2008). It envisions a totalitarian state where individual needs are ruthlessly sacrificed for environmental preservation. This "environment" encompasses the natural world and the entire web of life, including human societies and their governing structures (*ibid.*).

Ecofascists view modernization, with its industrialization and urbanization, and focus on materialism as a threat. They romanticize a traditional way of life, emphasizing harmony with nature and strong communities. This concern extends to immigration, which is seen as potentially disruptive to both ecological balance and cultural identity. For ecofascists, nature offers a purifying power that can restore society.

However, a critical distinction exists within Ecofascism. While some may hold anthropocentric views, prioritizing environmental protection to safeguard a particular race, building up on Garrett Hardin's "Lifeboat ethics" (Campion, 2023), others may hold a more holistic view (Zimmerman, 2008).

Since the second half of the 20th century, there has been a notable shift in the concerns. The concerns connected to ethnicity and general people who embodied Volk are no longer connected to the protection of (rural) natural landscapes. Nowadays, the far-right narratives are primarily concerned with the perceived threat to the sovereignty and well-being of the general populace as a threat to Volk (Forchtner *et al.*, 2018). This threat is often framed within the context of globalist climate policies. Far-right parties consider climate change as a "*cosmopolitan elite agenda*" (Lockwood, 2018, p. 713), conflicting with their core ideological stances, opposition to globalization, and criticism of political elites subscribing to the climate-change discourse (Vinceroová *et al.*, 2022). Therefore, despite an overarching international scientific consensus on the anthropogenic influence exacerbating the climate crisis (IPCC, 2023), a growing body of literature (Fraune and Knodt, 2018; Lockwood, 2018; Forchtner, 2019a) points to the distrustfulness of far-right parties towards this phenomenon.

Consequently, past far-right environmental views were more unified, focusing on protecting their "homeland." However, a bond towards nature is not inherently part of all far-right groups. Specific framing of nature by Nazis reflected a distorted continuation of German intellectual traditions, not a fundamental connection between environmentalism and fascism. Today, their environmental messages are more diverse and scattered, though echoes of those earlier concerns remain (Forchtner *et al.*, 2018).

3.2 Current European Far-Right Environmental and Climate Narratives

Overall, research suggests a strong link between European radical right-wing populist parties and opposition to climate change policies (cf. Forchtner *et al.*, 2018; Hess and Renner, 2019; Forchtner, 2019a; Schaller and Carius, 2019; Praet, 2023). Scholars have

identified recurring arguments used by these groups to justify their opposition. First, far-right groups adopt a climate sceptic stance, casting doubt on climate science itself (Hess and Renner, 2019) and its representative bodies, such as climate scientific groups and organizations (Schaller and Carius, 2019; Schwörer and Fernández-García, 2024). The European far-right is primarily communicating and arguing in the political debates through "response scepticism," as founded by Forchtner and Lubarda (2023), which means opposition to climate change mitigation policies, often because they are perceived as too costly (Van Rensburg, 2015). Other types of scepticism include "evidence scepticism," a complete denial of the existence of anthropogenic climate change, and "process scepticism," which criticizes the methods behind the production and distribution of climate knowledge, for example, viewing the media as alarmist and scientists as biased. "Evidence scepticism" and "Response scepticism" were more typical ways radical ring-wing parties' argumentation regarding climate change in the past (ibid.).

Second, they argue that climate change policies will lead to economic decline for their countries, with negative spillover effects for the public. This argument is often framed as "the economy and jobs should not be harmed." (Forchtner and Lubarda, 2022, p.58; Schaller and Carius, 2019, p. 14). Third, they view EU-imposed environmental and climate targets and mandates as an infringement on national sovereignty (Forchtner and Lubarda, 2023). Fourth, they promote climate dissent, fostering distrust in climate science and the acknowledgement of anthropogenic climate change (Hess and Renner, 2019). Fifth, far-right groups often oppose climate and environmental policies based on immediate costs (Hess and Renner, 2019).

Additionally, Schaller and Carius (2019) identify a category of arguments centred on "homeland (*Heimat*) and nature," as described further above, which can potentially serve to legitimize their opposition to climate policies. These arguments can often be intertwined. Concretely, according to Schaller and Carius (2019), who analysed 21 right-wing parties across Europe, a third of these parties expressed scepticism or outright denial of the scientific consensus on human-induced climate change. Another

half of the parties fluctuated in their messaging or remained silent on the issue. Notably, only two parties, Hungary's Fidesz and Latvia's National Alliance, actively supported the scientific consensus. Both parties held governmental positions at the time of the study and were not members of the Identity and Democracy Group, a radical ring-wing populist political group of the European Parliament. This finding resonates with Hess and Renner (2019), who stated that far-right parties in government may exhibit a less critical stance on environmental and climate policies, with a greater likelihood of acknowledging the problem.

Two notable examples of climate denial parties are the German AfD and the Dutch PVV. These parties dispute the existence of a definitive cause-and-effect relationship between human greenhouse gas emissions and climate change, arguing that independent scientific studies have not conclusively established it and that the IPCC's findings are inconclusive as well (Schaller and Carius, 2019). Consequently, Turner and Bailey (2022) show that far-right European groups, who are known for their "*environmental crisis denialism*", often openly promote "*eco-bordering*", casting immigration control as environmental protection, by stressing such views as "*migration as environmental plunder*" or "*migrant as environmental villain*" (p.7), referencing on roots of eco-fascism, and therefore national socialism as well.

However, some far-right parties present more environmentally positive narratives. For example, the RN in France promotes "patriotic ecology," emphasizing the connection between French natural resources and national identity (Boukala and Tountasaki, 2019). This approach includes supporting nuclear power, opposing harmful pollutants, and advocating for citizen health. These narratives resemble "*Blut und Boden*" more closely, functioning as somewhat conservative strategies rather than radical ecologism (Eatwell, 2014). Forchtner and Lubarda (2023) acknowledge that some pro-climate narratives exist within the broader context of far-right rhetoric. Radical ring-wing populist members of the 8th European Parliament (2014-2019) occasionally recognized climate change as a serious concern. However, such pronouncements were two-thirds less frequent than climate-sceptical statements.

An interesting observation involves the promotion of localization and shorter supply chains, a principle also advocated by environmental groups. Nevertheless, for far-right parties, this principle serves as a populist tool to reinforce nationalistic narratives. They criticize climate policies that encourage global trade, arguing that these policies increase global emissions and job losses (Forchtner and Lubarda, 2023). Renewable energy presents a contradictory case for far-right parties as well. Through the lens of the "*Heimat*" (homeland) argumentation, some view it as a threat to the country's landscape and agriculture, fearing a reduction in usable land for domestic production (Hess and Renner, 2019). Conversely, another group within the radical ring-wing populist parties utilizes the "*national independence*" argument to support renewables. However, this latter argument is significantly less prevalent, with the NF in France being a notable exception. Their approach combines national independence with economic patriotism and can even escalate to xenophobic statements targeting oil-exporting Islamic Gulf countries (Schaller and Carius, 2019). Any observed climate-positive narratives are typically framed within the context of national independence and homeland/nature (ibid.).

In conclusion, far-right parties in Europe employ a variety of arguments to justify their opposition to climate change policies, including climate scepticism, economic concerns, and national sovereignty. While some radical ring-wing populist groups present a more pro-environmental narrative, it is usually connected to the promotion of nationalism. This can take the form of supporting the local economy over others or encouraging nationalist sentiments by connecting landscapes and nature to the nation and national symbols (Boukala and Tountasaki, 2019; Kevický, 2024). This approach often serves as a proxy for anti-immigration or xenophobic narratives (Vinceroová *et al.*, 2022).

3.3 Visual Communication of Environmental and Climate Themes of the Current European Far Right

Visual representation plays a key role in shaping how environmental issues are framed in far-right communication (Forchtner and Olsen, 2023). However, little research has focused on visual communication of environmental and climate topics, with the notable exception of a recent publication by Forchtner *et al.* (2023). In relation to the study of far-right rhetoric concerning environmental and climate themes, as discussed further in Chapter 2 of this thesis, several aspects pertain to the types of images used in the visual communication of radical right-wing populist parties.

One visual communication approach emphasises nature's purity by connecting national natural heritage, particularly in relation to the people (*Volk*) and their homeland (*Heimat*). This often involves highlighting natural landscapes that hold deep ties to the nation's history, folklore, or cultural and political references (e.g., locations mentioned in national anthems or depicted in national symbols). An example of this can be found in the visual communication of the Slovak radical right-wing populist party Kotlebovci – People's Party Our Slovakia, which utilizes imagery of the Kriváň peak, a natural monument referenced in the national coat of arms, to mobilize voters (Kevický, 2023).

Not only are photographic images of landscapes utilized, but some far-right groups also incorporate historical landscape paintings. In certain cases, these are re-contextualized to appeal to younger audiences. For example, Caspar David Friedrich's *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog* (c. 1817), a key work in German Romanticism, has been reimagined in this way by a German far-right group. Friedrich, celebrated by the Nazis for his allegorical landscapes (Anderson, 2019), remains a source of inspiration for far-right groups today (Bogerts and Fielitz, 2019).

Beyond visuals of virgin nature, another common theme is the depiction of workers, symbolizing the "common people." Two primary themes can be observed in this regard. On the one hand, there is an emphasis on protecting farmers, who, according to Aguilera-Carnerero (2023), are seen as the backbone of society. This corresponds to

the focus on rurality as part of national identity and extends to other agricultural professions, such as fishermen (Carle, 2021). On the other hand, a concept of “petro-masculinity” can be perceived (Daggett, 2018), where workers in the petrochemical and mining industries are portrayed as victims of climate policies (Forchtner and Olsen, 2023). These professions are often associated with white masculinity, as noted by Daggett (2018, p. 32).

Together, these images of nature and the common people often invoke a theme of nostalgia centred on the remembrance of a traditional way of life closely tied to a “natural” identity (Carle, 2023). As Forchtner and Olsen (2023) point out, this discourse typically suggests that “the old ways are good ways,” framing the contemporary era as decadent and destructive. Nostalgia may also be linked to the perceived loss of landscapes or biodiversity, often illustrated, for example, through opposition to wind energy production (ibid.). In some cases, this nostalgic imagery leans toward a feminine vision of environmental protection rooted in pagan traditions and a traditional way of life. Women are depicted as caregivers and ethereal representations of nature (Carle, 2023), while woodcutters or timber workers are portrayed as humble, honest labourers contrasted with the profit-driven urban workforce, reinforcing the ideal of the “common man” (Bogerts and Fielitz, 2019), as an element of balance.

In many cases, these images also feature the party leader, who is portrayed as a protector of nature, often captured walking through landscapes or engaging in minor environmental activities like picking up trash (Aguilera-Carnerero, 2023). These visuals may combine several elements, such as a local party leader driving a fossil-fuel-powered vehicle through a picturesque landscape to visit impoverished rural fishermen or farmers, in the case of France, as found by Carle (2023).

Overall, nature is closely associated with the homeland (*Heimat*), with native populations such as farmers and rural communities seen as its custodians. This far-right vision of nature is highly anthropocentric, often illustrated with breathtaking landscapes, sometimes accompanied by the party leader. Nevertheless, this discourse can be disrupted by the emphasis on declining fossil fuel industries, often portrayed as the

domain of white men victimized by climate policies. As Forchtner and Olsen (2021) state, far-right groups can simultaneously adopt an environmental protection discourse while opposing climate policies, blending notions of petro-masculinity with “muscular environmentalism”—the defence of “our” landscapes in opposition to the abstract and somewhat feminized notions of climate protection (Daggett, 2018).

Having explored the textual and visual strategies employed by radical right-wing populist parties to communicate their environmental narratives, it is important to examine their political evolution and influence within the European Parliament, particularly as we move from the 9th to the 10th legislative term, which is a key aspect of this study.

4 The Far Right in the European Parliament and the European Elections

This chapter examines the evolution of far-right political groups within the European Parliament, focusing on the transition from the 9th to the 10th legislative term. The first section details the trajectory of the Identity and Democracy Group (ID Group) from its formation in 2019 to its dissolution in 2024. It highlights the group's initial composition, key members, and the internal and external factors that contributed to its disbandment. Additionally, it explores the emergence of new far-right political alliances within the European Parliament, such as the Patriots for Europe and the Europe of Sovereign Nations.

The second section provides a comprehensive overview of selected far-right populist parties, offering insights into their political influence and their roles within both the European Parliament and local political landscapes. The third section analyses the 2024 European Elections, examining the continuity of patterns observed in previous elections. However, it also discusses a slight shift towards the right-wing, reflecting a growing dominance of far-right parties within the right-wing spectrum. This section further explores the unique context of the 2024 elections, including the geopolitical conflicts in the proximity of Europe, the legacy of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the significant impacts of climate change and related policies.

4.1 Transformation of Far-Right Political Groups in the European Parliament (2019-2024)

The 9th European Parliament (2019-2024) consisted of 705 members. The 10th European Parliament (2024-2029) consist of 720 members. These members are affiliated with political groups based on their political profiles in their home countries. The 9th European Parliament consisted of seven political groups representing the political spectrum. Among these, the Identity and Democracy Group (ID Group), the far-right

political group of the European Parliament (Ekman and Lane, 2022), was the fourth largest, with 59 members (Sabbati, 2024).

The ID Group was founded in 2019, originally consisting of 73 members. Launched in Brussels by RN leader Marine Le Pen on June 13, 2019, the ID Group expanded to include former Europe of National and Freedom (ENF) Group members Vlaams Belang and the FPÖ from Austria. Additionally, the new Freedom and Direct Democracy (SPD) party from the Czech Republic and the Conservative People's Party of Estonia joined. It replaced the Europe of Nations and Freedom group, which held 36 seats in the previous EU legislature (Reuters, 2019).

At the end of the legislative cycle in 2024, the ID Group's largest contingent came from Italy's Lega party, with 24 representatives. This was followed by France's National Rally (FN) party with 19 members and Germany's Alternative for Germany (AfD) party with nine members. Austria had three members from the Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ), while Belgium sent three members from Vlaams Belang (VB), also known in English as Flemish Interest. The Czech Republic and Estonia each had a single representative in the ID Group, belonging to the Freedom and Direct Democracy (SPD) and Conservative People's Party of Estonia (EKRE) parties, respectively (Sabbati, 2024).

The ID Group's composition underwent some changes since the beginning of the parliamentary term in 2019. Initially, the group included two members from Finland's Finns Party (Perussuomalaiset). However, in April 2023, these members departed for the European Conservatives and Reformist Party (ECR) due to differing stances on the 2022 Ukraine invasion and its impact on Finnish security policy (Camut, 2023). Shifting political landscapes also impacted representation within the Netherlands. In October 2022, Marcel van Graaf became the sole representative for the Dutch far-right party, Forum for Democracy (FVD). Previously, he served as a representative for the Party for Freedom (PVV) led by Geert Wilders. However, in January 2022, he switched allegiances and joined the FVD (Identity and Democracy, 2022). One month prior to the European Elections in 2024, the Alternative for Germany (AfD) was

expelled from the ID Group. This decision was made by Marine Le Pen (RN), who deemed the AfD too extreme, aiming to make her party appear more mainstream while maintaining its strong anti-immigration stance (von Pezold *et al.*, 2024). Otherwise, no other European Union member states held representation within the ID Group during this parliamentary term. Additionally, the ID Group did not secure any vice-presidency or Questor positions within the European Parliament (European Parliament, 2022).

After the European Elections took place on 6-9 June 2024, the far-right wing populist party group experienced a political affiliation and identity upheaval. In late June 2024, Austria's far-right Freedom Party (FPÖ), Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban's Fidesz, and the populist Czech party ANO led by Andrej Babis announced a new alliance in the European Parliament, Patriots for Europe (Murphy, 2024). Other parties joining Patriots for Europe, which largely replaced the Identity and Democracy political group, included Vlaams Belang (Belgium), Danish People's Party, Rassemblement National (France), Christian Democratic People's Party (Hungary), Lega (Italy), Chega (Portugal), and Vox (Spain). When RN officially joined the Patriots for Europe on July 8, the ID group, founded at the beginning of the previous legislative term by RN, dissolved due to the departure of its key members RN, Vlaams Belang, Lega, and Chega (Jones, 2024). Thus, the Identity and Democracy group no longer had the numbers to constitute itself in the European Parliament. The leader of the new group became Jordan Bardella, leader of RN (Gozzi, 2024). The Patriots for Europe became the third largest parliamentary group, with 84 MEPs (Members of the European Parliament), following the conservative European People's Party (EPP) and the Social Democrats (SD). This move overtook the other right-wing group, the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR), led by Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni.

The second group replacing the role of the Identity and Democracy Group is the new alliance, Europe of Sovereign Nations (ESN). This group was founded shortly after the dissolution of the ID group on July 10, 2024. This alliance, which counts 25 MEPs among its ranks, is led by Germany's far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) and Poland's Confederation. It also comprises MEPs from Bulgaria's Revival, France's

Reconquête, Slovakia's Republic Movement, Hungary's Our Homeland Movement, Lithuania's People and Justice Union, and the Czech Republic's Freedom and Direct Democracy (SPD) (Starcevic and Wax, 2024). This political group is the smallest of all political groups represented in the 10th European Parliament. Europe of Sovereign Nations promised to be more radical than the Patriots (Starcevic and Wax, 2024; Rankin, 2024).

Media and political commentators acknowledge the newly founded parties as far-right, and ESN also received the label "extremist" in the media (Rankin, 2024). However, often added to this duo is a third party, ECR, which includes Fratelli d'Italia (Fdi, Brothers of Italy) and the Polish Prawo i Sprawiedliwość (PiS, Law and Justice). Notably, this particular group lost the significant party Vox to the Patriots for Europe.

4.2 Introducing and Situating the Selected Radical Right-Wing Populist Parties in the European Parliament

Due to the coherence and the presence of multiple minor far-right populist parties that entered the European Parliament after the 2024 European Elections, I chose to study political parties affiliated with the ID Political Group in the previous legislative term (9th European Parliament), with certain exceptions of Vox and PVV to be noted as described below. It is also questionable whether all political entities associated with the aforementioned political groups (Patriots for Europe, ESN, and possibly ECR) fully meet the criteria of far-right populist parties as defined by Mudde.

In the sub-chapters below, I discuss the selected far-right populist parties in detail. The parties are presented in order from the largest to the smallest in terms of ID Group membership during the 9th European Parliament period.

4.2.1 Lega Nord per l'Indipendenza della Padania (LN, Northern League for the Independence of Padania), shortly Lega (League)

The Lega Nord (LN) originated from the mobilization of regionalist parties in Northern Italy during the late 1970s. These parties eventually united in 1991 under the uncontested leadership of Umberto Bossi when Lega Nord was officially founded. Since then,

LN has maintained a continuous presence in parliament, making it the oldest parliamentary party in the country (Albertazzi and McDonnell, 2010). LN played a crucial role in dismantling the post-war Italian political system by emphasizing the so-called "Northern question." The party advanced a narrative that characterized Northerners as industrious and hardworking while depicting Southerners as idle and unproductive. This rhetoric bolstered a form of "inter-regional" nativism within the country (Newth, 2019). Bossi led LN without opposition until 2012, when he resigned due to a scandal involving the misappropriation of party funds. After the brief tenure of Roberto Maroni as leader, Matteo Salvini became the new Federal Secretary in 2013. According to Albertazzi et al. (2018, p. 662), Salvini's leadership saw the LN move away from regionalist concerns, which had been a central part of its ideology. This transformation shifted the party's ideology from ethno-regionalism to nationalism, firmly establishing the Lega as a prominent member of the European populist radical right political family. Under Salvini's leadership, the focus shifted from representing northern people to encompassing all Italians, thereby strengthening the concept of nationalism (Donà, 2021). This shift has been underscored by the Lega's electoral victories and significant political influence. As the oldest party in the current parliament, this ideological redefinition reflects the evolving landscape of Italian politics over the past three decades. (Ivaldi *et al.*, 2017; Donà, 2021).

In preparation for the 2024 European Elections, General Roberto Vannacci teamed up with Matteo Salvini, Italy's deputy prime minister and leader of the right-wing League party, as the League's prominent candidate. The party strategically chose Vannacci, a well-known figure, to differentiate itself from the Prime Minister's Brothers of Italy party. Vannacci has openly criticized LGBTQ+ rights, the environmental lobby, multiculturalism, and immigration (Kaval, 2024).

4.2.2 Rassemblement National (RN, National Rally), previously known as Front National (FN, National Front)

The Front National (FN), founded in 1972 by Jean-Marie Le Pen, was initially insignificant. However, over the past three decades, the party has successfully entered and

reshaped mainstream French politics (Nelson, 2020). The FN sought to establish itself as a right-wing populist and anti-communist movement, promoting xenophobia, advocating for reducing the public sector, decreasing state intervention, and implementing stringent immigration controls (Davies, 1999, p.100). Further social and political changes in the 1980s contributed to the FN's rise in popularity (Nelson, 2020).

In the 1980s, the FN capitalized on the economic crisis, shifting economic landscape, electoral system, and immigration patterns by reformulating their political agenda to focus on immigration and security (Stockemer, 2017). The FN employed populism to distinguish itself from mainstream parties and position itself as an alternative to the French political establishment (ibid.). Due to these shifts and changes in the economic, social, and political landscape, the FN gained more popularity, continuously increasing its seat gains in the European Parliament and national elections during the 1980s and 1990s. The unexpected advancement of the FN into mainstream politics became evident during the 2002 presidential election, where Le Pen became the first leader of a nationalist party to reach the second round of voting (Stockemer, 2017). However, this triggered widespread mobilization against the FN in France (Nelson, 2020).

Since Marine Le Pen, the daughter of Jean-Marie Le Pen, assumed leadership of the FN from her father in 2011, the party has undergone a resurgence. Marine Le Pen is one of the few radical right-wing populist female leaders in an environment where populist radical right movements are typically perceived as predominantly masculine and misogynistic (Snipes and Mudde, 2019). Following her presidency, Le Pen initiated a *dédiabolisation* ("de-demonization") campaign aimed at changing the negative image of the party among the French public (Beardsley, 2017). Transitioning away from its radical elements, Marine Le Pen aimed to portray the FN as a moderate party, which is evident in her recent decision to rename the party from *Le Front National* to *Le Rassemblement National* (RN). However, this strategic move appeared more aimed at distancing the party from its fascist origins rather than signalling a genuine shift in ideology. Historically, *Rassemblement* ("gathering" or "rally") has been associated with

traditional right-wing parties, while Front has been linked with radical parties across the political spectrum. In reality, there are few ideological distinctions between the "old" FN under Jean-Marie Le Pen and the "new" FN under Marine Le Pen. The Rassemblement National continues to emphasize concepts of nation and identity, espousing a neo-nationalist ideology focused on preserving French national identity, society, and culture (Davies, 1999). Thus, scholars recognize RN as a populist right-wing party (cf. Snipes and Mudde, 2019; Fachini and Jaeck, 2021).

In 2022, Jordan Bardella, aged 26, took over from Marie Le Pen as the leader of his party and emerged as a leading candidate for the 2024 European Elections. Despite this, Marie Le Pen continues to oversee the party actively. Bardella is significantly active on social media platforms, mainly TikTok, to attract support from young people in France (Khatsenkova, 2024).

4.2.3 Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs (Freedom Party of Austria, FPÖ)

The Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ), established in 1956, had a significant proportion of founding members who were former officials of the Nazi regime and were unable to integrate into the other two major parties (Pelinka 2002, p. 3.). After three decades of marginalization within the Austrian political landscape, the party experienced a resurgence under Jörg Haider's leadership, starting in 1986. Haider became infamous for his xenophobic and anti-Muslim positions, leading to increased electoral success and eventual government participation.

The FPÖ's precise position within the political spectrum, particularly its proximity to the far-right, has been debated among scholars. Numerous sources categorize the party as a right-wing extremist. A prominent example is a 2000 report by the European Court of Human Rights, which affirmed the FPÖ's extremist and xenophobic tendencies (Ahtisaari *et al.*, 2000, p. 25). After the Second World War, the populist Radical Right Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ) held strong anti-Soviet and anti-communist positions. However, as the FPÖ has increasingly focused on opposing the progressive cultural and liberal economic agendas of Washington and Brussels, Bauer (2014, p. 8) categorizes

the party as a moderate nationalist group operating within the established political system. FPÖ members have also been publicly recognized as supporters of Putin's Russia. In August 2018, photos of Russian President Vladimir Putin dancing with Austrian Foreign Minister Karin Kneissl made international headlines. Additionally, a 2019 scandal involving the former FPÖ leader, who was filmed offering government contracts to a woman posing as the niece of a Russian oligarch, further damaged the party's reputation (Wiederwald, 2024). Critics worried that this symbolic act could weaken the EU's foreign policy and confirmed fears about the FPÖ enabling Russian interference in European affairs (Roonema *et al.*, 2022).

Scholars currently consider the FPÖ a national-conservative, right-wing populist, eurosceptic, and far-right political party in Austria (Krzyzanowski, 2013), with Herbert Kickl as its leader since 2021 (Day, 2024). In 2024, Kickl was accused of links to the Russian espionage scandal that reportedly began in 2017 during his tenure as interior minister (Bell, 2024). Ties to Putin's Russia did not loosen during the 2024 European Elections campaign either (Wiederwald, 2024).

As discussed, Herbert Kickl was one of the founding members of the allegedly populist far-right European Parliament group called Patriots for Europe. The newly elected members of the European Parliament from the FPÖ did not continue with their previous political group, Identity and Democracy, which was later dissolved.

4.2.4 Svoboda a přímá demokracie (Freedom and Direct Democracy, SPD)

The Czech radical right-wing populist party Freedom and Direct Democracy (SPD) (Tarant, 2019) was established in 2015 by Tomio Okamura and Radim Fiala, and it is the most successful far-right political subject in the history of the country (Kazharski, 2022). Its name draws inspiration from the Eurosceptic group "Europe of Freedom and Direct Democracy" (EFDD). A key principle of the SPD is the rejection of Europe's bureaucratization (Schaller and Carius, 2019). The party describes itself through what could be termed populist exceptionalism, referring to itself as "a patriotic movement" and "the only party in parliament advocating for" systemic change (Kazharski, 2022).

The party establishment nearly coincided with the onset of the European migration crisis in 2015. Since then, it has consistently leveraged the strong anti-migration sentiments prevalent in Czech and other Central European societies. Prominent topics in the party narratives are also issues connected to gender and sexuality identity, as well as criticism of interculturalism, internationalism and environmental and climate agenda (*ibid.*). However, words like “environment” do not appear or are not prominent in the party’s programme in the past (Tarant, 2019).

The political approach of the Czech SPD closely resembles Trumpism, characterized by a constant critique of democratic systems while operating within them. By appealing to a populist base and discrediting political elites, it promotes a distrust of established institutions. A central element of this strategy is the demand for direct democracy, often manifested in referendums on crucial national issues, such as EU and NATO membership, mirroring the Brexit vote (*ibid.*), performed like in the “Swiss” example (Tarant, 2019, p. 210).

The SPD was running to the European Parliament in 2024 in collaboration with The Tricolour Citizens' Movement (Trikolora), a political party with strong anti-EU views, advocating for limited government spending and promoting traditional Czech values. The Tricolour Citizens' Movement was founded by the son of a previous Czech president, Václav Klaus, a great public critic of climate protection and defender of the opinion about the non-existence of anthropogenic climate change. Tricolour Citizens' Movement adopts practically the same stance about this issue (ČTK, 2023).

The SPD managed to retain only one of its two previous seats in the European Parliament. The new populist and Eurosceptic political entity, Přísaha (Oath), in electoral alliance with Motorists for Themselves, significantly outperformed the SPD in the Czech Republic's European elections. Advocating for the interests of motorists and opposing the European Green Deal, with a focus on reducing support for sustainable mobility infrastructure, this alliance garnered greater support than the SPD and secured three seats in the European Parliament (*ibid.*). This newly formed alliance, currently part of the Patriots for Europe political group, is not being analysed due to its recent

formation. Following the dissolution of its original political group, ID, the SPD joined the more radical group, ESN (Liboreiro and Genovese, 2024).

4.2.5 Alternative für Deutschland (Alternative for Germany, AfD)

The Alternative for Germany (AfD) began as a Eurosceptic party in 2013 and has since transformed into a far-right organization, promoting an identitarian ideology with a notably anti-constitutional faction (Schaller and Carius, 2019). In 2017, the AfD became the first party since 1961 to join the German Bundestag from the right side of the political spectrum. This makes it one of the most significant radical far-right populist parties, especially in the national German context, as well as on the European stage, where it is one of the most radical political entities in both the previous and current European Parliaments. The AfD's strong performance comes as Germany's political landscape undergoes its biggest upheaval in decades, with new populist parties vying for space vacated by the shrinking mainstream parties that have dominated since reunification in 1990 (Escritt, 2024).

Historically, the party has undergone gradual radicalization, evolving from ordoliberal populism with some far-right influences. Initially, the party was founded in response to the "eurozone crisis", but it gradually adopted populist radical right stances and eventually extreme right positions (Pfahl-Traughber, 2024; Biskamp, 2024). Currently, the AfD is benefiting from widespread fears among Germans about the rapid changes brought by the government's climate policies. The party also represented voters who opposed the large influx of migrants into Germany and further assistance to Ukraine. These issues are particularly significant in the eastern federal states, where the AfD leads in popularity (Frymark, 2023).

Unlike other parties, climate and environmental issues are significant points on the AfD agenda. During the "traffic-light" coalition in Germany, formed after the 2021 general election and consisting of Social Democrats, Liberals, and Greens, the AfD's criticism of the government coalition focused on climate policy, which most Germans see as the most significant challenge in the coming years (ibid.). This criticism extended

to their rhetoric at the European level during the 9th European Parliament. Members of the AfD do not hide their support and approval of the Nazi regime, using its symbols and rhetoric. Björn Höcke, leader of the AfD in Thuringia, has been found guilty of using a Nazi slogan for the second time (Jochecová, 2024). Consequently, there is a debate in Germany, the country where Nazism was founded, about whether to ban the AfD altogether (Fürstenau, 2024).

Regarding the 2024 European Elections, the AfD caused a political earthquake. In May, its lead candidate, Maximilian Krah, had to withdraw from campaigning after claiming that the SS, the primary paramilitary force of the Nazis, were "not all criminals." Additionally, one of his aides, Petr Bystron, was accused of spying for China, and another candidate was alleged to have accepted bribes from a pro-Russian news portal (March and Escritt, 2024). Due to these events, especially because of the first one, the entire AfD delegation was expelled from the ID Group, as described above, and the AfD had to seek new partners after the elections (Liboreiro and Genovese, 2024).

4.3 Other Radical Right-Wing Populist Subjects in the European Parliament

In this section I focus on two parties that differ from those previously discussed, as they were not part of the far-right ID political group in the 9th EP. The Spanish party Vox originally belonged to the ECR group, while the Dutch PVV was not present in the EP during the previous parliamentary term and earlier. Despite this, scholarly categorization identifies both parties as part of the radical right-wing populist movement, as defined by Mudde (2007). Following the 2024 elections, both parties joined the newly formed far-right political group, Patriots for Europe. Given their significant number of MEPs, they are included in this analysis, as they serve as influential far-right voices in their respective countries and the European level. Further details and explanations are provided below.

4.3.1 Vox

Vox is the second youngest of the studied parties, founded in 2013 by former conservative party members disillusioned by corruption scandals and what they saw as moderate stances on issues like Catalan independence. In response, Vox has advocated for suspending Catalonia's regional government and further centralizing government functions. The party's popularity grew amid events like the 2017 Barcelona terrorist attack and a sharp rise in youth unemployment. Since its founding, Santiago Abascal, a former conservative MP from the Basque Country, has led the party (Aguilera-Carnerero, 2024).

Vox combines anti-immigrant, particularly anti-Muslim, nativism typical of European radical right-wing populist parties with a nationalist agenda focused on centralization and opposition to secessionist movements (Ferreira, 2019). Its communication highly politicizes history, with leaders frequently referencing events like the Reconquista and Columbus's voyages as symbols of national pride (Rodríguez-Temiño and Almansa-Sánchez, 2021; Esteve-Del-Valle and Costa López, 2022). Vox's ideology also emphasizes cultural conservatism, championing traditional values related to religion, the "natural family," and anti-feminism (Esteve-Del-Valle and Costa López, 2022, p. 273). It actively campaigns against Spain's gender-based violence law, abortion, and LGBTQ rights (Ferreira, 2019). However, Aguilera-Carnerero (2024) notes that, in line with its identitarian views, Vox shows concern for the natural environment, especially in its support for pastoral lifestyles, farmers, and cattle breeders.

Scholars (cf. Marcos-Marne *et al.*, 2021; Ferreira, 2019) categorize Vox as a populist radical right-wing party, warranting its inclusion in this analysis. Although it was not part of the ID far-right group in the 9th European Parliament, Vox has joined the new "Patriots of Europe" group, led by RN's election leader Jordan Bardella. In the 2024 European Elections, Vox, which won six seats in the European Parliament, announced its departure from the ECR group to join this new alliance (Soler, 2024).

4.3.2 Partij voor de Vrijheid (Party for Freedom, PVV)

Geert Wilders founded the Dutch populist far-right radical Party for Freedom (PVV) in 2006, and the party quickly saw electoral success. That same year, it became the fifth-largest party, and by 2010, it had risen to the third largest (Cebulak and Lipper, 2024). However, the PVV lacks a formal organizational structure, as Wilders is the party's only official member. He exerts control over the party by relying on a small circle of close associates, taking charge of selecting and training candidates, formulating political strategies, and defining the party's ideology and program (ibid.). This centralized approach is also evident in the Czech SPD, where leadership similarly revolves around Tomio Okamura. Wilders has been the dominant figure and leader of the PVV since its inception and remains so as of the writing of this thesis (Boztas, 2023)

Scholars note that the PVV's ideology has evolved from neoconservatism to national populism, with a strong emphasis on opposing immigration, particularly from Muslim countries. The party has even advocated for banning mosques in the Netherlands (Cebulak and Lipper, 2024), and it has also targeted Eastern European workers. Nationalistic sentiments and a growing aversion to supranational cooperation are key features of the PVV's platform. Wilders had already led a successful campaign against the proposed EU treaty in a 2005 referendum (Vossen, 2011), and he later pushed for a referendum on the Netherlands leaving the EU ("Nexit") (Cebulak and Lipper, 2024). Regarding climate policy, the PVV is known for its climate scepticism and doubts about human-caused climate change (Schaller and Carius, 2019).

In 2023, the PVV became the largest party in the Dutch parliament, marking the most significant achievement in the party's history (Cebulak and Lipper, 2024). However, Wilders did not assume the role of Dutch Prime Minister due to conflicts with potential coalition partners. During the 2024 European Elections, Wilders continued to play a leading role. Although Sebastiaan Stöteler, a local and provincial councillor, was officially heading the delegation of the PVV party to the European Parliament, he made few media appearances in the lead-up to the elections. The campaign focused almost entirely on Wilders despite his low placement on the party's list, which

signalled his reluctance to become a European legislator (Verhlest, 2024). After the 2024 European Elections, the party joined the newly formed far-right political group, Patriots for Europe.

4.4 2024 European Elections

The 2024 European Elections echoed the patterns seen in the previous elections, notably those of 2019. Like before, these elections could be perceived by many as secondary in importance, resulting in lower voter turnout compared to national parliamentary elections (Reif and Schmitt, 1980). Parties allocated fewer resources to their campaigns, with media and public discourse primarily revolving around national issues rather than European concerns like EU enlargement and institutional reform. Furthermore, the prevailing narrative was anticipated to centre on the challenges posed by an increasingly influential far-right, a trend accentuated by Geert Wilders' significant win in the 2023 Dutch elections (Mudde, 2024)

Cunningham *et al.* (2024, p.4) foresaw a notable shift towards the right in the 2024 European Elections. While this might not have represented a dramatic surge, considering that nearly one-third of MEPs were already categorized as "populist" after the 2019 elections, predominantly from the far-right (Manucci, 2021; Mudde, 2019b), it underscores a noticeable trend within the right-wing spectrum (Cunningham *et al.*, 2024). Across various nations, far-right parties are increasingly emerging as the dominant forces within the right-wing bloc, signalling a transition from "soft" to "hard" Euroscepticism (Taggart and Szczerbiak, 2004).

The 2024 European Elections were the first since the completion of Brexit, which was reflected in the distribution and number of seats for the new members of the European Parliament. These elections also occurred after several significant crises that shifted the politics of the European Union, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, the (second) Russian invasion of Ukraine, and the conflict in Gaza that began in autumn 2023 (Mudde, 2020, p. 62). All of this took place within the context of the global climate crisis, whose EU response is the legal framework of the European Green Deal (EGD),

which was introduced by the first Von der Leyen European Commission and approved in 2020. The multiple farmers' protest, being one side social impact of the EGD, in many member states also influenced the campaign of this election (Cunnigham *et al.*, 2024) as it was leveraged primarily by the radical right-wing populist parties (Niranjan, 2024). Given the significant impact of recent crises and the evolving political landscape, it becomes essential to analyse how radical right-wing populist parties communicated their climate and environmental narratives during these elections. The methodology for this research is presented in the following chapter.

5 Methodology

This chapter outlines the methodological approach used in this thesis to analyse the communication of climate and environmental issues by radical right-wing populist parties in the 2024 European Elections. The first section presents the research questions and working hypotheses that guide the analysis. The main research question focuses on how these parties developed and presented their climate and environmental narratives to mobilize voters. The second research question explores the use of visual communication in this process.

The second section discusses the overall research strategy, which involves the use of quantitative content analysis and qualitative visual analysis as the primary research methods. The third section details the data collection process, focusing on selecting social media posts as the primary data sources. It explains the criteria used for selecting these materials and the period covered. The fourth section describes the specific methods used for analysing the textual and visual content. Finally, the limitations of the research are discussed.

5.1 Research Questions and Hypotheses

The most traditional method for constructing a valid analytical framework in content analysis, the research strategy employed in this thesis, as described below, is to test multiple hypotheses about the relationship between text and its context and select the one that is best supported by empirical evidence Kripphoff (2018, p. 91). This thesis uses the conceptualization by Cas Mudde, as described above in section 2.1.1, to analyse the communication of the selected populist right-wing parties in the 2024 European Elections campaign in order to answer the research questions. Although not explicitly mentioned above, the communication and mobilization of populist right-wing parties in the literature often feature signs of nativism, authoritarianism, and populism, as defined in section 2.11. In the context of this theoretical framework, a set of

four working hypotheses is presented to answer the main research question, and two supplementary hypotheses are used to answer the second research question.

The main research question asks:

How did radical right-wing populist parties develop and present their climate and environmental narratives to mobilize voters in the context of the June 2024 European Elections?

The second research question focuses on the visual aspects of the far-right communication of the climate and environmental themes in order to mobilise the voters:

How did radical right-wing populist parties in Europe present the climate and environmental issues in their visual communication to mobilize voters in the context of the June 2024 European Elections?

As described in detail, nativism is a xenophobic form of nationalism that advocates for the nation-state to be populated solely by members of the native group, however defined (Mudde, 2007). The nativist view on environmental and climate issues often aligns with anti-globalization narratives, which critique international environmental and climate protection agreements (Lockwood, 2018). This perspective also emphasizes localization, nostalgic praise for ruralism and the countryside (Forchtner and Kølvråa, 2015), and advocates for local environmental protection as part of nationalist and protectionist agendas (Boukala and Tountasaki, 2019). Based on this premise and the knowledge of the literature, I can derive the following hypotheses:

Working Hypothesis 1.1:

The climate and environmental narratives of selected radical right-wing populist parties during the 2024 European Election feature strong anti-globalization themes, framing international climate agreements as threats to national autonomy.

Working Hypothesis 1.2:

The radical right-wing populist parties during the 2024 European Elections utilize nature as a symbol of national purity and identity in their climate and environmental narratives, using natural heritage to symbolize nationalistic issues.

Working Hypothesis 2.1:

In the 2024 European Elections, radical right-wing populist parties exploit nature as a symbol of national purity and identity in their visual communication, using contemporary natural photography, historical landscape paintings and folklore references to equate natural heritage with nationalist issues.

Authoritarianism is based on the belief that societies should be organized in a strict hierarchical order, where any breaches of authority are to be harshly punished (Mudde 2007, 23). This ideology often includes rigid ideas about what is considered morally acceptable behaviour (Ennser-Jedenastik, 2016). Regarding the environmental position of the far-right, one stance is eco-fascism, which sees borders and territorial sovereignty as key to environmental protection (Turner and Bailey, 2021), as described in the previous chapter. On the other hand, right-wing populist parties may adopt a positive stance on environmental protection if the issue calls for a stricter, more hierarchical order. This has been observed by Tosun and Debus (2021) in cases such as the glyphosate ban in Austria and the national irrigation plan in Spain (Hanson, 2024). In terms of visual communication, the scholars (Aguilera-Carnerero, 2024; Carle, 2024; Mamonova, 2015) identified an authoritarian pattern where the portrayal of party leaders as protectors of nature and (rural) population can suggest a centralization of power and authority in a single figure, characteristic of authoritarian regimes. By framing leaders as guardians, these parties reinforce their legitimacy, presenting a vision of leadership and governance aligning with authoritarian ideals. Thus, based on the existing literature regarding contemporary radical right-wing populist parties and their authoritarian narratives in environmental and climate communication, the following hypothesis can be drawn for analysis:

Working Hypothesis 1.3:

The radical ring-wing populist parties mobilize voters by framing the issue of environmental protection and climate change as necessitating strict hierarchical order and moral discipline.

Working Hypothesis: 2.2:

In the 2024 European Elections, radical right-wing populist parties use the images of their leader to demonstrate their commitment to natural protection and to return to moral discipline.

Populists see politics as a battle between the "pure people" and a "corrupt elite" (Mudde 2007, 23; Müller, 2016). In line with this view, research on far-right populist parties' climate and environmental communication has noted that they commonly argue climate policies threaten national sovereignty, claiming the EU is taking powers away from individual states (Forchter and Lubarda, 2023). Lockwood (2018) further emphasizes that populists view climate change and related policies as initiatives driven by a cosmopolitan elite disconnected from the daily lives of ordinary people. Matthews (2024) found a similar observation in the context of early 2024 farmers' protests, identifying a recurring theme of populist conceptualization of "the corrupt elite vs the pure people," often portraying farmers as "victims" of their "elitist" government and "woke" policies. Hatakka and Välimäki (2019) highlight how the radical-right Finns Party uses the alleged dangers of wind turbines to illustrate "the elite's" lack of concern for "the people." Therefore, drawing from the existing literature on contemporary radical right-wing populist parties and their populist narratives in environmental and climate communication, we can formulate the following hypotheses for analysis:

Working Hypothesis 1.4:

The radical far-right populist parties in Europe frame climate change initiatives as driven by a disconnected cosmopolitan elite, aiming to mobilize voters by highlighting the divide between "the pure people" and "the corrupt elite" in the context of the 2024 European Elections.

Working Hypothesis 2.3:

During the 2024 European Elections, radical right-wing populist parties employ imagery of rural agricultural professions to symbolize the "common people" (Volk) and highlight the contrast between the "pure" population and the "corrupt elite," thereby reinforcing their narrative around nature and traditional values.

Thus, hypotheses 1.1, 1.2, and 2.1 explore how nativism appears in the environmental and climate communication of radical right-wing populist parties. Hypotheses 1.3 and 2.2 look for signs of authoritarianism, while 1.4 and 2.3 focus on how these parties use populist language in climate and environmental communication.

5.2 Research Strategy

This thesis aims to analyse how European far-right populist parties develop and present their climate and environmental narratives to mobilize voters in the context of the June 2024 European Elections. This study employs a cross-country analysis, examining seven far-right populist parties from Austria, the Czech Republic, Germany, France, Italy, Spain, and the Netherlands. To evaluate the working hypotheses and explore the reasoning behind the different stances on environmental and climate issues as presented in the research questions, quantitative content analysis is performed.

Content analysis systematically examines texts to draw conclusions about their underlying meaning and the context in which they were created. The purpose of content analysis is inter alia to describe trends in communication content, to disclose international differences in communication content or to expose propaganda techniques,

according to Berelson (1959), which matches the objectives with a greater or lesser extent of this thesis. According to Krippendorff (2018, p.30), a content analysis must include the following conceptual components:

- The data, a body of text, which in my case consists primarily of social media content, is further described in section 5.3.
- Research questions, which are in this thesis case, are described in the previous section.
- A context to make sense of the body of the text, which in my case is the 2024 European Elections, described in chapter 4 and namely in the section 4.4.
- An analytical construct that operationalises the analysis, which in my case is the theoretical framework developed by Cas Mudde discussed in section 2.1.1, and according to which the corresponding working hypothesis was developed, and according to which corresponding codebook was developed.

Complementing the quantitative content analysis, a qualitative visual analysis is simultaneously conducted. Visual analysis, a specific type of content analysis, is an observational technique that enables researchers to analyse (audio)visual content by applying specific values and variables. This approach is particularly useful for detailing what is depicted in visual images, allowing for the characterization of relevant aspects within that visual representation. I use the critical and interdisciplinary methodology of political visual iconography, which emphasizes the visual dimensions of current political and cultural issues (Müller, 2011). This approach enables the exploration of complex aesthetic messages and the potential for inflammatory content in the visual digital images distributed by political parties to the wider media audience (Müller, 2011). Similar to discourse analysis, this approach seeks to analyse the selected images from overarching to very specific contexts, considering cultural, historical, and symbolic factors. It incorporates perspectives from various social studies, inter alia environmental studies, gender studies, and critical political ecology.

The dual use of the deductive approach of the quantitative content analysis and supplementary visual analysis methods provides a robust research framework. Given the extensive qualitative and quantitative data captured in various visual and textual formats, content analysis systematically analyses far-right content (Kozinets *et al.*, 2020). The visual analysis further addresses the limitations of qualitative content analysis in capturing the intricate relationship between content meaning and user experience. Together, these methods are suitable for examining the strategies used in voter mobilization.

5.3 Data Collection

The characteristics of different communicative environments significantly shape political communication. This study examines the role of social media, particularly X (formerly Twitter), as the primary source of analysis for understanding the environmental and climate narratives in the communication of far-right populist parties. While still relevant, political manifestos are used minimally in this research due to their limitations.

Social media platforms like X provide a dynamic and immediate space for populist parties to engage directly with their supporters, respond to current political events, and shape public opinion in real time (Auter and Fine, 2016). Unlike political manifestos, which are static documents prepared well in advance of elections, tweets allow for continuous interaction and adaptability to evolving societal and political contexts. X is particularly suited to analyzing populist discourse because of its algorithmic structure and viral nature, which amplifies polarizing and populist content (Ernst *et al.*, 2019). The immediacy and accessibility of tweets make them an invaluable resource for examining party narratives and their engagement with key societal issues.

This study's primary units of analysis are tweets (X accounts posts) from the main X accounts of selected far-right populist parties. Exceptions include the Czech SPD and the Dutch PVV, which do not operate official party accounts on X; instead, their leaders' accounts (Tomio Okamura for SPD and Geert Wilders for PVV) serve as the primary

communication channels, as evidenced by links on their parties' websites. By focusing on official and leader accounts, this research aims to capture the central narratives promoted by these parties rather than the more diffuse content of affiliated entities, such as youth branches or individual members.

Political manifestos are employed sparingly in this analysis to provide supplementary context. While manifestos have been traditionally viewed as authoritative statements of party positions (Hansen, 2008; Robertson, 2004), they are limited in their ability to reflect the dynamic nature of political campaigns. They are often created weeks or months before elections and may not address events or issues that arise during the campaign period. Furthermore, the length and depth of manifestos vary significantly between parties, reducing their comparability and analytical utility. For instance, the AfD's manifesto for the 2024 European Elections spans 51 pages with a dedicated chapter on nature protection and climate change, while other parties, such as the SPD, offer much shorter documents with minimal mention of environmental issues. These discrepancies highlight the limitations of relying on manifestos as the primary source for cross-party and cross-country analysis.

By contrast, X allows for a more uniform and real-time comparison of party communications. Tweets from populist parties reveal how these groups frame environmental and climate issues in ways that resonate with their followers. For example, far-right groups have used X to promote their identity and political goals and mobilize supporters, organize events, and engage in direct confrontations with opponents (Fuchs, 2014). The platform's viral nature enables rapid dissemination of these messages, making it a critical tool for political campaigning.

This study also includes a visual analysis component, utilizing Instagram as a complementary source to examine how populist parties present their narratives through imagery and short videos. The analysis focuses on three primary functions of Instagram: photos, videos, and albums. Temporary content, such as stories and longer videos on Instagram Television (IGTV), are excluded from this research.

In summary, tweets on X are the primary focus of this analysis due to their immediacy, accessibility, and ability to reflect the dynamic nature of political discourse. While historically significant, political manifestos are used minimally to provide supplementary context, acknowledging their limitations in capturing the fluidity and immediacy of contemporary political communication.

5.4 Data Analysis

The following sections delve into the specific methodologies used for analysing textual and visual content within the political discourse related to environmental and climate issues.

5.4.1 Textual Content Analysis and the Codebook

In the content analysis, the tweets were selected based on specific criteria, primarily that they clearly relate to environmental and climate issues, either focusing solely on these topics or addressing them alongside other issues. First, I developed a detailed codebook and dictionary containing keywords affiliated with each hypothesis, which can be found in the appendix. The codebook is structured around several key components: overarching themes, such as "Nativism," "Authoritarianism" and "Populism", and specific sub-themes, like "Anti-globalisation." Each theme is linked to a hypothesis, represented by numeric codes, which frame the analysis of party rhetoric. For each hypothesis, a set of codes was defined to capture specific narratives, such as "Anti-international agreements" or "Resource nationalism."

The codebook also includes a detailed description of each code, often phrased as a guiding question (e.g., *"Do far-right parties use negative narratives about international agreements?"*), to clarify its relevance to the analysis. A list of keywords, referred to as the "Dictionary," was compiled for each code to help identify relevant content in the data. These keywords were then translated into the relevant languages (English, German, Spanish, French, Italian, Dutch, and Czech), to ensure comprehensive coverage across party communications in different national contexts. and used to filter the data

corpus. For the analysis, I compiled a dataset of 5,046 tweets (posts on X) from the period between 1st January 1 and 9th June 2024. The timeframe was chosen to cover the months leading up to the European Elections, including key events like the European farmer protests and high energy prices during the winter of 2023–2024. The analysis period ended on 9th June 2024, the final day of the European Elections, which took place between 6th and 9th June 2024.

A preliminary test of the dataset was conducted using translated keywords, accounting for linguistic variations such as declensions. This test was applied to three out of eight parties, assessing their narratives, and determining which keywords were commonly used. It also helped identify additional relevant keywords that needed to be included in the analysis.

Subsequently, a second preliminary test was conducted with two more parties to evaluate the updated codebook. After refining the codebook, the final version was used to extract relevant posts. Additionally, a "New Dictionary" column was added to account for updated or newly relevant terms. Non-relevant posts—such as those that did not contain environmental or climate topics and duplicate entries- were filtered out. The remaining body of 725 tweets was then quantitatively categorized according to the corresponding hypotheses, indicating whether they supported or opposed the hypothesis. Table 1 presents a breakdown of the parties by their total number of posts (excluding duplicates), the number of selected posts containing environmental and climate themes, and the salience of these posts relative to the total number of posts.

Party Name	Total posts	Selected posts	Salience of posts with environmental and climate themes
AfD	534	62	11.6%
FPÖ	309	19	6.2%
Lega	456	47	10.3%
PVV	350	6	1.7%
Vox	1906	151	7.9%
RN	1905	300	15.7%
SPD	1370	140	10.2%

Table 1 "Tweets" Overview

This codebook was crucial in filtering and categorizing the social media posts, allowing for a structured quantitative assessment of whether party narratives supported or opposed the hypotheses.

5.4.2 Visual Analysis

For the visual analysis, 75 images were selected from the data corpus of Instagram posts published between 1st January and 9th June on the Instagram accounts of the parties AfD, FPÖ, RN, and Vox, as well as the party leaders of SPD, PVV, and Lega. This selection was made because these parties do not have separate party Instagram accounts to communicate with their electorate; instead, they rely on the accounts of their leaders, similar to their X accounts. The posts analysed were deemed relevant to environmental and climate themes, either by directly addressing these topics or containing visuals of nature. As described above, the analysis of political visual iconography focused on current political and cultural issues, with five posts chosen for a deeper, more detailed examination.

For the purpose of the qualitative visual analysis, three posts from RN, one post from FPÖ, and one post from Lega were commented on in detail. Due to the subjective nature of this analysis, a breakdown or overview of total posts, selected posts, and their

salience is not included, as was done in the textual analysis. Some posts related to environmental and climate themes, for example, do not include visuals corresponding to these topics, while others focus on different themes but use nature as a communication tool, as evident in the analysis.

6 Results of Analysis

6.1 Nativism in the Communication of Environmental and Climate Themes by Radical Right-wing Populist Parties

Chapter 6.1 explores the role of nativism in the communication of environmental and climate themes by selected far-right parties during the 2024 European Elections in textual and visual communication. The analysed hypotheses are 1.1, 1.2 for textual analysis and 2.1 for visual analysis.

6.1.1 Presence of Nativism through Anti-Globalist Themes in the Textual Content Analysis

The first working hypothesis (1.1) examines whether communication on climate and environmental themes incorporates anti-globalization narratives, specifically framing international climate and environmental agreements as threats to national autonomy. By "international climate and environmental agreements," this thesis refers to international laws, agreements, and commitments tied to climate and environmental negotiations and objectives. This includes relevant European climate and environmental laws, primarily the European Green Deal and its related legislation, which serve as the core of European environmental and climate policy.

Introduced in 2019, the Green Deal is the EU's strategy for sustainable economic growth, aiming for climate neutrality by 2050 (European Commission, n.d). Other relevant legislation includes the Nature Restoration Law, which was adopted by the European Parliament on February 27, 2024, within the study's scope. Under this law, EU member states are required to restore at least 30% of degraded habitats by 2030, 60% by 2040, and 90% by 2050 (European Parliament, 2024). Within the entire data corpus, 496 posts contain negative mentions of international organizations or agreements. Specifically, there are 183 tweets about international agreements, 50 about international organizations, and 253 mentioning both. The majority of these posts, 436 entries, criticize the EU. Notably, the European Green Deal (EGD) appears in 163 posts,

as seen on the Table I. EU criticism is often associated with other topics, such as the Green Deal itself, which is sometimes used as a buzzword without further elaboration. "*Stop Green Deal*" has become ingrained in the communications of radical right-wing populist parties, serving as a mobilization tool. The EU is also frequently referred to by its main institutional location, Brussels, which represents European institutions, particularly the European Commission and the European Council, however, it also conveys pejorative meaning. The further connection of this code to authoritarian and populist narratives is elaborated in the subsequent sub-chapters.

As mentioned, the main target of criticism is often the EGD, usually referred to as the "Green Deal" or, in a pejorative tone, the "Green Pact". Interestingly, the AfD and Lega mention the Green Deal only once on their respective X accounts, while the PVV does not mention it at all. Conversely, the EGD is a central theme for the Czech SPD, which references it in 109 out of their 140 analysed posts on X, demonstrating the party's strong opposition to the agreement.

Political Party	Mentions of the Green Deal	Notes
AfD	1	Rarely mentions the EGD on their X account.
Lega	1	Similar to AfD, mentions the EGD only once.
ÖFP	0	Does not mention the EGD at all.
PVV	0	Does not mention the Green Deal at all.
SPD	109	Strong focus on the EGD, referenced in 109 of their 140 analysed posts.
RN	19	Mentions emphasize the <i>Farm to Fork</i> strategy as part of their criticism of the EGD.
Vox	42	Often links the EGD with <i>Agenda 2030</i> in their posts.

Table 2 Mentions of Green Deal

In addition to the Green Deal, other climate and environmental legislation linked to it, such as the "Fit for 55" package, also draw criticism from selected parties. For instance, there is one mention by Matteo Salvini of Lega and several from SPD leader Tomio Okamura, who critiques the updated European emissions trading system and

the new Energy Performance of Buildings Directive. Okamura's posts, such as "*Brussels has approved a ban on boilers fired by coal, gas, or light heating oil. This could lead to the collapse of heating systems (...) The aim of this absurd directive is to achieve complete climate neutrality by 2050 (...). This is another product of the EU's harmful green ideology and policies*"¹ (Okamura, 2024a), exemplifying how far-right ideologies frame environmental policies as threats to national interests. This is one example illustrating how his posts on environmental and climate policies frequently delve into extensive details and technicalities, presented in lengthy X posts and framed through a far-right ideological perspective. The Nature Restoration Law, a key element of the EU Biodiversity Strategy, is also highlighted by Vox (three mentions) and PVV (one mention). Vox frames this legislation as a threat to local agricultural production, aligning it with populist views of protecting farmers and rangers (Vox, 2024), while PVV takes a more nationalist perspective (PVV, 2024), a topic further explored in the next sub-chapter.

Another prominent international framework is the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, or the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), established by the United Nations in 2015. This global initiative receives significant attention in Vox's communication due to the deep commitment of Spain's third Pedro Sánchez government, which established the Ministry of Social Rights, Consumer Affairs, and the 2030 Agenda in 2023. Vox frequently groups European environmental and climate legislation, particularly the Green Deal, with their opposition to Agenda 2030. Agenda 2030 is mentioned in 79 out of 151 Vox posts (52%), highlighting its role in voter mobilization against environmental and climate policies. Conversely, the Paris Agreement and other UN-FCCC-related legislation are absent in the selected parties' communications, reflecting a shift in focus towards European legislation during the European Elections campaign.

The critique of international climate and environmental agreements is thus deeply rooted in anti-globalism rhetoric. Globalism is often criticized within the

¹ original Czech: "*Brusel schválil zákaz kotlů na uhlí, plyn či lehké topné oleje. Může to přinést totální kolaps vytápění (...) Cílem této naprosto nesmyslné směrnice je dosáhnout úplné klimatické neutrality do roku 2050. (...) Jedná se o další produkt škodlivé zelené ideologie a politiky EU*".

framework of national sovereignty as such, or particularly in the context of energy and food security, topics highly relevant to the 2024 European Elections. Such arguments support the case for national autonomy over renewable and non-renewable resources. Specifically, when posts criticize international agreements (mainly the EGD) or institutions like the EU, they often associate these criticisms with resource nationalism. Out of 496 posts, resource nationalism is mentioned in relation to agricultural production and fisheries in 265 instances and in relation to non-renewable energy sources in 31 instances, in total, with 286 mentions.

For that reason, radical right-wing populist parties have leveraged the momentum of mass farmer protests across Europe to highlight national agricultural issues alongside European agricultural and environmental policies. Since December 2023, farmers across Europe have protested against low food prices, environmental regulations imposed by the EU and national governments, such as the German government's removal of diesel tax breaks due to the unconstitutional misuse of COVID-19 relief funds, and EU trade agreements with non-EU countries, particularly Ukraine. These protests, marked by street blockades and demonstrations in France, Germany, Belgium, and the Netherlands, have prompted the EU to reconsider some of the environmental policies (Matthews, 2024).

Agriculture has emerged as a prominent topic, especially for RN, which promotes local agriculture in 247 posts, with 88 per cent of its posts mentioning agriculture. RN is the only party that occasionally advocates for sustainable agricultural practices (RN, 2024a). Following RN, Vox supports national agricultural resources and local farmers in 57 per cent of its environmental and climate-related posts. Although the number of posts analysed for PVV is smaller, 50 per cent of them also express support for local farmers and fishermen, which is an important topic for the Dutch economy and identity. However, neither Vox nor PVV explicitly criticizes any environmental agreements.

The concept of "localism" is also prominently advocated by the French RN, which promotes environmentally and economically motivated local behaviour. For instance,

RN uses statements like "*Common sense ecology requires localism. Short supply chains drastically reduce emissions and benefit our farmers!*"² (RN, 2024b) RN frames localism as a key element of its environmental stance and as a critique of globalist agreements such as the Green Deal. In other cases, RN presents this stance as a way to ensure food security and independence. For example, Czech SPD leader Tomio Okamura states, "*The EU has led us to lose our food self-sufficiency, and through the Green Deal, it is destroying the remnants of our agriculture. Farmers across Europe are rebelling against the globalist policies of their governments, which sacrifice national agriculture on the altar of globalism and the EU Green Deal*"³ (Okamura, 2024b).

Additionally, the surge in energy prices, which began in the summer of 2021 as energy demand rebounded post-COVID lockdowns, was strengthened when Russia reduced natural gas supplies to Europe, particularly following its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 (Cornago, 2023). The impact of these geopolitical developments remains evident in the winter leading up to the 2024 European Elections and is used as a nationalistic narrative in promoting nuclear energy and opposing the EU's sustainable energy policies by the selected parties. In the context of nuclear energy, the French RN is the strongest proponent, followed by SPD and AfD, while Vox and PVV make little to no mention of it, and FPÖ only critiques it.

In conclusion, the analysis confirms that the climate and environmental narratives of selected radical right-wing populist parties in the 2024 European Election prominently feature anti-globalization themes. These parties consistently frame international organizations and their climate agreements, particularly the European Green Deal, as threats to national autonomy, especially in energy and agriculture. In the words of the Vox party, the populist right-wing radical parties would like to "*turn the*

² French original: "*L'écologie de bon sens passe par le localisme. Les circuits courts permettent de réduire drastiquement nos émissions et favorisent nos agriculteurs !*" (Translated by [DeepL])

³ Czech original: "*EU nás dovedla ke ztrátě potravinové soběstačnosti a prostřednictvím Green Dealu likviduje i naše (...) zbytky zemědělství. Zemědělci napříč Evropou se bouří proti globalistické politice svých vlád, které obětují národní zemědělství na oltář globalismu a Green Dealu EU*"

Nature Restoration Law, the Green Deal and the 2030 Agenda into recycled paper.”⁴ (Vox, 2024).

However, as demonstrated by Figure 1 below, the importance of binding environmental and climate issues, framed through anti-globalist criticisms of participation in international agreements and organizations, varies among the parties. For some, the topic of nationalist critique of international environmental and climate policies is not relevant, as seen with parties like AfD and PVV, for whom environmentalism as such (and, therefore, not mentioned in the figure) is not a central concern. In contrast, for parties like SPD and, to some extent, Vox and RN, this issue was a prevalent motive and mobilizing force in the election campaign. Of the 496 posts analysed, 53.4% mention resource nationalism in relation to agriculture and fisheries, and 6.3% in relation to non-renewable energy sources, in total 57.5%. Based on these findings, the Hypothesis 1.1 can be confirmed.

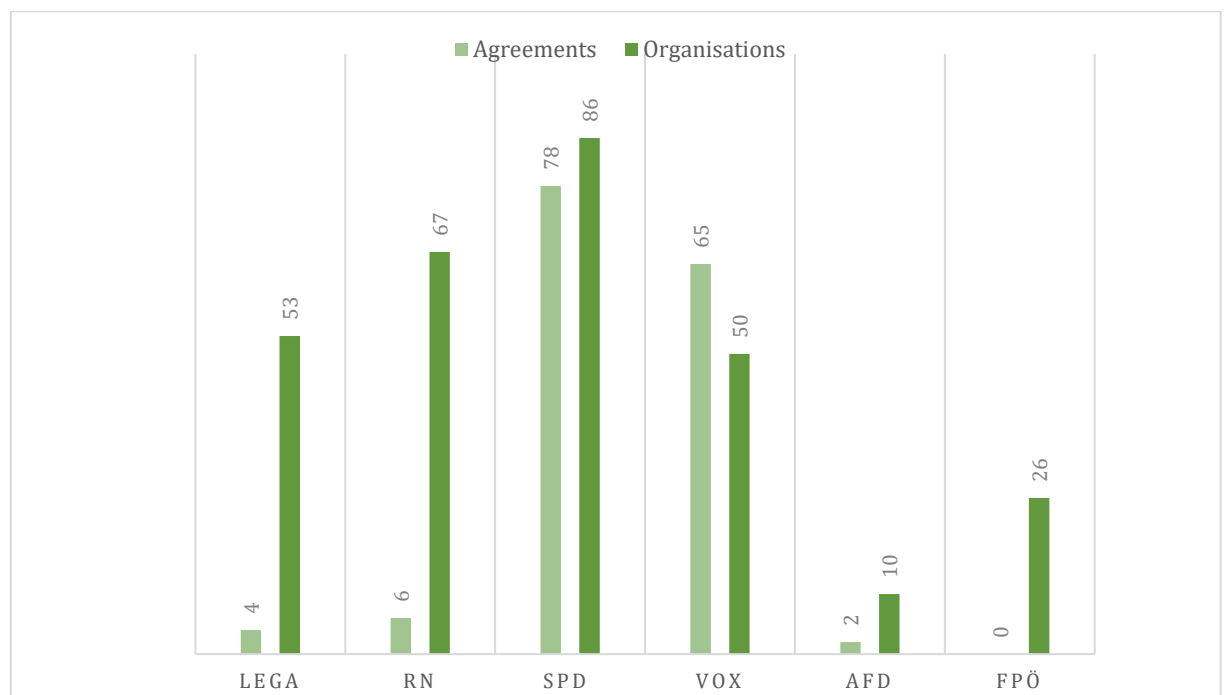


Figure 1: Breakdown of Results by Parties for Anti-Globalism Narratives

⁴ Spanish original: “Convertiremos la Ley de Restauración de la Naturaleza, el Pacto Verde y la Agenda 2030 en papel reciclado.” (Translated by [DeepL])

6.1.2 Presence of Nativism through Nature-related Nationalism in the Textual Content Analysis

This section explores hypothesis 1.2, which posits that right-wing populist parties are strategically using nature as a symbol of national purity and identity within their climate and environmental narratives. To analyse this hypothesis, I applied two key codes when examining the communication of the selected parties. These codes focus on identifying instances where nature is framed as part of the country's cultural identity or as a national property that must be preserved.

Nine relevant units regarding the connection between nature and national identity were identified within the analysed communication data corpus. Two of these units come from the AfD, such as the following example: *"Those who love their homeland also protect their environment and the natural and plant world"*⁵ (AfD, 2024a). The AfD argues that loving one's country inherently involves protecting the environment and nature, directly linking patriotic sentiment to a duty of environmental stewardship. However, despite this rhetoric, the AfD's election program (p. 44) opposes sustainable land management, particularly regarding forestry, and rejects sustainability certifications like those from international non-profit organizations such as FSC. These positions can be seen as contradictory to their environmental rhetoric, as they do not advocate for concrete pro-environmental measures.

In contrast, the clear expression of environmental patriotism is found in the communication of the RN, which emphasizes localism, as discussed in the previous subchapter. However, when it comes to natural protection, particularly forest conservation, RN shifts its stance. In their political program (Rassemblement National, European Election Programme 2024, p. 14), RN advocates for *"intra-European cooperation on forest management, protection, and anticipating the effects of climate change."* This position contradicts the hypothesis of environmental chauvinism, as it calls for

⁵ German original: *"Wer seine Heimat liebt, der schützt auch seine Umwelt und die Natur- und Pflanzenwelt."*

international cooperation rather than a strictly nationalistic approach, undermining the idea that nature protection should be exclusively a matter of national sovereignty.

Supporting the second code, I identified 15 units of analysis within the communication of the selected parties where nature is discussed as being threatened by foreign influences, particularly the European Union. These units emphasize the preservation of the environment as a national priority. For example, RN states: *“Boosting the local economy and preserving our environment are top priorities. Reforming the EU standards, disconnected from reality, is vital to protect our sovereignty and encourage responsible progress.”*⁶ (Rassemblement National, 2024c). This reflects a rejection of European environmental measures, aligning with their nationalistic narrative. RN further critiques the EU’s approach, stating: *“The European Union is imposing punitive ecology on us! By forcing wind turbines on our territories, it disfigures our landscapes and subjects us to energy that will never be as powerful as nuclear energy”*⁷ (Rassemblement National, 2024d). The anti-windmill rhetoric, often used by RN, AfD, and SPD, serves to frame environmental policies as a foreign imposition, further supporting the notion of environmental protection being linked to national sovereignty and identity.

Geert Wilders, leader of the Dutch Party for Freedom (PVV), also contributes to the narrative of environmental chauvinism. He critiques the European Union’s Nature Restoration Law, stating: *“Great that thanks to the veto of the Netherlands and also Hungary, a blocking minority is being formed against that terrible nature restoration law by former Euro Commissioner Timmermans, which would only further lock down our country!”*⁸ (Wilders, 2024a). This rhetoric portrays the law as overly restrictive, potentially

⁶ French original: *“Dynamiser l’économie locale et préserver notre environnement sont des priorités absolues. Une réforme des normes de l’UE, déconnectées du réel, est vitale pour préserver notre souveraineté et encourager un progrès responsable.”* (Translated by [DeepL])

⁷ French original: *“L’Union européenne nous contraint à l’écologie punitive ! En imposant sur nos territoires des éoliennes, elle dénature nos paysages et nous soumet à une énergie qui ne sera jamais aussi puissante que le nucléaire.”* (Translated by [DeepL])

⁸ Dutch original: *“Geweldig als dankzij de tegenstem van Nederland én ook Hongarije er een blokkerende minderheid komt tegen die verschrikkelijke natuurherstelwet van oud eurocommissaris Timmermans, die ons land alleen maar verder op slot zou zetten!”* (Translated by [DeepL])

harmful to the country's interests, and as a form of bureaucratic overreach by the European Union. The language of “*locking down*” the country evokes concerns over national sovereignty and the loss of control over land and natural resources.

Although several units support the hypothesis, the scope of the data used to verify this hypothesis is limited. The number of units belonging to the analysed scope was very low, with only one or two units per party, except for the RN, which had 16 units. This higher number of posts published by RN is partly influenced by their larger scope of analysed units within the entire data corpus. The lack of sufficient data suggests that nature-related nationalism is not a dominant theme in the textual communication of these parties. This indicates that nature is not consistently positioned at the forefront of nationalistic rhetoric. Therefore, this hypothesis cannot be fully verified based on the available data.

6.1.3 Presence of Nativism in the Visual Communication

Hypothesis 2.1 examines how nationalist and nativism themes are communicated through the use of natural imagery, such as photography or art. This hypothesis seeks to explore the connection between nature and nationalism, analysing its symbolism, meaning, and cultural interpretations through a selected method. Within radical right-wing populist parties, nationalistic themes are a prominent focus, including in visual communication (cf. VincEROVÁ *et al.*, 2024; Carle, 2024). However, in the context of the 2024 European Elections, nature is rarely used in its pure form to convey these ideas.

As described further later, the current European populist right-radical parties tend to, in general, feature industrial or cultural landscapes, like agricultural scenes, as well as address environmental and climate-related themes rather than use natural imagery. Thus, nature and natural landscapes are not primary tools for expressing nationalist themes, where alternative visual strategies are often preferred. However, while direct references to nature were subtle in the examined data corpus, two notable cases emerged where mountainous landscapes played a symbolic role, warranting further discussion in this section.

The first case is Figure 2 (Rassemblement National, 2024e), which illustrates a campaign post on Instagram by RN featuring the slogan in the French language, “*Contre l’abandon de l’Outre-mer. Le 9 juin, votez Bardella. Vivement le 9 juin!*” (in English translation: “*Against the abandonment of overseas territories. On June 9, Vote Bardella. Looking forward to June 9!*”) (Translated by [DeepL]). As mentioned above, Jordan Bardella is RN’s leader in the 2024 European Elections. The voting day for French citizens in the 2024 European Elections fell on 9th June 2024.



Figure 2: Against the Abandonment of Overseas Territories

Notably, although the topic addressed France’s overseas territories, typically depicted with tropical coastlines, the chosen image instead presents a rugged mountain peak devoid of lush greenery. The mountain landscape highlights a French national flag

in the foreground, visually emphasizing RN's dedication to protecting the nation (Müller, 2011; Nissen *et al.*, 2021). This imagery choice reflects RN's strategy of combining iconic French symbols with resilient landscapes to convey its nationalist message, aligning with visual conventions of other right-wing nationalist parties.

In contrast to the overt land-related imagery in Figure 2, Figure 3 (FPÖ, 2024) demonstrates a more abstract nationalist message through an Instagram post by Austria's FPÖ. The post quotes the federation party leader (*Bundesparteibmann*) Herbert Kickl in the German language: "*Die eigene Bevölkerung muss wieder zum Herrn im eigenen Haus gemacht werden*" (in English translation: "*The people must be made masters of their own house again*") (Translated by [DeepL]). This post, made just 2 weeks before the 2024 European Elections, visually complements the quote with the silhouetted image of a man standing atop a peak against a striking sunset or sunrise, evoking a powerful emotional response. Like in Figure 3, the national flag, in this case, Austria's, dominates the scene, connecting the visual to themes of homeland and cultural pride. For example, Firth (1973) argues that flags are powerful symbols for conveying attitudes and emotions, as even simple actions like waving them evoke loyalty and belonging. Smith (1969) further legitimizes the study of flags as core political symbols, integral to political life, control, and propaganda. Though lacking clear references to Austria's mountainous heritage, this professionally crafted image enhances the nationalist tone through its carefully edited visual elements (Müller, 2011).



Figure 3: Silhouette with an Austrian Flag on a Hill

The symbolic use of mountains in both examples could tap into a historical association between mountains and nationalist ideals of pride, cultural continuity, and security. For instance, Coțofană (2021) highlights how Romania's Carpathian Mountains are depicted as a protective force, reinforcing narratives of belonging and territorial ownership. Similarly, after WWII, the Giant Mountains became symbolic of national pride for both Czechs and Poles amid territorial conflicts with Germany (Stibral and Faktorová, 2021). Also, Italian and Swiss nationalist movements during WWII saw the countries' mountains, the Alps, as a "*defensive castle*" against external threats like Hitler's regime (Zimmerman, 2008, p. 655). By the late nineteenth century, these mountains had come to represent natural boundaries and unifying and protective symbols across Europe (ibid.). Eco-nationalist groups globally also adopt mountain imagery as a symbol of resilience and strength. New Zealand's Action Zealania, for instance, frequently incorporates stylized mountain shapes resembling lambda symbols

or arrows (Campion and Phillips, 2024), echoing the Spartan symbols used in the Battle of Thermopylae (Jacquet-Vaillant, 2021, p. 7.) These symbols have been widely adopted by identitarian movements to signify resistance to foreign influence (Campion and Phillips, 2024).

In various contexts, mountains have become enduring symbols of defence, continuity, and nationalist pride, often used in nationalist iconography to represent cultural security, as seen in these two examples from the 2024 European Elections. However, these two pieces of evidence do not clearly support this hypothesis. Therefore, Hypothesis 2.1 cannot be verified, as no strong representative examples were found that clearly illustrate the use of nature, either real or artistic, in supporting nationalistic communication among the selected parties in the 2024 European Elections. Given that these parties target the majority of the radical right-wing populist electorate, it can be concluded that green nationalism is not currently prevalent in the communication strategies of radical right-wing populist parties. This contrasts with the textual analysis, where nativist strategies dominate.

6.2 Authoritarianism in the Communication of Environmental and Climate Themes by Radical Right-wing Populist Parties

Chapter 6.2 explores the role of authoritarianism in the communication of environmental and climate themes by selected far-right parties during the 2024 European Elections in textual and visual communication. The analysed hypotheses are 1.3 for textual analysis and 2.2 for visual analysis.

6.2.1 Presence of Authoritarianism in the Textual Content Analysis

This section presents the findings related to Hypothesis 1.3, which explores how radical right-wing populist parties mobilize support by framing environmental protection and climate change as issues that demand a strict hierarchical order and moral discipline. The hypothesis aims to examine whether these parties associate environmental

challenges with broader narratives of authority, control, and social order, appealing to values of tradition and discipline within their voter base. By analysing the communication strategies of selected parties, this section investigates how environmental protection and climate issues are linked to calls for social hierarchy, moral rigour, and authoritarian power.

The analysis of the selected parties in the context of the 2024 European Elections shows that none of the units of analysis supports the hypothesis that these parties use authoritarian rhetoric in their communication about environmental and climate issues. These parties do not employ hierarchical or moral discipline narratives to promote environmental protection or conservation. While environmental and climate issues were often discussed alongside other societal concerns that these populist right-wing parties consider morally problematic, such as migration, extremism, feminism, gender-related issues, LGBTQ+ rights, and social justice, they were not framed through the lens of authority and control to support the protection of environment and climate. Instead, these issues were presented as part of a broader narrative designed to mobilize voters. Often, environmental topics were linked to the above-mentioned topics and subjects, which these parties associate with "*woke culture*" - a political buzzword appropriated by *culture warriors* to criticize "*political correctness*" and left-leaning ideologies (AFP, 2022). The purpose of combining climate and environmental issues with topics like migration and extremism is to create a moral panic, framing these issues as part of a broader societal decline linked to left-liberal ideologies.

For example, a post from the PVV leader, "*No climate, woke, or other left-liberal nonsense. But LESS ASYLUM AND IMMIGRATION*"⁹ (Wilders, 2024b), illustrates how the term "climate" is used in a rhetorical sense to provoke moral panic, linking environmental issues with other left-liberal concerns such as migration. This demonstrates that climate change was not presented as an environmental issue to advocate for natural protection but as part of a broader criticism of left-wing ideologies that the party

⁹ Dutch original: "*Geen klimaat, woke, of ander links-liberaal gezeur. Maar MINDER ASIEL EN IMMIGRATIE*" (Translated by [DeepL])

opposes. Here, climate is woven into the narrative of societal collapse caused by the values of immigration and social liberalism, with environmental concerns serving as a rhetorical tool rather than a central policy focus. Similarly, a call to action from the leader of the Italian Lega urging voters to support General Roberto Vannacci in the election also demonstrates how environmental supporters are framed negatively. In the post, environmental advocates are described as “*eco-maniacs*” and grouped with “*bomb-throwing leaders*” while also being criticized for their stances on gender and refugee issues: “*Baton-wielding schoolmarms and technocratic teachers, friends of illegal immigrants, social centres, eco-maniacs, and slackers, colour-coordinated leftists and assorted ‘gender-fluid’ types, bomb-throwing leaders? No, thanks! Yes to defending the home, car, savings, work, products, borders, safety, family, history, and identity of ITALIANS. No more war, yes to PEACE for the future of our children. With the League and with General Vannacci*”¹⁰ (Salvini, 2024a). This example illustrates how the environmental issue is not utilized to advocate for environmental protection but is instead used to provoke moral panic by associating climate issues with leftist ideologies the party opposes, such as gender equality, immigration, and the refugee issue.

Given the complete absence of any analysed units coded in support of the hypothesis, it can be concluded that the hypothesis is falsified in the context of the selected parties in the 2024 European Elections. In this case, the radical right-wing populist parties do not utilize authoritarian narratives in relation to environmental and climate issues, nor do they employ such narratives to promote their proposed solutions. Instead, environmental topics are largely used as part of a broader discourse to create moral panic, mobilize voters, and criticize “*woke culture*” and other left-liberal concerns, including migration, extremism, and gender-related issues.

¹⁰ Italian original: “*Maestrine di manganello e maestrine tecnocratiche, amici dei clandestini, dei centri sociali, degli eco-matti e dei fannulloni, sinistre armocromatiche e “gender-fluid” assortite, leader bombaroli? No, grazie! Sì a difesa di casa, auto, risparmi, lavoro, prodotti, confini, sicurezza, famiglia, storia e identità degli ITALIANI, basta guerra, sì alla PACE per il futuro dei nostri figli. Con la Lega e con il generale Vannacci.*” (Translated by [DeepL])

6.2.2 Presence of Authoritarianism in the Visual Communication

This part of the analysis examines the connection between right-wing populist parties and natural themes in their visual communication, with a specific focus on leader engagement in rural and agricultural settings. Like Hypothesis 2.1, Hypothesis 2.2 does not indicate a clear association between radical right-wing populist parties and environmental themes in visual messaging. Instead, Hypothesis 2.2 highlights the prominence of leaders in these visuals, specifically emphasizing leaders' active engagement with rural environments and related activities. This hypothesis is, therefore, discussed in this chapter.

The 2024 European Elections brought mass farmer protests across Europe back into the spotlight, significantly influencing election themes and highlighting both national agricultural issues and European agricultural and environmental policies. Since December 2023, farmers across Europe have protested low food prices, EU and national environmental regulations, such as the German government's removal of diesel tax breaks due to the unconstitutional misuse of COVID-19 relief funds, and EU trade agreements with non-EU countries, particularly Ukraine. These protests, marked by street blockades and demonstrations in France, Germany, Belgium, and the Netherlands, prompted the EU to reconsider some environmental policies (Matthews, 2024). The leaders of selected right-wing populist parties focused their attention on these protests, attending farmer gatherings and voicing support, thus securing favour among the farming community.

The dataset analysed contains three leaders visibly supporting farmers, actively engaging in agricultural activities, or at least being photographed alongside farm machinery, such as tractors. This affinity between far-right leaders and rural communities is deeply rooted in history, tracing back to the "*Blood and Soil*" ideology and supported by evidence of such associations in the communication strategies of contemporary right-wing populist parties (Biehl and Staudenmaier, 2011). Historical precedents also highlight that leaders like Adolf Hitler had a complex yet strategic relationship with agricultural policy and the rural class. On the other hand, although Hitler showed

minimal personal interest in agriculture—unlike Mussolini, who actively engaged with farmers—he understood the socio-economic influence of the peasantry, as evidenced by frequent, though vague, references to agriculture in his biography (Farquharson, 1972).

A related example is illustrated in Figure 4 (Rassemblement National, 2024f), where Jordan Bardella, the election leader of the RN, is photographed alongside agricultural machinery in an image developed in collaboration with the RN youth branch, RNJ (Rassemblement National de la Jeunesse), and posted on the RN's official Instagram account.



Figure 4: Jordan Bardella and a Tractor

A white text overlay reads, “*Agriculteurs, éleveurs, pêcheurs, tenez bon! On arrive!*” (In English: *Farmers, breeders, fishermen, hold on! We’re coming!*) (Translated by [DeepL]), signalling the support of both the youth branch and the party, endorsed by Bardella’s presence. However, the image is visually “clean,” not reflecting the hard work of rural and agricultural life. The machinery behind Bardella appears pristine, and his attire, a white shirt, black suit pants, and luxury watch, creates a sense of detachment from the realities of farming.

This contrasts sharply with Figure 5 (Salvini, 2024b), which captures Matteo Salvini, the leader of Italy’s Lega party, among farmers, creating a more authentic, informal impression compared to the RN photo. Salvini’s black softshell jacket aligns with the attire of the farmers around him, projecting solidarity with the protest group.

Nevertheless, Santiago Abascal, the leader of the party Vox, historically displays the most explicit support for rural professionals, particularly during the farmer protests. Vox’s social media featured numerous posts depicting Abascal actively participating in farming activities, such as driving a tractor and wearing work attire. However, it shared primarily audiovisual content. Mamonova (2020) documents Vox’s historical interest in similar themes, connecting Abascal’s imagery to Franco-era ideals, where rural Spain embodies a pure, untainted origin of the Spanish nation under threat from external forces. This finding is also supported by Aguilera-Carnerero (2024), who describes party leader Abascal as the primary protagonist of the party’s communication regarding environmental issues. He is often depicted wearing khaki outfits to align with the uniformity of farmers (Burnett, 2024) or being photographed in breathtaking landscapes. This supports Carle’s (2024) findings regarding politicians frequently being represented in beautiful settings to appeal to local populations. However, while this imagery does reflect some authoritarian themes, particularly from a historical perspective, the underlying reasoning is more populist, which does not support this hypothesis.



Figure 5: Matteo Salvini and Farmers

Apart from these engagements, leaders rarely participate in environmentally friendly or conservation activities during the 2024 European election campaigns. Therefore, in light of the analysed data corpus, Hypothesis 2.2, within the context of the 2024 European Elections, cannot be verified due to the absence of supporting evidence, similar to textual analysis and its missing evidence.

6.3 Populism in the Communication of Environmental and Climate Themes by Radical Right-wing Populist Parties

Chapter 6.3 analyses the role of populism in the communication of environmental and climate themes by selected far-right parties during the 2024 European Elections in textual and visual communication. The analysed hypotheses are 1.4 for textual analysis and 2.3 for visual analysis.

6.3.1 Presence of Populism in Textual Communication Analysis

This section addresses Hypothesis 1.4, which investigates how far-right populist parties in Europe frame environmental and climate policies as products of a disconnected cosmopolitan elite, seeking to mobilize voters by emphasizing a divide between "the pure people" and "the corrupt elite." This framing aligns with a core populist narrative that pits ordinary citizens against an out-of-touch elite, presenting climate initiatives as part of an agenda that undermines national interests and traditional values. The section explores whether these parties use climate and environmental issues to deepen voter polarization and reinforce their elite-people divide in the context of the 2024 European Elections. To test the hypothesis, units of analysis were searched with the codes "people victimization," "economic hardship," "disconnected elite," and "controlling elite."

Out of 725 analysed units of analysis (posts on the X platform), 318 units contained one or more of the above-mentioned codes, suggesting some form of populist narratives in environmental and climate communication and voter mobilization. Some units were coded with multiple codes, all falling under the category of populism, to support answering the hypothesis. The predominant theme, using the narrative of economic hardship, was found in 202 units, and it was the most prominent argument used to advocate against environmental and climate policies, thereby mobilizing voters. The "people victimization" code, which focused more on the livelihood and rights of people (for example, the right to live with dignity in rural areas or the right to drive cars), was less focused on the economic side of the issue. A total of 113 units were identified under this code.

Regarding economic struggles caused by environmental and climate policies, the argument of high energy bills often served as a common denominator. The selected parties frequently placed the blame for economic hardship on the EU, with 119 cases explicitly mentioning it, as well as on local governments, to advance their political agendas. This was particularly true for parties like the AfD and FPÖ, who, during the campaign period for the 2024 European Parliament elections, had members of the

local Green Party in state governments. Similarly, Vox, which opposes the left-wing government, also followed this narrative. Even in states with centre-right governments, such as France or the Czech Republic, RN and SPD regularly criticized national leaders for their environmental measures and support for them. However, from the SPD's perspective, the EU is seen as a greater enemy in terms of the fight against environmental and climate measures. For example, SPD mobilized voters with the message: *"Together, we will stop the EU's insane Green Deal that makes energy, food, and transport more expensive for everyone! Support the SPD in the European elections this June!"*¹¹ (Okamura, 2024c).

As mentioned earlier, energy issues were central to criticisms of elite environmental and climate policies, but in general, the feeling of expensive living costs, including high energy prices, was a key concern for SPD. Vox, in addition to highlighting high energy costs, also discussed job losses, with particular emphasis on working families in rural areas, a core issue in Vox's ideology: *"We do not deny climate change, but man is not a virus for the planet and we cannot submit to the dogmas of the climate agenda in the face of the needs of working families."*¹² (Vox, 2024b). Interestingly, while Vox does not deny the existence of climate change, unlike climate-sceptical parties like the AfD, they emphasize the value of working families and rural communities, reflecting traditional and conservative values: *"The European Green Deal is the main tool that European governments use to suffocate the countryside. This agenda of radical environmentalism has become a plan of massive layoffs for our countryside and industry, which condemns thousands of Spanish families and companies to ruin"*¹³ (Vox, 2024c).

¹¹ Czech original: *Společně zastavíme šílený Green deal EU, který všem lidem zdražuje energie, potraviny a dopravu! Podpořte letos v červnu SPD ve volbách do Evropského parlamentu!*

¹² Spanish original: *No negamos cambio climático, pero el hombre no es un virus para el planeta y no podemos someternos a los dogmas de la agenda climática frente a las necesidades de las familias trabajadoras.* (Translated by [DeepL])

¹³ Spanish original: *"El Pacto Verde Europeo es la principal herramienta que utilizan los gobiernos europeos para asfixiar al campo. Esta agenda del ecologismo radical se ha convertido en un plan de despidos masivos para nuestro campo e industria, que condena a la ruina a miles de familias y empresas españolas."* (Translated by [DeepL])

Furthermore, as previously noted, the RN's argumentation in this case of populist voter mobilization focuses primarily on farmers, unlike Vox, which targets the rural population more broadly: *"Guaranteeing remunerative prices for our farmers and producers is a priority. We must protect those who feed us!"*¹⁴ (Rassemblement National, 2024g). This appeal to protect farmers also indirectly mobilizes other parts of the population to support them, leaving little choice but to back their cause. The RN also used interviews with farmers, where they expressed their support for election leader Jordan Bardella: *"I am a farmer. On June 9, I vote @J_Bardella! Because I want to live with dignity, be paid fairly, and not suffer from the Green Deal and degrowth imposed by the EU. On June 9, I am voting @J_Bardella"*¹⁵ (Rassemblement National, 2024h). The FPÖ and AfD also used narratives primarily against their local governments, which were not strictly related to European themes, such as local CO₂ taxes and economic struggles connected to local energy transition policies ("*Energiewende*").

Regarding explicit mentions of the elite, either imposing controlling measures or being disconnected from the needs of the population, 75 units were identified. The vocabulary used here was particularly interesting, especially in relation to the "controlling elite." For example, SPD frequently used terms like *"dictate"* or *"dictatorship of Brussels,"* a narrative also common in their communication on other topics, such as migration. They also invoked the imagery of the communist regime: *"We have nothing against electromobility, as long as it is useful. But it is nonsense to impose top-down the Bolshevik way. The problem with electric cars is primarily the short range (...) Well, Brussels, in a Bolshevik way, thinks that they can control the uncontrollable"*¹⁶ (Okamura, 2024d), commenting on electromobility. While SPD is not entirely against

¹⁴ French original: *Garantir des prix rémunérateurs pour nos agriculteurs et nos producteurs est une priorité. Nous devons protéger ceux qui nous nourrissent !* (Translated by [DeepL])

¹⁵ French original: *Je suis agricultrice. Le 9 juin, je vote @J_Bardella ! Parce que je veux pouvoir vivre dignement, être rémunérée justement et ne pas subir le Pacte Vert et la décroissance imposés par l'UE, le 9 juin je vote @J_Bardella.* (Translated by [DeepL])

¹⁶ Czech original: *Nemáme nic proti elektromobilitě, pokud se vyplatí. Ale nařizovat něco bolševicky shora je nesmysl. Problémem elektroaut je především krátký dojezd (...). Holt Brusel si bolševicky myslí, že poručí větru dešti.*

electromobility, they criticize the top-down approach. In the context of a communist-style government, other references to the elite were used by the FPÖ, who discussed "eco-communism," and by the AfD, who frequently invoked the term "planned economy" in connection with environmental measures impacting the economy exclusively.

While SPD emphasizes the aspect of a controlling elite, the AfD focuses more on the idea of a disconnected elite, primarily in the context of local government. The EU, however, is also seen as a long-term "bully," with the AfD defending the middle class: *"For years, the entire middle class has been bullied, patronized, and exploited by the EU and by federal governments of varying hues. That is why the #AfD is calling for massive relief: End ideological energy policy, abolish CO₂, reduce taxation on energy and fuels (...) and much more"*¹⁷ (AfD, 2024b). In terms of opposition to both local and European elites, Lega, which is in the Italian government during the 2024 European Elections, also fights against European elites in terms of environmental measures. Similarly, Vox often merges the local government and European "bureaucrats" into a unified enemy, a tactic also used by RN, as mentioned above.

The ratio of strictly populist tweets compared to other analysed tweets does not vary significantly across the parties, as described in Figure 6. All parties show a notable presence of populist tweets, except for AfD, which prominently frames environmental and climate issues through a largely populist perspective. Aside from SPD, most parties emphasize narratives of victimization and economic hardship among the population. In contrast, SPD focuses more heavily on anti-elite messaging, aligning this with a more nationalist approach.

¹⁷ German original: *Jahrelang wurde der gesamte Mittelstand von der EU und von den Bundesregierungen wechselnder Couleur gegängelt, bevormundet und ausgebeutet. Deshalb fordert die #AfD massive Entlastungen: Ideologische Energiepolitik beenden, CO₂-Abschaffen, Besteuerung von Energie und Kraftstoffen reduzieren (...) und vieles mehr.*

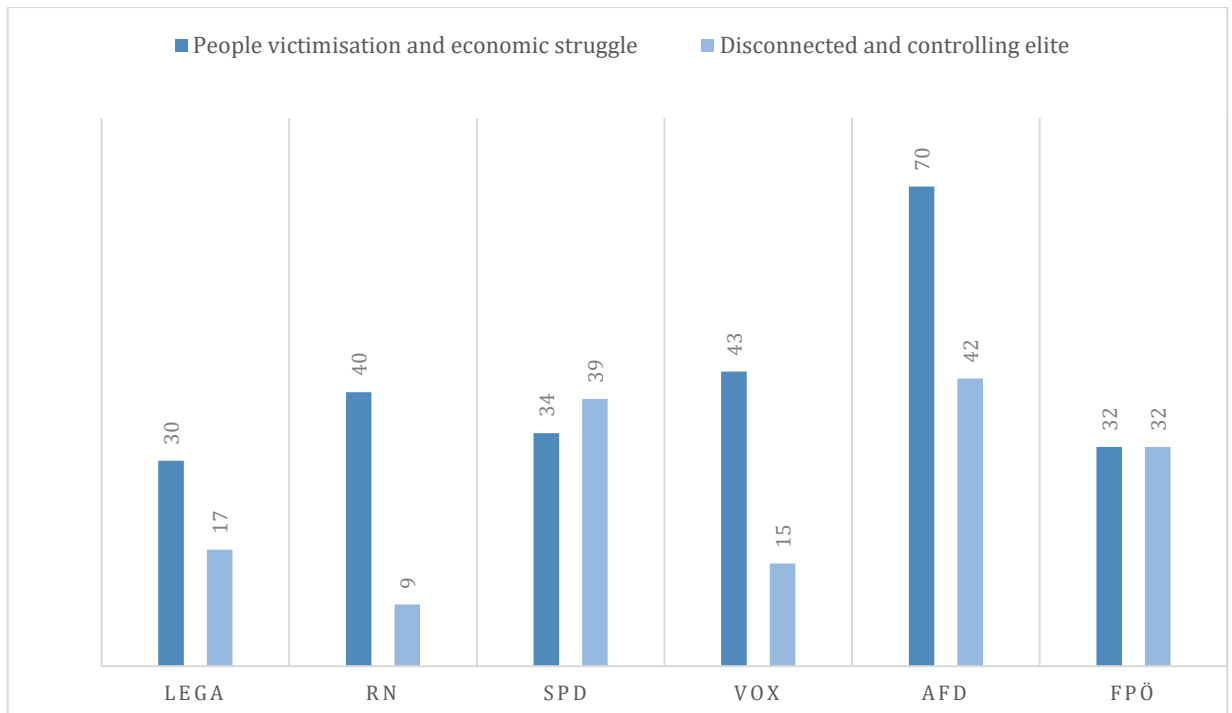


Figure 6: Breakdown of Results by Parties for Populism Narratives

Given the extensive data supporting the use of populist tactics to mobilize voters against environmental and climate policies imposed by disconnected or controlling elites, placing the burden on the population, especially rural communities, low-income working families, and the broader nation, Hypothesis 1.4 can be considered verified in the context of the 2024 European Elections. Therefore, it can be concluded that populist radical-right-wing parties employ populist strategies during election times, though further Euroscepticism on environmental and climate issues, as discussed in Hypothesis 1.1, is more prominent than victimization and economic struggle.

6.3.2 Populism in Visual Communication

Hypothesis 2.3 investigates the themes and imagery employed by radical right-wing populist parties during the 2024 European Elections, specifically focusing on how these parties idealize rural professions and depict the “common people” in stark

contrast to the “corrupt elite.” This analysis aims to uncover populist patterns in visual communication that resonate with voters’ sentiments.

This dynamic is particularly exemplified by the winter 2023–2024 farmer protests, which gained support from radical right-wing populist groups and became a focal point for their campaigns. Among the parties studied, the RN prominently featured rural workers in its visual messaging, sharing the most imagery related to this demographic (a total of 27 posts). The RN strategically capitalized on the annual *Salon International de l'Agriculture* (SIA), an internationally recognized agricultural trade fair held in Paris, to enhance its campaign. Both Jordan Bardella, the election leader, and Marine Le Pen, the party leader, attended the show, emphasizing their alignment with rural values and agricultural identity. Historically, RN has engaged with the SIA over the years, further reinforcing its connection to rural communities (RTL, 2024).

Among the images RN posted regarding rural professions, notably, all featured male workers, specifically white men, with a single exception of a woman standing in a sunflower field holding a French flag, symbolizing patriotism and solidarity with farmers (Burnett, 2020). The men in these images wore tidy work attire, sometimes even white polo shirts, while working in fields, a detail that subtly distances them from the image of hardworking farmers. Additionally, most images showed these men in profile or with obscured faces, adding to the impression of detachment. The visuals were professionally crafted, often with a sepia filter and captured at sunrise or sunset, lending a nostalgic quality.

As Forchtner (2023) notes, images can simplify complex arguments and intensify the emotional impact used in populist communication. The latter is especially evident in Figure 7, which shows a man holding a young girl in a blue dress, her hair in a braid, and looking over a herd of cows. The text over the image reads: *Valoriser le travail des agriculteurs et la qualité pour redresser notre balance commerciale agricole!* (In English: “Value the work of farmers and quality to improve our agricultural trade balance!”) along with RN's overarching slogan for the 2024 European Elections: *Vivement le 9 juin!* (in English translation: “Looking forward to June 9th!”) (Translated by

[DeepL]). This photo, originally shared on February 26, 2024, during the SIA, was re-posted on May 2 with a call to vote for Bardella, emphasizing a patriotic stance: *Pour défendre l'exception agricole française, votez Bardella!* (in English translation: “To defend the French agricultural exception, vote for Bardella!”).



Figure 7 Cattle Breeder with a Little Girl

Both messages resonate with nationalist and protectionist support for French agriculture, aligning with prior research on RN's ecological positions (Bivar, 2022; Carle, 2024). By linking farmers' work to emotive, nostalgic imagery, however, RN taps into populist support for rural values, as supported by Burnett (2024), who observed that far-right parties frequently portray patriotism and populism through affectionate images of white male farmers with their families. These images of robust, masculine

farmers and traditional, nurturing mothers symbolize conservative values that, for example, implicitly justify exclusionary attitudes, as discussed by Tebaldi and Plum (2024).

Similarly, Aguilera-Carnerero (2024) notes that, in Spain, Vox has similarly used rural imagery to create a polarized populist discourse, casting rural professions in opposition to urban elites and reinforcing a dichotomy of “patriots vs. traitors.” In RN’s case, rural figures are often depicted as protectors of the homeland, suggesting that nature itself belongs to the native white population (*ibid.*). While RN’s images of cows in open pastures evoke sustainable agriculture, those of pig farming reveal more conventional, confined practices. Unlike RN, other parties studied did not heavily incorporate rural protests or similar events into their visual messaging to emphasize populist ideals. Vox has traditionally used rural imagery (*cf.* Ungureanu and Popartan, 2024; Aguilera-Carnerero, 2024), but for the 2024 European Elections, primarily in video format, which was outside the scope of this analysis. For other parties, images of rural life often depicted agricultural machinery, suggesting a more industrial-supportive perspective, as discussed later.

In summary, although only a small sample of populist imagery directly connects rural professions with nature, primarily from RN, it suggests a populist narrative influenced by recent farmer protests, which resonated with far-right-wing populist discourse. Given these findings and the limitations outlined, the hypothesis can be considered verified.

6.4 Analysis Summary and Further Emerging Themes

Regarding the textual analysis, a total data corpus of 725 “tweets” (posts on the platform X) was analysed. As described above, these data were collected from the official accounts of the selected parties, AfD, FPÖ, RN, and Vox, and from the accounts of party leaders from Lega, PVV, and SPD, where no specific party communication account was available. These posts, identified as relevant for communication about environmental and climate themes, were posted during the study period from 1st January to 9th June

2024. In total, 654 tweets mentioned some form of nationalism, including anti-globalism (expressed as opposition to international institutions and their environmental and climate policies), resource nationalism (promoting local agriculture and production of natural resources affected by environmental policies), or nature-related nationalism, also known as "green nationalism," as outlined in Hypotheses 1.1 and 1.2. The analysis in section 6.11 shows that nationalism, especially with an anti-globalist emphasis, was common across almost all analysed tweets, often justified with arguments about food and energy security and sovereignty. In contrast, green nationalism appeared infrequently and usually alongside other forms of nationalism or nativism.

Similarly, authoritarianism was not prominent in the textual analysis of tweets. Although radical right-wing populist parties occasionally connect environmental and climate issues with morally problematic topics such as migration for selected parties, these topics are generally used to mobilize opposition to environmental measures rather than advocate for further conservation, as noted in the existing literature. Furthermore, among the 725 analysed units, 318 included some form of populist communication, as hypothesized in Hypothesis 1.4.

In summary, Hypotheses 1.1 and 1.4 are supported by the data, while there was little to no evidence to support Hypotheses 1.2 and 1.3. The lack of evidence for these hypotheses indicates a lack of interest, thus serving as falsifying evidence. As illustrated in Figure 8, 90 per cent of posts containing climate and environment-related themes included a nativist perspective aimed at mobilizing voters, while only 44 per cent included a populist perspective. Posts could also include both perspectives.

In addition, a visual analysis was conducted on 75 images from the selected parties' Instagram accounts, identified as relevant to climate or environmental communication. Most of the visual content came from RN, which posted 32 images focused on agricultural themes. Vox similarly emphasized local agriculture and products, aligning with themes of nativism through protectionism and localism in supporting local farmers and agricultural practices. AfD and FPÖ, on the other hand, centred on nativist themes in the context of automobilism and industrial imagery, often depicting gas

stations and cars refuelling. AfD additionally included visuals in support of nuclear energy, contrasting with FPÖ's opposition to it. This imagery, while not fully aligning with the visual communication hypothesis, reflects the concept of "petro-masculinity" as described by Viet (2022), and a climate-sceptical stance (Nelson, 2019), appealing to individuals whose lifestyles are tied to petrol reliance (Tebaldi, 2023). Therefore, Hypothesis 2.1 cannot be confirmed, as no clear or significant examples were identified that demonstrate the use of nature, whether real or symbolic, to support nationalistic messaging by the selected parties in the 2024 European Elections.

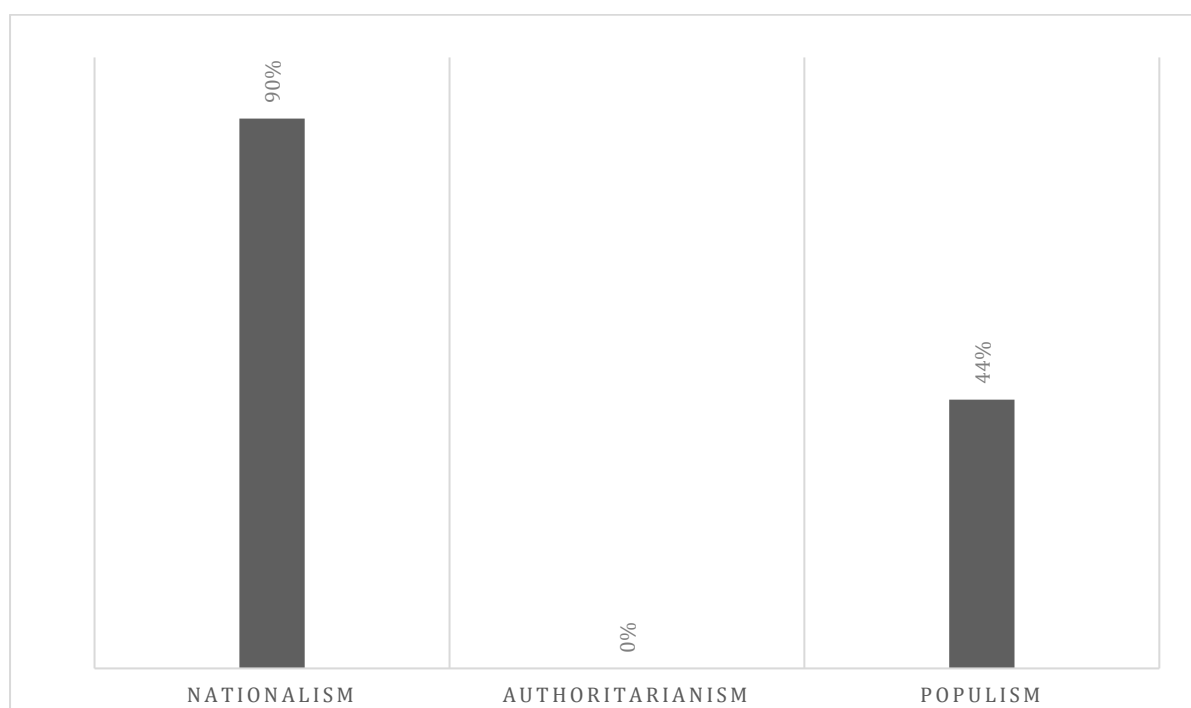


Figure 8: Overall Results of the Textual Analysis

Regarding authoritarianism, visual content related to farmers was identified as the primary theme associated with this ideological aspect. In Lega's visual communication, particularly through Matteo Salvini's Instagram account, four posts supported farmer protests and criticised environmental activists. The focus on farmer protests reflects a kind of authoritarian approach to governance, where the leadership takes a strong stance against environmental policies, portraying the state as defending local

interests. Salvini's criticism of environmental protesters, alongside his own advocacy for agricultural practices, can be seen as reinforcing this authoritarian perspective, positioning the state's authority in defence of agricultural practices and against perceived external pressures; however, rather than protecting the environment, the leaders in the analysed data presented themselves as a defender of national resources in terms of resource nationalism. Therefore, hypothesis 2.2 was not verified.

In terms of populism, themes often emerged through imagery portraying a "common people vs. elite" narrative. This is evident in the RN and Vox visual content, which emphasizes local agriculture and includes scenes of rural workers, agricultural machinery, and cultural landscapes to promote a populist stance on environmental issues. While only a small portion of populist imagery directly links rural professions with nature, mainly from RN, this still points to a populist narrative shaped by recent farmer protests, which strongly align with far-right populist discourse. Based on these findings and the limitations discussed, hypothesis 2.3 could not be verified.

7 Discussion

This chapter examines how far-right parties have mobilized support by integrating climate and environmental themes into their populist and nationalistic narratives. It analyses the implications of this strategy for future political dynamics, especially in light of trends observed in the 2019 and 2024 European Elections. The chapter concludes by addressing the study's limitations and offering recommendations for future research.

The analysis in the previous chapter demonstrates that the selected populist right-wing radical parties have increasingly utilized environmental and climate themes as tools for nationalist and populist mobilization. Nationalism, particularly in the form of anti-globalism and resource nationalism, emerged as a significant narrative in their communication. These themes were often framed through arguments about food and energy security, emphasizing sovereignty over international cooperation. In contrast, green nationalism (Hau, 2022), promoting nationalistic values through emphasising national nature heritage, was less prominent, appearing primarily as a secondary element to other nationalist narratives.

As Boukala and Tountasaki (2021) observed, for example, the case of RN and their promotion of “patriotic ecology” is rooted in the historical connection between nature and nationalism. This observation was also observed in the thesis in the promotion of local resource nationalism and the appeal to the beauty of the local nature, especially in the context of RN and AfD. It is not present in the visual communication. Furthermore, as Aronczyk (2024, p. 34) argues, “*It is tempting to consider eco-nationalism as ‘merely’ strategic,*” an instrumental effort to transform genuine environmental concerns into electoral support or justification for national isolation. For radical right-wing populist parties, this tactic serves as both a nationalist and populist device. In this regard, Müller (2019, p. 35) highlights the role of “*populist poseurs*” in exploiting nationalist rhetoric and imagery to advance their agendas, emphasizing the populist underpinnings of these strategies. This shows that although the nationalistic narratives

on paper can be highly represented, the motivation to use them for communication could spring rather from a populist motivation, which could also be argued in this thesis given the occurring themes and its regular connection with populist arguments.

Populist narratives were also prominent in the textual and visual data. White (2024) questions what climate change offers to populism, arguing that it presents a unique opportunity for mobilization. Beyond its economic implications, climate change and environmental policies serve as a platform for generalized scepticism toward experts and elites, aligning with the anti-establishment narratives typical of populism. As a relatively new issue in political discourse, it also provides an alternative context for populist rhetoric compared to more traditional themes (*ibid.*). In line with this, Schwörer and Fernández-García (2024) also noted that climate and environmental issues are introduced into the discourse of radical right-wing populist parties through mass mobilization rather than as part of their traditional ideological focus.

As said above, economic challenges were central to the 2024 European Elections, which took place during a period of profound transformation across European societies. Digitalization and climate change have reshaped communities, deepened social divides, and intensified economic uncertainty (Bolopion, 2024). These dynamics unfolded against the backdrop of a "polycrisis" — a series of interconnected crises since 2008, including the financial crisis, the 2015 refugee crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the wars in Ukraine and Gaza. These crises were significant topics of discussion in the campaign. Furthermore, Ivaldi (2024) argues that shifting from their Brexit-era demands for national exits, many populist parties have softened or obscured their stance on European integration. The ongoing environment of crises has also fuelled opposition to climate and environmental policies, framing them as divisive rather than unifying and making opposition to these issues more prominent, as demonstrated in this thesis.

Dickson and Hobolt (2024) observe that populist right-wing radical parties have markedly intensified their focus on climate change since 2010, with a sharp increase

from 2020 onward, partly due to the rise of the Fridays for Future movement (Schwörer and Fernández-García, 2024), leaving them second only to green parties in their attention to the issue. These parties have increasingly adopted adversarial stances on climate policies, challenging the mainstream party consensus on measures designed to mitigate the climate crisis. This trend is evident in the results of this thesis, where a majority of the studied parties placed significant emphasis on climate-relevant topics and their socio-economic impacts, such as the effects of climate policies on workers, farmers, and the broader population, often using climate and environmental policies as scapegoats and blaming them and the elites associated with them for the consequences of past crises mentioned above, such as high living costs. By leveraging primarily economic struggles and using scepticism toward costly climate measures and less with general resistance towards environmental movements, like in the case of FFF (Knüpfer and Hoffmann, 2024), populist right-wing radical parties create an opportunity to attract voter support, suggesting that climate change can serve as a polarizing issue that deepens the divide between voters and mainstream parties (ibid.).

The rising prominence of far-right-wing parties often reflects broader societal scepticism toward achieving ambitious environmental goals. These parties commonly oppose measures such as the European Commission's target to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 90% by 2040, framing such initiatives as threats to economic stability and rural livelihoods (Bolopion, 2024). While this thesis does not provide direct evidence of voter mobilization or shifts in party support, it highlights how far-right narratives capitalize on fears of societal and economic disruption, bringing climate policies to the forefront of political debate. This resistance poses significant challenges to global climate security efforts, particularly if similar rhetoric gains traction in other states or organizations (ibid.).

The analysis further illustrates how far-right parties incorporate narratives regarding the climate and environment, which usually have underlying themes of sometimes interconnected anti-globalism and economic struggle. Imagery and “Twitter” posts from parties such as RN and Vox focused heavily on local agricultural themes,

aligning with nativist and nationalist rhetoric. Meanwhile, AfD and FPÖ emphasized industrial motifs tied to fossil fuel reliance, with AfD also supporting nuclear energy and highlighting high energy costs, a perspective supported by observations from other scholars (cf. Ivaldi and Zankina, 2024). These visual and textual communication strategies reflect the interplay between nationalism and environmental scepticism, where environmental issues are reframed to support local identities and resist international environmental policies. Mamonova and Franquesa (2020) argue that policies like the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) and the EGD have widened economic disparities and led to frustration among rural communities. This frustration could therefore create an environment where right-wing populist rhetoric can thrive, as it often appeals to rural voters who feel excluded from mainstream political agendas and marginalized by broader economic systems, tapping into concerns over national identity and economic insecurity (cf. Deppisch *et al.*, 2022).

To counter the growing influence of far-right narratives in the environmental policy making, it is crucial to emphasize promoting a '*just transition*' at the EU level and within individual member states, as Blondeel (2024) noted. The EGD offers a framework for this, including initiatives like the Just Transition Mechanism for carbon-intensive regions and the Social Climate Fund to support vulnerable households facing rising fossil fuel costs. Such measures are essential to securing public support for climate action and the transition (ibid.). This approach addresses some of the concerns raised by radical right-wing populist parties in this thesis, particularly the economic difficulties faced by people, highlighting the need for other parties to respond to these issues. This observation could be beneficial for environmental and social policymakers, especially considering that the significant electorate of the populist right-wing radical comes from low-income groups (Engler and Weisstanner, 2020) or rural areas (Rickardsson, 2021) that are notably influenced by the impact of new environmental agricultural policies. It is important to recognize that the focus on economic challenges is not merely a populist narrative but a legitimate issue for many vulnerable individuals, who then may be more inclined to support radical parties.

In conclusion, the Green Wave, a significant success for the Green Parties during the European Elections 2019 (Biedenkopf *et al.*, 2023; Pearson and Rüdig, 2020), has been followed by a political landscape that reflects the strongest representation of right- and far-right-wing parties ever seen in the European Parliament and other EU institutions (Alemanno, 2024; Russak, 2024). Although fears of a far-right backlash did not materialize as predicted by some scholars and analysts (cf. van Rij *et al.*, 2024; Cunningham *et al.*, 2024), this shift may have future implications for enforcing climate policies, potentially leading to obstruction or inaction (Bolopion, 2024; Hockenos, 2024). At the same time, it suggests that climate and environmental issues are no longer exclusively the domain of the Green Parties (Dickson and Hobolt, 2024), as demonstrated by the results of this thesis. Instead, these issues have become part of the political mainstream, through which broader social and economic phenomena are communicated and criticized and could be leveraged in future right-wing populist rhetoric with an emphasis on populist or nationalistic arguments, as found in this thesis.

7.1 Limits of the Research and Recommendations for Future Research

The following section outlines the primary constraints of this study, including methodological considerations, the scope of data analysed, and the potential for emerging trends in political communication that were not addressed. Recommendations for future research are then provided to guide subsequent scholarly work in expanding on these findings and addressing identified gaps.

Conducting qualitative research often comes with challenges, particularly the risk of bias or contamination in the findings. Heisenberg's uncertainty principle reminds us that the observation itself can influence the observed, a dynamic that qualitative methods like visual content analysis cannot entirely avoid (Krippendorff, 2014, p. 40). Despite this, as noted by Marying (2014), the theory-guided approach used in this study helps mitigate these risks by ensuring theoretical rigour. A mixed-method approach

combining qualitative and quantitative methods was also employed to enhance the robustness of the research further.

This research may not have captured other significant means of messaging used by radical right-wing populist parties, such as video formats. Forchtner (2024, p. 298) has raised concerns about the potential impacts of longer-form video messaging on platforms like YouTube, as well as the influence of shorter video formats on potential new ways of far-right communication. The social media platform TikTok, in particular, is gaining popularity among radical right-wing populist parties and associated personalities, potentially surpassing other communication channels in the future (Ljubas, 2024). This platform targets diverse audiences, including youth, which could contribute to the growing influence of far-right movements on these groups (Pfeifer, 2024; Goujard, 2024).

There is a need for rigorous research further to explore environmental and climate messaging in this context and to investigate the connection between youth support for the far-right and the volume and strategies of far-right communication directed at youth. This could help explain why these parties potentially no longer place emphasis on mobilizing against the youth climate movement, as previously described by scholars (Schwörer and Fernández-García, 2023; Knüpfer and Hoffmann, 2024).

Additionally, this research does not cover the full scope of radical right-wing populist parties in Europe or even the entire European Parliament, such as the Finns Party (Perussuomalaiset) or Bulgarian Revival (Възраждане), putting emphasis also on North and East Europe representation. However, the study's selection criteria were justified by focusing on parties of significant influence in both European and national contexts. This approach provides representativeness, and some degree of generalizability based on the proportion of the electorate of these parties. In any case, a detailed analysis studying the European radical right-wing populist parties under bigger scrutiny to see trends in their communication about climate and environment among countries or regions, as outlined briefly by Johansson (2024), could be seen as beneficial by policymakers.

It is also important to note that some parties in this study were represented by the accounts of their leaders (e.g., Lega, PVV, SPD) rather than by dedicated party accounts, as these parties do not maintain official accounts. The communication style and volume of posts on these leader accounts may differ significantly from those of official party accounts. Future research could address this limitation by including multiple sources from the same party to provide a more comprehensive and balanced analysis.

8 Conclusion

This thesis provides an in-depth analysis of the climate and environmental narratives employed by radical right-wing populist parties in the 2024 European Elections campaigns, offering insights into their strategic mobilization tactics. By examining these narratives through the lenses of nativism, authoritarianism, and populism, as defined by Mudde (2007), the study illustrates the multifaceted ways in which these parties frame environmental and climate issues to resonate with their voter base. This study is important due to two key factors: the significant shifts in environmental and climate policy agendas during the last parliamentary term of the European Parliament and the disproportionate impacts of the climate crisis on far-right voters. These dynamics unfolded against the backdrop of the Russia-Ukraine conflict and tangible manifestations of the Green Deal, such as the widespread farmer protests across Europe in early 2024 (Bassot, 2024).

The research process was guided by the main research question: *How did radical right-wing populist parties develop and present their climate and environmental narratives to mobilize voters in the context of the 2024 European Elections?* This was complemented by the sub-research question: *How did radical right-wing populist parties in Europe present the climate and environmental issues in their visual communication to mobilize voters in the context of the 2024 European Elections?* These questions provided a structured foundation for the analysis, driving the exploration of both textual and visual communication strategies.

To answer these questions, the thesis employed a content analysis approach underpinned by the method of evaluating multiple hypotheses about the relationship between text and context, as conceptualized by Krippendorff (2018). Drawing from the literature and theoretical framework established in the initial chapters, a set of working hypotheses was developed. These hypotheses examined the interplay between the three ideological pillars of nativism, authoritarianism, and populism and the communication strategies of radical right-wing populist parties.

Findings from this study reveal that the selected populist right-wing radical parties have increasingly utilized environmental and climate themes as tools for nationalist and populist mobilization. Nativism, particularly in the form of anti-globalism and resource nationalism, emerged as a dominant narrative in their communication. These narratives often framed environmental issues through arguments about food and energy security, emphasizing sovereignty over international cooperation. Green nationalism (Hau, 2022), which promotes nationalistic values by highlighting national natural heritage, appeared less frequently and primarily as a secondary element. Importantly, these nationalist and populist narratives were significantly more prominent than authoritarian themes, marking a notable evolution in far-right communication strategies.

Most notably, economic challenges played a pivotal role in shaping these narratives to mobilise voters. The campaign period coincided with a profound transformation in European societies marked by digitalization, climate change, and interconnected crises since 2008, including financial, refugee, and health crises and wars in Ukraine and Gaza. Rising energy costs, attributed to environmental measures, were a central theme used to mobilize voters, often blaming the EU or local governments. These findings align with the thesis' broader conclusions on the shifting role of environmental issues in political discourse. While the 2019 European Elections marked a peak for Green Parties (Biedenkopf *et al.*, 2023; Pearson and Rüdig, 2020), the 2024 elections saw increased representation of right- and far-right-wing parties, raising concerns about potential climate policy obstruction. Environmental issues have entered the political mainstream, enabling broader critiques that far-right populists now exploit effectively. In conclusion, the selected radical right-wing populist parties re-framing of climate and environmental issues could be, therefore, interpreted as a strategic adaptation to broader socio-economic phenomena. By connecting climate policies with voter concerns about migration, economic hardship, and national sovereignty, they have positioned themselves as critics of perceived institutional overreach. These dynamics underscore the need for further research into how environmental

policies can be communicated inclusively, avoiding polarizing rhetoric that deepens societal divisions.

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