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Climate Change and Far-Right Politics: Between Adoption and Adaptation

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1. INTRODUCTION

«farmers demonstrate outside the EU headquarters on the occasion of a EU agriculture ministers meeting in Brussels, on March 26, 2024. Farmers across Europe have been protesting for weeks over what they say are excessively restrictive environmental rules, competition from cheap imports from outside the European Union and low incomes» (EU News 2024)

«Between February and March 2024, farmers' protests flared up in several EU countries. Driven by several real reasons, including concerns over Brussels' environmental agricultural policies and economic uncertainty, farmers took to the streets demanding a fair price for their products, more support to be accompanied in the transition, and administrative and bureaucratic streamlining of the CAP. According to EFCSN Newtral, however, "misinformation has permeated the discourse, adding new layers of complexity to the narratives surrounding the protests» (Newtral & Science Feedback 2024)

As the quotation stresses, farmers are protesting against measures to reduce emissions. In recent years, farmers in Western Europe have engaged in increasingly vehement opposition to policies designed to safeguard the environment, which they perceive as imposing undue financial burdens on them. From the Netherlands, where the backlash has been most pronounced, to Belgium, France, Spain, Ireland, Germany, and the United Kingdom, protests have resulted in convoys of tractors congesting roadways and ports, farmer-led occupations of capital cities, and even cows being herded into the offices of government ministers. Politicians from mainstream parties are worried that right wing populists could exploit a "climate backlash". The adverse effects of the climate crisis and globalisation have resulted in marginalisation and vulnerability for farmers in Europe, who are susceptible to the influence of populist politicians, as well as to far-right discourses and mobilisations, according to academics and the media. The growing argument is that in the absence of adequate funding, planning and equity in the transition to a low-carbon

economy, there is a risk of a resurgence of the far right exploiting environmental issues across the continent.

On the one hand, when it comes to climate protection, conventional wisdom describes the far right as skeptical by signaling the substantial non engagement of actors in this ideological family with the matter and political science observed that denialism is the traditional official position of the radical right on climate change. Some parties, such as Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) in Germany, even deny the human impact on the climate. Hostility to liberal, cosmopolitan and green elites, as well as a rejection of international commitments, fits well with opposition to climate protection as a supposed elite project (Caiani and Padoan 2021). On the other hand, however, we also know that some right-wing populist parties and far right movements support the protection of the domestic environment as a source of national identity. In this reading, climate change can also be a far-right concern, because it threatens the environment of the nation state. The Berlin branch of AfD's youth organisation, for example, in an open letter from May 2019, urged the party to explicitly reject the denialist position.

Even more remarkably, although at first glance the environmental movements and the far-right movements, including anti-immigrant and white supremacist groups, appear to be situated at opposite ends of the political ideology spectrum, recent scholarship started to investigate overlaps between these two movements (Lubarda 2024).

Against this background, the environment as an issue is then becoming increasingly a contested battlefield where also right wing political actors try to impose their view, by embedding the environmental issue into broader ideologies linked to more traditional far right themes such as nationalism and nativism, as Mancosu and colleagues show in this special issue. Statement such as 'Counteracting climate change is one of today's most important challenges'; 'We are one of the leaders in the "climate championship"'; 'We need to engage better with the environment (. . .) bring the ecological question to the center of politics' may appear as excerpts pulled from a press release of any Green actor, but they are not. In fact, all three were produced by right-wing populists (RWP): the first is by Mateusz Morawiecki, Poland's Prime Minister (Law and Justice, PiS, party); the second by Viktor Orbán, Hungary's Prime Minister (Fidesz, Hungarian Civic Alliance party); and the third is from the 2019 Election manifesto of the Italian Lega per Salvini Premier. How can we explain such an evolving engagement of the far right with the environmental issues? And which impact does this have on the environmental politics of the far right?

If it is now clear that Far Right movements and parties are not simply 'anti-environmentalist' (Gemenis *et al.* 2012), it remains still to be understood what this change of route means in terms of ideological positioning and in the overall development of the far-right politics in contemporary political spectrum. After all, this turn in the making is being developed after years of unfavourable positions by the radical right towards the protection of the natural environment (Tosun and Debus 2022, Vihma *et al.* 2020). Moreover, the different positions of right-wing populist parties on environmental issues may also depend, in part, on their genetic process and the political culture that has permeated their evolution. Ultimately, it is difficult to understand whether the repositioning of the far-right actors towards the environment represents an ideological shift, or it is rather the result of contingent political opportunities to be exploited for electoral gains.

While scholars have so far mostly focused on left wing progressive movements and discourses in their relationship with environmental issues, the Far Right, including both social movements and political parties, has been neglected until recently. Furthermore, the (still comparatively rare) scholarship on far right and environmentalism has followed a strict division of labour, either focusing on far-right social movements and eco-fascism (Lubarda 2023), or focusing on right wing (populist) parties and environmental policies, with very few works crossing and combining the two strains of research. Whilst some attempts have been made to bridge the party politics literature and social movement studies (Tarrow 2021), the two branches of scholarship have only rarely crossed paths in analyses of the radical right (for exceptions, Minkenberg 2018; Caiani and Cisar 2018). In this special issue we offer an empirical contribution to fill this gap.

This special issue empirically investigates the relationship between the far right and environmental issues and particularly climate change. Specifically, it looks at the current Far Right in Europe and its frames, networks, and strategies relate to environmental and climate change issues. In order to look at the widest array of political actors, from political parties to social movements, it will draw on social movement studies and research on political parties, as well as the scholarship on 'movement parties' (della Porta *et al.* 2017) to address these dynamics of an increasing interest on and positioning of the far right on environmental current issues, paying particular attention to the political (and discursive) opportunities provided by the process of European integration and globalization. Against this background, the special issue considers the political, economic, and

cultural crises that have hit Europe in the last two decades and which have offered specific political and discursive opportunities for these political actors to mobilize also on environmental issues.

1.1 *The far right and environmentalism*

The conceptual departure point of this special issue is the role of the far right towards environmental issues. Acknowledging the complexity of the terminological debate, which is beyond the scope of this special issue to address in detail, we use the term far right to refer to those groups that exhibit in their common ideological cores the characteristics of nationalism (ethno-nationalism), xenophobia, antiestablishment critiques and socio-cultural authoritarianism (law and order, family values) (Mudde 2019). This deliberately includes political party and non-party organizations, even subcultural (violent) groups as well as cultural associations and think tanks. Other scholars prefer to use a broad and inclusive meaning of the ‘radical-right’ category, which encompasses other labels commonly used in the literature such as ‘extreme right’ or ‘populist radical right’ (Wondreys and Mudde 2022). Thus, we refer to the far right in this conceptual sense in this special issue. Some contributions will also address the articulation of far-right actors with radical right groups and populism. The central theoretical goal of the special issue is highlighting the evolving nature of the relationship between the far right and environmental issues and to critically assess whether this is the result of an ideological restructuring or rather the strategic positioning towards an opportunity provided by several crises.

This matters because not only are right wing populist leaders publicly adopting ‘pro-environmental’ discourses, but, with an increasing number of these parties currently in power around the world, they also have the potential to impact environmental policies through their position within governing coalitions (Caiani and Meardi 2022). This capacity to exercise power therefore raises a series of questions about what determines the, political, discursive and policy positions that these parties take on the environment, and whether they are the result of an evolving ideology or the outcome of contextual adaptation to contingent ‘political opportunities’. Do far right parties and non-party organizations (still) tend to follow their ideological convictions as ‘anti environmentalists’ or they moderate their positions once becoming mainstream? And, more in general, what are the discourses, frames, action repertoires and relational strategies undertaken by the far right (including parties and movements) when dealing with the environmental issues

understood as ‘novel’ issues of potential mobilisation? While Ideology can indeed be a determinant of environmental (policy) preferences (McCright and Dunlap 2013), in many situations, the context can assume prevalence (Criado and Herrerros 2007).

To delve more into the conceptual definition of the far right used in the special issue, far right is not a monolithic ideology, but it shows instead several variants within this family, which can also be expected, in turn, to influence the (degree and) forms of these actors’ political discourse (on environment), repertoires and relations. Examples of these varieties include ‘national conservatism’ on the one hand and the ‘populist radical right’ on the other (Zulianello 2020). A third subtype is ‘neoliberal populism’. Similar attempts to parse out the spectrum have been made with respect to the far-right communication on climate change in the European Parliament (Forchtner and Lubarda 2023) but reflections on the broader spectrum of far right are still missing.

This gap will be the point of departure of our special issues, that aims to investigate the relationship between the far right and environmental issues, across different types of organizations and countries, as well as political arenas.

Overall, a growing body of academic literature provides evidence of how far-right parties position themselves on environmental issues (Lockwood 2018; Forchtner *et al.* 2018; Schaller and Carius 2019; Lubarda 2020), including the attitudes of their voters (Huber *et al.* 2021; Duijndam and van Beukering 2021; Domorenok and Prontera 2021). Most of the scholarships agree that right wing actors have assumed critical positions against protective, ambitious European and national climate policies (Vicedo Carabea *et al.* 2021; Tosun and Debus 2020; Vihma *et al.* 2020). Some relate this to the right-wing (and populist) ideology as key determinants of their environmental politics and policy (Böhmelet 2021). Right wing populist ideology constructs the environment in several ways: privileging the national against the global domain of international policy making, as is, for example, visible in climate change policy (Farstad 2018); foregrounding nostalgia and “retropias” (Elçi 2022), where nostalgia for the past environments is a motivational frame and a call for policy action restoration (Hanusch and Meisch 2022); or discursively centering ‘the people’ against the elites (i.e. the ‘polluting outsiders’, such as immigrants or elites or the elites making the people bear the costs of climate change. Moreover, right-wing populist discourses on climate change rely heavily on emotional framing processes, through which specific interpretations, grievances, and identities are constructed and communicated, see Caiani and

Di Cocco 2023). Because of their nationalism, as well as opposition to multiculturalism and internationalism, right wing actors frequently support local and national environmental policies that protect the countryside (i.e. rural vs. urban), nature and the homeland (Forchtner 2019), but often express scepticism about global environmental problems like climate change and oppose policies to address them.

Second, ideological interpretations are particularly relevant when it comes to the far-right ideology, as the emphasis on blood and soil of the so-called ‘ecofascism’ (Hughes *et al.* 2022) is generally narrower than far-right ecologism, which also includes conservative and populist sentiments (Lubarda 2020). Populist attitudes play an important role in explaining climate change scepticism and opposition to environmental protection: yet, populism offers an orthogonal dimension to partisanship and left–right self-placement (Gooch and Huber 2020), which broadens the scope of the concept of ideology suggested by Bartha *et al.* (2020). However, these analyses also point to the potential heterogeneity within the right-wing spectrum and discourses: examples of ‘green’ right wing populists, such as environmental populism of anti-extractive or climate justice movements (Buzogány and Mohamad-Klotzbach 2021) and far-right ecologism (Forchtner 2019), are cases in point. However, research on this topic is still scant and centred around the alleged association between the far right and denialism, based on the anti-establishment sentiments of far right against the ‘green lobbies’.

Beyond ideology, there are also other factors that play a role in the right wing positioning and strategies on the environment: the political opportunities provided by the institutional framework of the country within which they operate (Biard *et al.* 2019); the institutionalization process (De Lange and Art 2011); the links of RWP parties and other (non-party) actors (e.g. links with the fossil fuel industry have been seen as determining right wingers positions on environmental and especially climate policies) (Jeffries 2017). Finally, political cultures can also be important: for instance, differences among Eastern and Western Europe have been continuously emphasized, although evidence has been mostly context-specific and not easily generalizable (Leininger and Meijers 2021). In terms of environmental issues, the range of ideas, frames and ultimately, policies that resonate with the public is determined by the contextual and country-specific markers (Cherp *et al.* 2017).

Building on a rich emerging literature and *drawing on social movement perspectives and concepts* (such as collective identity, frames, movement-counter-movement dynamics, networks, and action repertoire), our special

issue intends to contribute to this debate. We then also investigate, from a resource mobilization approach (della Porta and Diani 2006), if the differences among different types of actors can account for explaining the environmental politics of the far right.

This special issue will address different problems from a social movement perspective. In particular, the special issue’s various contributions will address the development of far right ‘environmental politics’ using the following guiding concepts: a) movement relations, networks, and events; b) transnationalization trends and domestic opportunities; c) movement-counter-movement dynamics; d) climate/environmental related protest events and strategies; e) local/transnational practices and sites of environmental-related mobilization; f.) movement identities and frames; g.) ‘critical junctures’ for the development of a far right politics. Methodologically, this SI will draw on a variety of methods: survey in-depth interviews; text and discourse analysis; historical comparative analysis; and qualitative content analysis. In addition, the methods used by contributors to the special issue help overcome existing biases in approaching right-wing movements from an outsider, externalist perspective and answer the calls for analyzing them as movements in their own right (Avanza 2018; Castelli Gattinara 2020).

2. BACKGROUND

The interrelated nature of the challenges currently facing our societies and planet has led to the term ‘poly-crisis’ being used to describe the current era (Henig and Knight 2023). Both the World Economic Forum (WEF 2023) and climate researchers (Homer-Dixon *et al.* 2022) have identified the existence of systemic risks associated with these long-term challenges. The most prominent of these are the crises of liberal democracy and climate and environmental emergencies. This special issue is concerned with the numerous interconnections between these developments and the way right wing populist and far right movements are shaped by and feed on the climate crisis. In Europe, there has been a discernible shift towards authoritarianism, an increase in right-wing populism and the growth of illiberal democracies. Concurrently, there has been an increase in distrust of the political system and public institutions (Dijkstra *et al.* 2019). Many such actors proactively seek to exploit societal discontent to erode the foundations of liberal democracy. They argue that ‘political elites’ are unresponsive to the concerns of citizens, particularly on matters such as migration and economic hardship, or that they are

exceeding their authority in their response, as evidenced by strict measures introduced in response to the pandemic and climate policies. These positions have been articulated by a diverse array of political movements but are now gaining traction in the political programs of (right wing) populist parties and far right movements that have gained power and are leading governments in some European states.

European research on post-war environmental movements is, among others, related to the prominent 'new social movements' theory (Offe 1985), and later to the cognitive (Eyerman and Jamison 1991; Cox 2014), as well as opportunity structures, approaches, originally dominant in North American academia (della Porta and Rucht 2002). These approaches are almost exclusively oriented towards the study of progressive social movements on the environmental issue. This wave of environmental movements – re-labelled as 'climate justice movements' (Martiskainen 2020) or, more rarely, 'environmental defenders' (Scheidel *et al.* 2020) – effectively re-use repertoires and organizational forms that emerged earlier but sublimate them into new patterns (Jamison 2010). They stand out, among others, for their internet-assisted network and global arena of actions (Temper *et al.* 2020) as the contribution of Caiani and Pennucci in this special issue will show, as well as their science-based rationale (Massarella *et al.* 2021). These movements often draw support from the youngest and under-aged demographics (Wallis and Loy 2021; Biswas and Mattheis 2022) and employ consistently non-violent repertoires (Scheidel *et al.* 2020). They offer novel ways of political mobilization, such as engaging underage individuals in activism and youth climate panels, experimenting with citizens' assemblies, and engaging art to both mobilize, transgress boundaries and imagine alternate futures, to name a few. They also attempt to transform social and cultural norms, e.g. when they challenge the obsession of capitalist performance principle through specific 'regeneration cultures' or engaging the transgenerational justice concept and exceeding the temporalities to future generations. But what about the reactionary nativist far right? These above mentioned issues are still under-researched for what concern this area of the political contention.

Studies from various research fields, from political science to political sociology have addressed the development of the 'new' interest of right wing actors for environmental issues. As recently pointed out, however, existing research has overwhelmingly focused on the 'denialist' frame adopted by these actors to develop their discourse and policy positions on the matter, with discourse and textual analysis as the primary methods

used to inform empirical social research on the matter. In addition, studies focusing on conspiracies (Caiani *et al.* 2026) and relational elements and repertoires of far right actors and environmental issues are almost absent (Caiani and Pennucci 2026) or research have been focused solely on single case studies rather than comparative studies. Interestingly, building upon the literature on movement framing, scholars have shown how multi-level discursive opportunities can influence movement dynamics and local framing by analyzing local contention in relation to universal and EU-level themes (Ayoub and Chetaille 2020). In this SI we argue that this would be profitable also for the topic far right and environmentalism and climate change.

Overall, as we will demonstrate in this special issue, if we want to understand the growing relevance of the repositioning of the far right towards environmental issues, a social movement approach seems particularly fruitful. This will allow us to account for coalition-building dynamics, cooperation and conflict and to grasp the ideological mosaic of diverging claims and identities (Maciejewska 2024; Zuk *et al.* 2024; Mihai *et al.* 2024; Mannoni 2025; Figulova *et al.* 2024, Celik 2024) in various countries.

3. CONTENT

The articles that compose this special issue consider several aspects of far-right actors relationship with environmental and climate change. They do so by combining contributions exploring empirical manifestations of this phenomenon in several European countries, and beyond. We will also go beyond the classical division between social movements and political parties to capture actors both outside and between these concepts.

More specifically, our special issue aims to appraise the 'degree' and 'varieties' of Far Right and Environmental politics within various political, cultural and economic contexts across all Europe and beyond. This also includes reflections on the momentum for European democracies after the European Elections, which brought about (and revitalized) issues of FR on the one hand and Environment on the other hand.

The special issue hosts seven articles each of them contributing to its goal from different perspectives. The first two articles analyze the articulation of the far right with external political ways of articulating complex ideologies such as populist attitudes (Mancosu *et al.* 2026) and conspiracy theories (Winter 2026). The subsequent four articles look at the far right in its relationship with the environment form a social movement

perspective (Benoist 2026), a social media data driven approach (Hilmar 2026; Caiani and Pennucci 2026) and an ideological perspective (Guerra 2026). The last article looks at the articulation of the far right and misogyny in explaining the emergency of far right environmental issues (Coufal 2026). The contributions of Mancosu *et al.* and Winter investigates the articulation of populism and conspiracy theories respectively with the right-wing ideology in order to understand the determinants of people's attitudes towards the environmental issue.

Specifically, Mancosu, Biancalana, Landini and Bertero unpack the role of ideology in climate related behaviors and beliefs. They pose the research question of whether the relationship between populist attitudes in human induced climate change is dependent on people's political ideology. They tackle this question through an original survey with 15000 respondents in six countries after the 2024 European Elections. While populist attitudes are linked to skepticism towards the human nature of climate change across the political spectrum, right wing ideology remains a strong predictor of climate skepticism with substantial national variations.

Kevin Winter advances the claim that conspiracy beliefs are a stronger predictor than political ideology to climate inaction. Conspiracy beliefs are in his view strong determinants of behavior and attitudes towards the environment. His article calls for a better engagement of the literature on environmentalism and climate change with conspiracy theories.

Benoist, Hilmar, Caiani and Pennucci, and Guerra zoom in the far right by looking at it through several perspectives in order to highlight its evolving relationship with the environmental issue. Benoist looks at extra parliamentary far right movements, Hilmar employs computational methods on X data for the AfD case similarly to Caiani and Pennucci, who employ quantitative text analysis on social media data to uncover the shifting narrative of social movements and political parties on the far right spectrum towards the environment, and Guerra unpacks the concept of eco fascism as a specific way of looking at the far right evolving relationship with the environment.

In particular, Benoist's article looks at the far-right side of the political spectrum by analyzing the relationship between French extra parliamentary far right activists and climate change. She argues that far right relationships with the environment must go beyond the traditional denialist, non-denialist distinction and she focuses on the role of environmentalism in the articulation of the overall political activism of the far right that embeds the discourse on the environment in a broader anthropocentric crisis narrative.

Hilmar employs a computational approach to look at X data produced by the AfD between 2009 and 2023. The computational analysis on X data shows that the AfD employs the framing of environmental issues through the lens of victimhood. Climate policies are framed as harmful for citizens and pro climate activists are seen as morally corrupted. In this way they are shifting their strategy towards the environment by looking at the protection of the middle-class people harmed by the ecological transition that is economically dangerous and morally corrupted.

Against the same lines, Caiani and Pennucci's article focuses on the changing relationship between the far right and the environment, beyond skepticism, by looking at social media data for key political actors in seven European countries, employing computational text analysis by looking at common frames they use to talk about the environment. By looking at common narratives towards the environment, their contribution seeks to look for potential transnational patterns of diffusion of the far right ecologism beyond traditional skepticism.

Building on this debate on the specific use of environmentalism by the far right, Guerra's article makes a vital and innovative contribution by challenging the conceptual rigidities that often constrain current scholarship on far-right ecology. The author forcefully demonstrates the analytical utility of framing "ecofascism" as an autonomous, syncretic ideological formation, distinct from the broader and more diffuse category of Far-Right Ecologism (FRE). By mapping extra-parliamentary movements in Northern Italy and specifically the National Anarchists, ANAI, and NR-NA, this study shatters the conventional academic assumption that aligns neo-fascist environmentalism with hyper-nationalist statism. Instead, Guerra uncovers a sophisticated ideological architecture where anti-statism, Alain de Benoist's ethnopluralism, and direct democracy converge with a radical anti-capitalism rooted in the syndicalist legacy of the Italian Social Republic. All these elements are structurally bound by a foundational, organicist cult of nature that acts as the supreme normative standard for human society. Ultimately, this piece contributes to the literature by illustrating how ecological concern can serve as a catalyst for "Red-Brown" political hybridization, revealing a fluid front of dissent against the liberal-democratic world order.

Still looking at the far right in its relationship with environmentalism, Coufal inserts an innovative viewpoint by analyzing the threefold relationship between far right, environmentalism and misogyny that is severely under looked in the literature on the far right. Coufal's article fills this gap by analyzing Incel blogs, representing a most

likely case study to look at the way of looking at the environment in far right and misogynist online forums.

4. CONCLUSION

Overall, this special issue aims at contributing to the emerging literature on the relationship between the far right and environmental issues. First, it proposes an innovative approach looking at a various array of actors, from social movements to political parties and their relationship, by employing a social movement perspective that builds on the literature on movement parties to look at the widest possible number of political actors. Second, it tries to understand whether the evolving relationship between the far right and the environment beyond the usual frame of denialism is embedded in a broader ideological restructuring of the far right or it is rather the result of a strategic positioning to respond to contingent political opportunities. In terms of methodology, the special issue displays pluralism by hosting qualitative quantitative and computational perspectives spanning from data collected through interviews, survey and social media data.

By looking at the articulation of populism and conspiracy theories with the far-right relationship with the environment, focusing on the evolving relationship of far right actors with the environmental issues, and developing its articulation with misogyny, the various articles in the special issues try to advance our comprehension of these complex issues from different but complementary perspectives. In so doing, this special issue contributes to the advancement of the knowledge of the new positioning of the far right on the environment through a multi method and multidisciplinary approach taking together several actors and different political arenas by providing a solid base for further studies on this innovative and urgent matter in contemporary political and social sciences.

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