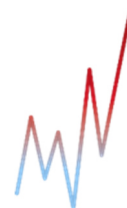




Clash of Perspectives: Analyzing the Climate Debates in CEE+ Region before the 2024 Election Campaigns

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List of abbreviations

AMO – Association for International Affairs
CBAM – Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism
CEE – Central and Eastern Europe
ECFR – European Council on Foreign Relations
ECR – The European Conservatives and Reformists Group
EPP – The European People's Party Group
EGD – European Green Deal
EU – European Union
GEG – German Building Energy Code
GHG – Greenhouse gas emissions
JDI – Jacques Delors Institute
MEP – Member of the European Parliament
MS – EU member state
NATO – North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NRRP – National Recovery and Resilience Plan
PS – Progressive Slovakia Party
RED – Renewable Energy directive
RES – renewable energy sources
SaS – Freedom and Solidarity Party
SFPA – Slovak Foreign Policy Association
SNS – Slovak National Party
V₄ – The Visegrad Group



Summary

- The European Parliament elections in 2024 will be significantly influenced by the current green transition measures and the implementation of the European Green Deal in general. However, the demand of the voters will differ from the previous elections, when the public demanded swift pro-climate actions.

- Although citizens already acknowledge the dangers connected with climate change (including even the citizens in traditionally euroskeptic V4 countries), **support decreases when debating specific measures with a direct economic impact on individuals and companies**. In a growing number of the EU countries, economic costs overshadow environmental benefits in public debates and climate policies are seen as expensive and socially unfair, especially in rural areas.

- To drive a just transition, beneficial to all segments of society, **the emphasis should be on ensuring a socially fair transition, connected positive narratives, and their effective communication**. For public acceptance of the necessary measures and for the just and inclusive setting of the just transition measures, the national governments need to engage in clear and coordinated communication with the general public, as well as with businesses. A proactive approach and fostering understanding are crucial.

- Energy independence and diversification of energy sources are paramount in shaping the positions across the analyzed EU countries and national security concerns have the potential to drive a swift shift towards renewable energy sources.

- Common concerns include **the impact of the EGD on the industrial competitiveness of the EU Member States**, especially in sensitive industries, such as automotive. Industry, which is often more ambitious than the national governments, can also play a key role in driving the green transition across the analyzed countries.

- The key aspect of public acceptance of the EGD measures and for the European green ambitions in general will be a focus on just transition measures, and the adequate setting of programs for the most vulnerable citizens, businesses and regions.



Recommendations

- The Governments of the EU Member States need to implement **a concrete, relatable and non-academic communication strategy** to address the perceived clash between economic interests and environmental objectives, ensuring that the public is well-informed about the rationale behind green transition measures. Such a strategy needs to identify and emphasize **positive narratives connected with the European Green Deal** that resonate in respective countries. They need to directly relate to citizens' daily experiences and concerns.

- Politicians should recognize the **role of business** in driving the green transition. Business figures can enhance communication about climate targets and opportunities presented by the European Green Deal and address various segments of society.

- For all actors, it is necessary to emphasize the importance of **just transition measures** to make the European Green Deal fair and acceptable to citizens. The governments **should exchange best practices** and build coalitions focusing on the social and economic considerations of the green transition.

- Sharing best practices and building coalitions is necessary also to **align efforts in decarbonization and energy transition**. The heavily industrialized states like Czechia could leverage their expertise to influence the EU-wide discussions on transitioning to a low-carbon economy.



Introduction

Rising temperatures, droughts, school strikes for climate across the EU and the emergence of influential figures like Greta Thunberg dominated the political agenda leading up to the 2019 European Parliament elections. Fast forward five years, and the European Green Deal (EGD) has transformed from an ambitious vision into a reality, with EU member states beginning the implementation of measures aimed at achieving EU-wide climate neutrality by 2050. However, the public debate across the EU surrounding climate policies is undergoing significant shifts, as member states struggle with a number of intertwined challenges at the same time - for instance the consequences of escalating energy prices, the need to provide energy security, and at the same time the requirement to quickly implement the EGD measures. This shift in the public debate has particularly manifested across EU member states in concerns about the economic costs of climate action, which have emerged as a common challenge transcending national borders.

This set of analyses examines the particular climate policies and the state of public debates focused on the EGD before the 2024 European Parliament elections in selected EU countries: Czechia, Slovakia, Poland, Bulgaria, Germany, Spain and France. Although the original intention was to explore the narratives and potential for coalition-building of the Central and Eastern European Countries, preliminary analysis revealed that in many cases the public debates are similar to those in other countries in the EU, and that coalitions are increasingly built upon cross-cutting topics, rather than according to the regions. Consequently, the focus was broadened to look beyond the horizon of this region and to compare the CEE perspective with the experiences and situations of other countries.

This text therefore brings together a set of analyses of selected elements of climate policies in those countries. We focus on the state of public debates, examine how governments respond to these debates and explore the main media coverage of the issues. The goal is to understand the different perspectives and arguments shaping the narrative, and to see how official reactions and media portrayal contribute to the overall debate on these issues. The term "narrative" refers to the overall story that captures the public discussions on a specific topic.

The first part of this paper introduces individual national chapters authored by experts from the respective countries, members of the ECF European Green Deal Think Tanks Network. They delve into the details of climate-related narratives, responses to the climate crisis, energy transition, and industrial challenges.

The subsequent chapters are dedicated to a comparative analysis of key narratives, with a specific emphasis on ensuring a socially fair transition and exploring argumentation related to energy transition and industrialization. The clash between economic interests and environmental objectives remains a central theme across the EU, posing a significant barrier to public acceptance of the green transition. The final part suggests recommendations to these states and draws out the opportunities for positive change. Effective communication, just transition measures, and collaboration among EU member states (among other means by exchanging best practices) are essential to navigating the path toward a socially fair future that will also be climate-responsible. The examination of key factors influencing the political landscape emphasizes the need for a socially fair transition and the imperative for effective communication to bridge the gap between policy goals and public perception.



1 Overview of the main climate-relevant narratives in the CEE+ region

1.1 Czechia

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After the successful 2022 Czech EU Council Presidency, praised for completing several Fit for 55 initiatives, there were expectations that Czechia would shift its traditional climate-skeptical stance. However, months later, Czechia, with Germany, rejected the Council's agreement on phasing out internal combustion vehicles by 2035, opting for carbon-neutral synthetic fuels and undermining its own negotiated compromise reached at Member States level during the Czech Presidency. Domestic politics, along with Czechia's status as one of the most industrialized EU countries, significantly impact the government's climate approach and its communication with the Czech population - similarly to the situation in other EU Member States.

1.1.1 PUBLIC PERCEPTION OF THE EUROPEAN GREEN DEAL

Several studies¹ reveal that the debate surrounding the European Green Deal in Czechia has been driven by domestic political interests and economic anxieties, and these predominantly used by right-wing, national-conservative opposition politicians. They **use the EGD as an argument to criticize the current government, characterizing it as an economic burden that will deeply impact Czech industry and increase living costs**. Not only opposition politicians, but even some members of the conservative ruling party portray the EGD as an ideologically motivated project imposed by European elites, which is at odds with "physics and economics".

The national government has struggled to effectively counter these allegations and to explain the measures and solutions needed for the green transition of Czech industry. **The Czech public debate is lacking in very basic data about climate change and its consequences, which are not raised and explained by politicians** (or many other visible and highly respected personalities). As a result, most of the public are confused and don't understand the necessary measures - for example, sociological data² show that Czech society worries about issues such as drought (80%) and air pollution (65%), while the "impacts of climate change on yourself" are worried significantly less (41%). Furthermore, the connection between phenomena directly connected to climate change is not always apparent, and it is not always apparent why decarbonisation measures would be needed.

1.1.2 PUBLIC DEBATE BEFORE THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT ELECTIONS

¹ For instance: 1) Kolářová, Marta. Výzkumná zpráva média, January 9, 2023, Sociologický ústav AV ČR.

https://www.soc.cas.cz/sites/default/files/publikace/vyzkumna_zprava_media_green_deal_kolarova.pdf. 2) Mindeková, Tatiana. Monitoring of the EU's Green Policies: Perceptions and Narratives in the Czech and Slovak Information Space, February 2, 2023, Europeum.

<https://www.europeum.org/articles/detail/5424/report-monitoring-of-the-eu-s-green-policies-perceptions-and-narratives-in-the-czech-and-slovak-information-space>. 3) Šefčíková, Kristína. The European Green Deal and the Energy Crisis in the Czech Information Space, January 24, 2023, Prague Security Studies Institute. <https://www.pssi.cz/publications/88-the-european-green-deal-and-the-energy-crisis-in-the-czech-information-space>.

² STEM Institute for Empirical Research, Institute 2050. Czech (non)transformation 2022, September 20, 2022, 50. <https://www.stem.cz/en/ceska-netransformace-2022/>.



As the European Parliament elections approach, the European Green Deal is anticipated to be a significant focal point. Given the tendency in the Czech public debate to use the Green Deal as a prominent critique against the European Union in general, it is likely that current populist and far-right opposition parties will persist in depicting the EU's climate ambitions as "green suicide" or "madness." Specifically, they will likely keep emphasizing the energy crisis and current inflation as the primary reasons for opposing the EU's climate goals.

Moreover, criticism of the EGD goals also comes from the governing SPOLU coalition. Although the conservative parties within this coalition are represented in different European Parliament factions (ECR, EPP) and hold opposing views on EU climate politics, they have formed a joint coalition for the 2024 elections. While this list includes MEP Luděk Niedermayer, one of the most pro-climate voices in the Czech public debate, the leader is MEP Alexandr Vondra, a prominent critic of the current EGD agenda. Vondra regularly criticizes the "green ideology" of the current European Parliament, describing it as "too green," "too leftist," or "too regulating."

The question remains of how this coalition will communicate on climate issues and whether this setup, coupled with heavy criticism from the opposition, will facilitate a constructive pre-election debate about EU climate ambitions and the role Czechia could play in them.

The debate is expected to be heavily dominated by economic questions and concerns about the impacts of the EGD on Czech industry. The automotive industry holds a particular place in the minds and hearts of Czech citizens, and any topic related to it is met with heightened sensitivity. While most people may not have extensive knowledge of the EGD itself, the idea of a "ban on internal combustion engine cars" has gained widespread awareness. Critics argue that EGD measures will erode the industry's competitiveness, making it less able to compete with American and Chinese counterparts. Similarly, nuclear energy enjoys strong support across the political spectrum, a sentiment shared by the Czech general public.

In the upcoming pre-election debates, all political candidates will have to address questions related to European climate ambitions and the future of the EGD. However, the primary focus is likely to remain on the future of Czech industry and its competitiveness, including topics such as electromobility and energy prices. Emphasizing energy security and reducing dependency on fossil fuels from Russia can play a positive role. It is also essential to formulate a just green transition that compensates for the economic costs for vulnerable citizens - and communicate these measures to them in an understandable way.

1.2 Slovakia

Radka Vicenová, Veronika Oravcová, Slovak Foreign Policy Association

The political landscape in Slovakia has witnessed significant shifts in the approach to climate change and environmental issues. The prevalence of climate change denialism and nationalist perspectives in political discourse has been notable, with certain parties using these topics to advance their agendas. Additionally, framing of energy and environmental issues with a socio-economic focus has gained prominence, particularly due to events like the Russian military invasion of Ukraine and the impact of COVID-19. One noteworthy development is the Progressive Slovakia (PS) party's proactive stance on climate and environmental matters. They have placed these issues at the forefront of their political agenda, marking the first time a mainstream political party in the Slovak parliament has done so.

1.2.1 CLIMATE CHANGE DENIALISM, RELATED HOAXES, AND FAKE NEWS HAVE BECOME INTEGRAL PARTS OF THE POLITICAL DISCOURSE IN SLOVAKIA



While climate change denialism and related hoaxes have existed on the fringes of public discussion for a long time, it is only recently that such narratives have entered mainstream political discourse.³ These narratives have primarily been fueled by far-right politicians, such as the Republika (Republic) movement, and nationalist politicians from the Slovak National Party (SNS), who have exploited the power and influence of various disinformation media outlets that gained popularity, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, MPs from the Republic movement and the Kotlebovci-LSNS (Kotlebovci - People's Party Our Slovakia) party have consistently questioned and downplayed the demands of environmental activists, promoting the narrative of "ecoterrorists." This culminated in the election of prominent figures from the Slovak disinformation scene to parliament in September 2023, and subsequently, their involvement in the new government following the 2023 parliamentary election. The first SNS candidate for Minister of the Environment has even repeatedly denied the scientific consensus on global warming and though his nomination was vetoed by President Zuzana Čaputová, his replacement Tomáš Taraba has also questioned the need for environmental protection.⁴

The framing of energy and environmental issues by the nationalists runs contrary to the fact that efforts to achieve climate neutrality have a globalist nature, necessitating global solutions. In Slovakia, there is an ongoing tendency to view these topics through a nationalist lens.

This phenomenon has been observed for several years, particularly with far-right political parties like Republic and Kotlebovci-LSNS, which have increasingly incorporated environmental and ecological themes into their agendas while disproportionately emphasizing the nationalist perspective. For example, their discussions often center on issues related to woodland and forest management. However, environmental protection is not their primary concern; they employ it as a means to criticize their perceived "enemies" – foreign companies and the Roma minority in this instance.⁵

These narratives have become even more pronounced since the Russian military invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, particularly in the context of its economic consequences, energy independence in Slovakia, diversification of energy sources, and energy security. Simultaneously, such discussions have become closely intertwined with the anti-EU and anti-NATO positions held by a segment of the political spectrum. They criticize decisions made at the European level as being anti-Slovak or as endangering Slovak interests, often promoting the narrative that Slovak interests and those of the EU or other EU countries are in conflict. **For instance, they complain that Slovakia lost its energy self-sufficiency, which, of course, has never been the case, as Slovakia has always been heavily dependent on third countries for energy imports.** Furthermore, this point is frequently used to highlight decisions made by the previous government regarding the privatization of energy companies, further strengthening the nationalist framing of energy and economic issues by stoking fears of foreign interests controlling the Slovak economy.

The framing of energy issues by the populists, with a socio-economic focus has become more pronounced, particularly following the Russian military

³ Radka Vicenová, Veronika Oravcová, Matúš Mišík, "What Do Far-Right Parties Talk About When They Talk About Green Issues? LSNS in 2016–2020 Parliamentary Debates," *Sociológia - Slovak Sociological Review*, vol. 54, no. 6 (2022): 569–594. 0049-1225.

⁴ Štefan Chovanec, "Rudolf Huliak ministrom nebude, prezidentka ho odmietla vymenovať," *HN Online*, October 19, 2023, <https://hnonline.sk/slovensko/96110717-rudolf-huliak-ministrom-nebude-prezidentka-ho-odmietla-vymenovat>.

⁵ Radka Vicenová, Veronika Oravcová, Matúš Mišík, "What Do Far-Right Parties Talk About When They Talk About Green Issues? LSNS in 2016–2020 Parliamentary Debates," *Sociológia - Slovak Sociological Review*, vol. 54, no.6 (2022): 569–594. 0049-1225.



invasion of Ukraine and, to some extent, due to the impact of COVID-19. Highlighting the socio-economic consequences, especially for low-income households, and the impact on energy prices,⁶ has become a distinct element in parliamentary discussions. This trend was evident during the electoral campaign for the 2023 Parliamentary elections.

The winner of the September 2023 elections, the Smer-SD (Direction-Social Democracy) party, had consistently called on the government during the previous election period to address the issue of high energy prices by providing higher energy compensation. They also advocated for the preservation of energy sources (natural gas and oil) in the context of negotiations with Russia during the sanctions. Alongside the political party Hlas (Voice), they were vocal supporters of energy price compensation, and this was a part of their election campaign.⁷

Regarding specific EU policies, such as those within the Fit for 55 package of the RePower EU initiative, political parties tended to avoid discussing these loudly in favor of focusing on national issues. One notable exception was the political party SaS (Freedom and Solidarity), which strongly opposed the ban on internal combustion engines from 2035 and made this a central topic of its election campaign, arguing that the market should decide, not the EU.⁸ This is aligned with the party's long-standing EU-skeptical position, primarily centered on its criticism of EU bureaucracy.

1.3 Poland

Szymon Kardas, European Council on Foreign Relations

The results of Poland's parliamentary elections, held on October 15, 2023, could have a significant impact not only on changing the narrative, but also on real change in Poland's energy and climate policy. The elections were won by the Law and Justice party, which had been in power since 2015, but the new ruling coalition (formed by groups hitherto in opposition - Civic Coalition, Third Way and Left) already in the election campaign declared that it would pursue a more ambitious energy and climate policy than those then in power.

1.3.1 WINDS OF CHANGE

The Civic Coalition has announced strong measures to decarbonize the electricity sector, including increasing the share of renewable energy sources (RES) of electricity production to 68% by 2030 and reducing CO₂ emissions in the electricity sector by 75% by 2030 compared to 2022. The Civic Coalition has also announced the expansion of electricity grids, particularly distribution grids, and the separation of distribution companies from the large power companies responsible for energy production in Poland.⁹ Support for development of renewables (RES) has also been

⁶ Oldřich Sklenář et al. V4 Fiscal Response to the Energy Crisis, V4ETTP Working paper. Praha: Asociace pro mezinárodní otázky (AMO), 2023. https://rekk.hu/downloads/academic_publications/V4%20Fiscal%20Response%20to%20the%20Energy%20Crisis_2023.pdf.

⁷ Tomáš Grečko, "Vo vládnom programe chýba Pellegriniho sľub o lacnejších energiách. Potrebujú naň viac ako miliardu eur a majú len pár týždňov," Denník N, November 14, 2023, <https://e.dennikn.sk/3678592/vo-vladnom-programe-chyba-pellegriniho-slub-o-lacnejsich-energiach-potrebuju-nan-viac-ako-miliardu-eur-a-maju-len-par-tyzdnov/>.

⁸ "SaS spustila petíciu proti zákazu predaja áut so spaľovacími motormi, krok podľa nej poškodí hospodárstvo," Sme, March 28, 2023, <https://www.sme.sk/minuta/23151686/sas-spustila-peticiau-proti-zakazu-predaja-aut-so-spalovacimi-motormi-krok-podla-nej-poskodi-hospodarstvo>.

⁹ Bartłomiej Sawicki, "Koalicja Obywatelska proponuje rewolucję na sieciach dystrybucyjnych," Rzeczpospolita, September 21, 2023, <https://energia.rp.pl/transformacja-energetyczna/art39146001-koalicja-obywatelska-proponuje-rewolucje-na-sieciach-dystrybucyjnych>.



declared by the Third Way (they used the slogan "a power plant in every home" in the election campaign¹⁰) and the Left. The parties, which formed the new government, also declared support for the continuation of the Polish nuclear program (Polish plans include construction of both large nuclear units and small modular reactors). At the same time, it has been stressed that the decisions made by the previous (Law and Justice) government require an audit¹¹.

The new government has also declared its willingness to pursue **a more active policy within the European Union**.¹² It is very likely that the new government may lead to the unblocking of EU funds earmarked for Poland under the Recovery and Resilience Facility (currently they are blocked due to rule of law issues in Poland).¹³ This is because the new authorities have declared their readiness to fulfill so-called milestones, concerning not only the rule of law, but also in the sphere of energy and climate policy. One milestone, among others, is the need to further liberalize law regulating the possibility of onshore wind projects.¹⁴ It is also positive that the expert base of the current ruling parties is advocating the need to present a comprehensive strategy for Poland's energy transition, a coherent way for the government to implement it, and the establishment of a semi-independent institution to provide a form of permanent expert support for the implementation of the energy transition strategy. A factor in favor of pursuing a more ambitious energy and climate policy is the generally positive attitude of Polish society toward the energy transition.¹⁵

The new government sworn in on 13 December, while opting to accelerate the energy transition, will face serious challenges. **One of the most serious immediate challenges is electricity prices.** They are currently at relatively low levels due to the authorities' decision to freeze energy prices. The possible abandonment of the shielding measures by the authorities might result in increases of several tens of percent¹⁶ which would presumably spark popular discontent. The main reason is the strong dependence of Poland's energy mix on coal. Although the share of coal in the national electricity mix is declining (in 2022 it was at 71%, in 2023 it fell to 63%), it is still high compared to the EU average, affecting not only the high carbon intensity of the Polish economy, but also energy prices given the high costs for CO₂ emission allowances.¹⁷ Hence, the previous Polish government was fighting for an extension of the capacity market mechanism for coal-fired power plants until 2028 as part of the negotiations on electricity market design. This would enable an

¹⁰ "Zielona Polska, to Polska 2050," Polska 2050, May 31, 2023, <https://polska2050.pl/zielona-polska-to-polska-2050>.

¹¹ "Nowa koalicja chce audytu projektu jądrowego. Skąd weźmiemy pieniądze na atom?," Globenergia.pl, October 23, 2023, <https://globenergia.pl/nowa-koalicja-chce-audytu-projektu-jadrowego-skad-wezmiemy-pieniadze-na-atom/>.

¹² "Umowa koalicyjna", <https://platforma.org/upload/document/203/attachments/433/UmowaKoalicyjna.pdf>.

¹³ Oskar Nawalany, "Tusk obiecuje odzyskać dla Polski fundusze unijne. Spotyka się z europejskimi przywódcami," Puls biznesu, October 25, 2023, <https://www.pb.pl/tusk-obiecuje-odzyskac-dla-polski-fundusze-unijne-spotyka-sie-z-europejskimi-przywocami-1199044>.

¹⁴ Barbara Oksinska, "To będą trudne decyzje. Pięć priorytetów nowego rządu dla energetyki," Business Insider, October 21, 2023, <https://businessinsider.com.pl/gospodarka/decyzje-w-sprawie-wegla-i-atomu-oto-piec-priorytetow-nowego-rzadu-dla-energetyki/e498d48>.

¹⁵ "Polki i Polacy wobec transformacji energetycznej," Swiat OZE, August 22, 2023, <https://swiatoze.pl/polki-i-polacy-wobec-transformacji-energetycznej/>.

¹⁶ "Ceny wzrosną nawet o 70 proc. Nadchodzi potężne uderzenie w portfele Polaków," Money.pl, October 30, 2023, <https://www.money.pl/gospodarka/ceny-wzrosna-nawet-o-70-proc-nadchodzi-potezne-uderzenie-w-portfele-polakow-6957762826426912a.html>.

¹⁷ Szymon Kardaś. From coal to consensus: Poland's energy transition and its European future. Policy Brief. Warsaw: European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR), 2023. <https://ecfr.eu/publication/from-coal-to-consensus-polands-energy-transition-and-its-european-future/>.



extension of the mechanism for legally subsidizing Polish coal-fired power plants.¹⁸ The long-term challenge will be to establish a more ambitious path away from coal, which will be socially acceptable, and especially, accepted by mining unions. According to the declarations presented by the previous (Law and Justice) government as recently as 2021, the date for the final departure from coal will be 2049.¹⁹ A more ambitious decarbonization strategy entails the need to carry it out in a way that fairly distributes the social costs of the changes introduced. It will also be a challenge for the new government to estimate the total outlay for carrying out the energy transition, particularly in terms of implementing an ambitious nuclear program. The previous Polish government, in the electricity market design negotiations, was backing calls for the recognition of nuclear power as clean energy and the use of contracts for difference in the implementation of nuclear projects.

Considering the European Union's efforts to increase its technological and industrial potential for achieving its climate goals (RES, improving energy efficiency) and accelerating the energy transition, the V₄ countries, including Poland, should explore opportunities for closer cooperation to implement joint projects on strengthening their own potential in this sphere.

1.3.2 POLISH SOCIETY BELIEVES IN A FASTER ENERGY TRANSITION

What is conducive to efforts towards implementing the energy and climate agenda in Poland is **the positive attitude of Polish society towards energy transition**. Only one-third of Poles believe the pace of the energy transition is satisfactory. Two-thirds believe that the process should be faster, and as many as 44 per cent feel that energy transition is important for keeping prices down and maintaining stability of supply. The Polish public also supports the removal of dependencies on foreign raw materials as quickly as possible and the construction of new wind projects.²⁰ Support for nuclear power is also high in Polish society (90 per cent).²¹

At the same time, **the issue of energy prices** will certainly be crucial in the next election campaigns in Poland (ahead of the local elections in April, the European Parliament elections in June 2024 and presidential elections in 2025). The challenge for political forces supporting the acceleration of energy transition will be to convince the public that the EU's energy and climate policy is aimed at a fair energy transition that will translate positively for citizens in the long term. The Polish public also expects that the main cost of implementing the energy transition will be borne by the European Union. A survey published in August 2023 showed that as many as 68% of Poles felt that the EU should bear the main financial burden of implementing the energy transition agenda.²²

¹⁸ Bartłomiej Sawicki, "Wydłużenie rynku mocy da czas na przebudowę polskiej energetyki," Rzeczpospolita, July 24, 2023, <https://energia.rp.pl/elektroenergetyka/art38772711-wydłużenie-ryнку-mocy-da-czas-na-przebudowe-polskiej-energetyki>.

¹⁹ Katarzyna Zamorowska, "Odejdźcie od węgla w Polsce do 2049 r. potwierdzone – czyli świat sobie, a Polska sobie," Teraz Środowisko, May 23, 2023, <https://www.teraz-srodowisko.pl/aktualnosci/odejście-od-węgla-umowa-transformacja-2049-10224.html>.

²⁰ "Polacy popierają transformację energetyczną kraju. "Już nie ma odwrotu"," Strefa Biznesu, June 5, 2023, <https://strefabiznesu.pl/polacy-popieraja-transformacje-energetyczna-kraju-juz-nie-ma-odwrotu/ar/c3-17600329>.

²¹ MKiŚ: Prawie 90% poparcie dla energetyki jądrowej w Polsce, Nuclear.pl, December 23, <https://nuclear.pl/wiadomosci,news,23122301,o,o.html>

²² Grzegorz Osiecki, "Polacy chcą, by za transformację energetyczną zapłaciła nam UE," Forsal.pl, August 28, 2023, <https://forsal.pl/swiat/unia-europejska/artykuly/9285251.polacy-chca-by-za-transformacje-energetyczna-zaplacila-nam-ue-sondaz.html>.



1.4 Bulgaria

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The urgency of climate action in Bulgaria has been overshadowed by Russia's war in Ukraine, as well as ongoing health, economic, and energy crises. Climate concerns have been conspicuously absent from public debate and the agenda of Bulgarian politicians. However, recent surveys conducted by the ECFR²³ reveal that a majority of Bulgarians would support bold initiatives for a green and just transition, despite the lack of engagement from the country's political elite. On the other hand, the Bulgarian business sector has put increasing investments²⁴ into renewable energy but citizens' engagement and participation in the energy transformation remain unsatisfactory - mainly due to the lack of awareness, administrative burdens and political turmoil that lasted for the last two years (2021-2023).

1.4.1 PUBLIC DEBATE AND NARRATIVES

Bulgarians pay attention to climate issues.²⁵ However, confronted with socio-economic difficulties, support for nature conservation and the fight against climate change often depend on additional incentives, such as public funding and subsidies through financial schemes.

Almost half of the respondents in the ECFR's recent survey²⁶ said that Russian gas is an important source of energy for our country, and we should continue to rely on it. A minority holds the opinion that the use of natural gas always leads to dependence on third countries and Bulgaria should stop it in principle. It seems that for Bulgarian citizens the link between dependence on Russian energy raw materials, the energy crisis in Europe and its impact on inflation as a result of increased natural gas and electricity prices is not clear.

More than half of the respondents believe that EU green policies will impact the Bulgarian economy by increasing prices of products and services, while a quarter strongly doubt that they will contribute to new jobs. **This highlights the pressing need for politicians to step up information campaigns about the benefits of green transition**, a feature that is currently lacking in Bulgaria. Lack of leadership on the topic risks it being hijacked by toxic narratives, which often serve Russia (such as "Russian natural gas is the cheapest"). It is indeed the politicians' responsibility to address people's concerns through an explanatory campaign about the financial instruments of the green transition.

On the other hand, **Bulgarian industry holds the potential to drive the green transition in the country**. Bulgaria's economy is primarily driven by energy-intensive activities, making it vulnerable to shocks in global supply chains. Consequently, there is a pressing need to act swiftly and seek innovative technologies to enhance competitiveness and align with European developments. In

²³ Alpha Research for the European Council on Foreign Relations Sofia. The Case of Bulgaria: National Representative Survey on Public Attitudes Towards the Green Transition, May 2023.

²⁴ Martin Ivanov, "Decarbonise and democratise: How the European Green Deal could transform high-carbon economies," European Council on Foreign Relations, January 19, 2023, <https://ecfr.eu/article/decarbonise-and-democratise-how-the-european-green-deal-could-transform-high-carbon-economies/>.

²⁵ Maria Trifonova, "Няма дебат за климата, партиите изостават от очакванията на българите," Dnevnik.bg, July 27, 2023, https://www.dnevnik.bg/bulgaria/2023/07/27/4511799_prouchvane_niama_debat_za_klimata_partiite_izostavat/.

²⁶ Ibid.



2022, ECFR Sofia conducted a study²⁷ to assess the readiness of Bulgarian industry to decarbonize and its ability to address energy supply insecurities. A significant portion of businesses remain unfamiliar with the diverse instruments of the European Green Deal. Additionally, they face challenges due to the absence of e-governance, which is meant to support the green transition, as well as delays in implementing essential local measures to activate EGD instruments like the Modernisation Fund.

Indeed, recent years of political upheaval have significantly contributed to the challenges faced. Bulgaria's political landscape experienced fragmentation due to an unprecedented series of five general elections within a mere two years. This turbulent period coincided with post-COVID recovery efforts, urgent responses to Russia's war against Ukraine, and the pressing energy crisis. As a result, two major consequences emerged: firstly, **the green deal was overshadowed by political conflicts, pushing it to the sidelines of public discourse**. Secondly, the green deal became a convenient tool for populist exploitation during election campaigns. These factors disrupted public discussions on energy issues, leaving Bulgarian citizens unable to actively participate in and influence the process. The political turbulence thus hindered citizens' ability to address energy challenges effectively.

The National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRRP) stands as Bulgaria's most influential and strategic tool for advancing the green transition. Approved in April 2022 after undergoing multiple revisions by three successive governments, the NRRP became a focal point of political contention. However, it is not very popular among the population, with 31% saying they have never heard of it, and only 20% expressing support for its priorities²⁸. Meanwhile, the territorial just transition plans ignited a nationwide debate, leading to protests²⁹ by mining industry workers who opposed 2038 as a deadline for the closure of the power plants. This situation highlighted the belated nature of Bulgaria's discourse on phasing out coal. In the country, any robust commitments to curbing pollution and reducing the carbon footprint often face skepticism, being perceived as externally mandated and driven by foreign agendas. Such misunderstandings of environmental protection may escalate in the future due to economic interests within the polluting industries and opposition from circles opposed to the EU objectives and principles.

The present Bulgarian government is pro-European; however, significant challenges lie ahead. Bulgaria has to bridge the gap to the more advanced public debates on green transition in other EU member states and at the EU level overall while strategizing on how to decarbonise Bulgaria's industry which is defined by its high energy intensity. As a relatively small country, Bulgaria has the potential to transition more swiftly and with less pain than larger European economies. Achieving this goal requires increased collaboration between the public, private, and NGO sectors, a stable political environment for credible long-term transition commitments, as well as active engagement with European partners.

²⁷ Martin Ivanov, "Decarbonise and democratise: How the European Green Deal could transform high-carbon economies," European Council on Foreign Relations, January 19, 2023, <https://ecfr.eu/article/decarbonise-and-democratise-how-the-european-green-deal-could-transform-high-carbon-economies/>.

²⁸ Maria Trifonova, "Няма дебат за климата, партиите изостават от очакванията на българите," Dnevnik.bg, July 27, 2023, https://www.dnevnik.bg/bulgaria/2023/07/27/4511799_prouchvane_niama_debat_za_klimata_partiite_izostavat/.

²⁹ Yoan Kolev, "Protest of miners and energy workers in Bulgaria continue," Bulgarian National Radio, February 10, 2023, <https://bnr.bg/en/post/101885601/protests-of-miners-and-energy-workers-in-bulgaria-continue>.



1.5 Germany

Nils Meyer-Ohlendorf, Ecologic Institute

Climate action stands as one of Germany's most reported and discussed policy issues. All parts of society participate in the debate. Depending on the segment of society, dominating narratives vary significantly. Even within one specific segment, narratives can differ considerably. Germany's climate debate has been fairly constructive in the past but has significantly polarized over the last year.

1.5.1 AUTUMN 2023: CLIMATE POLICIES ARE FACING STRONG HEADWINDS

General support for climate action has always been high in Germany. This is still the case, but climate policies faced very strong headwinds in the autumn of 2023. Growing parts of the population view climate policies as overly expensive, disconnected from everyday concerns, overly bureaucratic and socially unfair. **It is perceived as an agenda that meddles with people's lives, doesn't respect personal choices and is about forbidding things.**³⁰ These narratives have always been an important part of Germany's climate debate, but they are gaining strength, possibly to the point that they are becoming the dominating climate narrative.

There are many reasons for this development. Record high energy prices in 2022 are one. **Combined with very high inflation, such energy prices propelled economic costs and cost of living to the center of the political debate.** In this environment, any measure that would or could increase costs was set to face staunch opposition. Bild, Germany's leading tabloid, was influential in framing the debate along the lines of economic hardship ("Heizhammer" or heating hammer) and political identity ("Klimakleber" or "a climate activist who glues him or herself to streets"). Additionally, some government measures aimed at ensuring energy supply in 2022, particularly the extension of the operational lifespan of a few coal power plants, were perceived as contradictory. Constant infighting among coalition partners rendered clear communication on climate policies impossible. In German politics, probably nothing undermines a government and its policies more than internal strife.

Another pivotal factor driving this narrative shift is the controversy surrounding the Building Energy Code (GEG) and heat pumps. The GEG and heat pumps became a defining moment in the debate and a catalyst for many concerns and heightened feelings. **It was evidence for many that climate policies take no account of daily lives in rural areas, fail to recognize real costs, and are devoid of a fundamental understanding of engineering principles.** An obscure expert term until recently, "heat pumps" could become the word of the year. During the last state elections, heat pumps featured in virtually every campaign event – as a big stick to undermine the government. Combined with a nepotism scandal in the responsible Ministry, the GEG and heat pumps became the perfect storm for the opposition to discredit the government and its climate policies.

This shift in narratives does not translate into openly questioning climate targets. Apart from the AfD, there is no significant political force in Germany that questions the climate law and its targets. However, the shift in narratives weakens climate mitigation. There is no appetite to take the measures necessary to meet climate targets. The GEG has been weakened, plans to increase energy efficiency standards for new buildings have been shelved and measures to accelerate road infrastructure projects have been adopted instead. "Yes" to climate targets but "No" to implementing measures is likely to become the country's dominating climate narrative.

³⁰ More in Common, Wie schaut die deutsche Gesellschaft derzeit auf die Klimabewegung? May 2023 <https://www.moreincommon.de/klimabewegung/>.



In this political environment, it is inconceivable that Germany will take the measures needed to meet its climate targets. The following two developments make the adoption of ambitious climate policies even less likely:

- Erosion of Support for the Traffic-Light Coalition, increasing popularity of the opposition Christian Democrats and the far-right Alternative for Germany.
- Climate movement losing support drastically: According to a survey by the NGO “More in Common”,³¹ public support for the climate movement in Germany has effectively halved in the last two years– from 68% in 2021 to 34% summer 2023. Only 25% of the population believe that the climate movement pursues the wellbeing of society, down from 60% in 2021. Only 28% think the climate movement speaks in an ‘understandable language’, down from 65% in 2021. 85% reject the street blockades of the “Last Generation”. 75% say that “Fridays for Future” has hardly any influence on their climate views.³²

1.5.2 TODAY’S HEADWINDS CAN CHANGE BUT STRONG TAILWINDS SEEM UNLIKELY IN THE NEAR FUTURE

Although climate policies were buffeted by the headwinds of 2023, there are several factors that could make the wind change direction, probably not in the coming months but in the midterm:

- A succeeding Energiewende (the energy transformation to a low carbon economy) would alter the narrative: The Energiewende is still an abstract and frightening project for many. This would change if the Energiewende becomes demonstrably effective in reducing energy costs durably, while simultaneously bolstering energy security, competitiveness, and environmental protection.
- Important stakeholders remain genuinely committed to climate action: Many companies made investments necessary to decarbonize their operations. These investments are long-term and rely on a clear political commitment toward climate neutrality. These companies advocate for ambitious climate policies as an integral part of their business models. Trade Unions, churches, and large parts of civil society also support this vision but society in general is lagging.
- Fluctuating and ambiguous public opinion: In April 2023, 26% of respondents considered environmental protection and climate change as their primary concern; 44% wanted to accelerate climate action.³³ However, a mere six months later, immigration took precedence by a large margin (44%).³⁴ Environmental protection and climate change occupied the second position at 18%, followed by social inequality (13%), economic matters (11%), and cost of living (10%). In the October 2023 state elections, voters prioritized economic development over migration and climate. These shifts underscore the dynamic nature of public opinion, which can change rapidly.

³¹ More in Common, Wie schaut die deutsche Gesellschaft derzeit auf die Klimabewegung? May 2023 <https://www.moreincommon.de/klimabewegung/>.

³² “Fridays for Future” beeinflusst Deutsche kaum,” ARD Berlin, tagesschau, September 14, 2023, <https://www.tagesschau.de/inland/deutschlandtrend/deutschlandtrend-moma-100.html>.

³³ Ehni von Ellen, “Klimawandel als wichtigstes Problem,” Tagesschau, April 6, 2023, <https://www.tagesschau.de/inland/deutschlandtrend/deutschlandtrend-3339.html>.

³⁴ “Migrationspolitik für Mehrheit am wichtigsten,” Tagesschau, October 13, 2023, <https://www.tagesschau.de/inland/deutschlandtrend/deutschlandtrend-moma-102.html>.



1.6 Spain

Jorge Galindo, Esade Center for Economic Policy

Overall, it can be stated that there is a wide consensus in Spain on climate change being a relevant issue³⁵ and on decarbonization as a desirable goal, and the differences across narratives primarily focus on how to achieve this and, increasingly so but to a lesser extent, the speed with which it should be done.

Important nuances are introduced that grow in divergence, mostly dependent on the policy or policy package being considered, but in general correlating with wider ideological differences.³⁶ These are interestingly modulated by two considerations: the national interest, especially clear in energy matters, (which tends to gather more voices than the European average in favor of renewables); and the territorial subdivision and variance, which does the opposite: it divides voices (but interestingly in a way different from partisan lines) according to the interests and position of each region. These are reproduced in a series of key areas.

1.6.1 RENEWABLE-ORIENTED ENERGY MIX: A NEAR-TOTAL CONSENSUS?

The energy shock experienced in 2022 had conflicting effects on climate narratives in Spain. On one hand, it spurred a pro-renewable reaction: the belief that renewables will ensure long-term independence. This sentiment reinforced the voices advocating for its expansion, leveraging Spain's comparative advantages, encapsulated in the combination of sun and wind. This alignment between renewable investment and national interest is not very partisan, with center-right leaders also supporting renewables, though emphasizing technology neutrality. The government's initial actions in the European electricity market reform prioritized renewable expansion over other priorities, including, as perceived by some pro-market voices, strict adherence to competition.

However, at the same time, the spike in energy prices provoked a strong reaction, leading to **Spain's first mass climate-related protest led by transport workers in March 2022**. This prompted the government to enact a nationwide general fuel subsidy until the end of 2022. Additionally, the government advocated for a lower-than-EU-average savings goal and a compensation for gas-generated electricity, known as the Iberian exception, which helped lower electricity prices but also seemingly encouraged the use of gas for generation.³⁷ Last but not least, the culmination of the Council agreement led by Spain during its role in the EU rotating presidency, more nuanced, farther away from renewable-focused goals and less interventionist than Spain's initial proposal, showed the room for flexibility displayed by the Spanish national leadership.

The next steps are likely to navigate within this tension. The upcoming discussion on the link between industry and energy serves as an example. Both public and private leaders in our country insist on renewables being strategic for greening our production chains, while also introducing other elements such as hydrogen, LNG,

³⁵ Sandra León, Lluís Orriols, Pablo Fernández-Vázquez, Natalia Collado, Jorge Galindo, Álvaro Fernández, "Radiografía de las divisiones y consensos de la sociedad española en torno al cambio climático," EsadeEcPol Insight, #39 (2022).
<https://www.esade.edu/ecpol/es/publicaciones/radiografia-de-las-divisiones-y-consensos-de-la-sociedad-espanola-en-torno-al-cambio-climatico/>.

³⁶ Lluís Orriols, Jorge Galindo, "Los reticentes a las políticas contra el cambio climático: quiénes son, qué piensan y cómo votan," EsadeEcPol Insight, #42 (2022).
<https://www.esade.edu/ecpol/es/publicaciones/los-reticentes-a-las-politicas-contra-el-cambio-climatico-quienes-son-que-piensan-y-como-votan/>.

³⁷ Manuel Hidalgo-Pérez, Natalia Collado, Jorge Galindo, Ramón Mateo, "Los efectos del tope al gas en los precios, la inflación y el consumo seis meses después," EsadeEcPol Policy Insight, #43 (2023).
<https://doi.org/10.56269/MHP20230131>.



and occasionally nuclear energy into the political debate. Prominent liberal-conservative voices see these as essential tools to boosting European industry, advocating for technology neutrality.

Simultaneously, there is an emerging but growing interest in questioning large renewable projects. This is more evident on the supply side than on the demand side: according to Galindo³⁸ and Roig et al,³⁹ there are clear majorities in favor of these projects, but it's true that in smaller population centers (towns), opposition voices are more likely to appear according to this analysis. This potential clash between supply and demand could potentially hinder the progress of renewables in Spain.

1.6.2 KEY EXPORTS OF SPAIN AND THEIR INTIMATE RELATIONSHIP WITH CLIMATE: CARS & TOURISM

In the Spanish national accounts, car manufacturing and tourism hold privileged positions, and given their clear impact on and relationship with the climate, they also feature in climate-related debates.

More attention is paid to policies directly affecting the purchase and manufacturing of cars. There is a consensus among citizens⁴⁰ and private stakeholders of **favoring positive incentives to decarbonize the vehicle fleet (subsidies, investments) over negative ones**. This makes it difficult to advance policies of the latter type, despite repeated recommendations from independent experts (see the White Paper on Taxation 2022⁴¹) and even acknowledgements from public authorities).

1.6.3 URBAN, TRANSPORTATION AND CITIES: NEW POLITICAL BATTLEFIELD

After the local and autonomous elections of 2015, Spain entered an 8-year cycle of left-leaning governments that were very pro-intervention to foster climate goals. The policies were implemented and became especially visible in the last 3-4 years: restricting the use of private vehicles, incentives for public transportation use, and intense urban changes are their central features (but not the only ones). In the 2023 elections, these policies came to a test. Beyond the results, what is significant is how prominent the debates about them were across the media and political spectrum. For the first time, green policies were at the forefront of an election.

The division of the political offer is as expected here: the farther to the left, the more in favor of these policies. The same can be said, according to Orriols and Galindo,⁴² about political demand: the probability of being in favor of restrictions on the use of private vehicles, for example, increases substantially and statistically significantly as the surveyed citizen identifies more with the left.

³⁸ Jorge Galindo, "El peso del territorio en las posiciones sobre la transición verde," EsadeEcPol Insight, #47 (2023). <https://www.esade.edu/ecpol/es/publicaciones/el-peso-del-territorio-en-las-posiciones-sobre-la-transicion-verde/>.

³⁹ Jorge Alarcón, Toni Timoner, "Vaciada ¿y verde? Actitudes de la España rural ante el cambio climático y el ecologismo," OIKOS - Política y Medio Ambiente (2023).

⁴⁰ Sandra León, Lluís Orriols, Pablo Fernández-Vázquez, Natalia Collado, Jorge Galindo, Álvaro Fernández, "Radiografía de las divisiones y consensos de la sociedad española en torno al cambio climático," EsadeEcPol Insight, #39 (2022). <https://www.esade.edu/ecpol/es/publicaciones/radiografia-de-las-divisiones-y-consensos-de-la-sociedad-espanola-en-torno-al-cambio-climatico/>.

⁴¹ Comité de personas expertas, Libro Blanco sobre la Reforma Tributaria (Madrid: Instituto de Estudios Fiscales, Ministerio de Hacienda y Función Pública, 2022). https://www.ief.es/docs/investigacion/comiteexpertos/LibroBlancoReformaTributaria_2022.pdf.

⁴² Lluís Orriols, Jorge Galindo, "Los reticentes a las políticas contra el cambio climático: quiénes son, qué piensan y cómo votan," EsadeEcPol Insight, #42 (2022).

<https://www.esade.edu/ecpol/es/publicaciones/los-reticentes-a-las-politicas-contra-el-cambio-climatico-quienes-son-que-piensen-y-como-votan/>.



This ends up articulating a **notably polarized debate around these issues**, even more so than on previously considered ones, which leads to stereotypical portrayals of city models (dense and car-free; less dense and car-based) that do not capture the nuances of real policymaking.

It is hard to envision a way out of this logic, especially as we are at a moment of activating agreed-upon policies such as low-emission zones, whose effects are yet to be seen (and according to Bernardo et al,⁴³ may be below expectations or what could be achievable with other policies not considered in Spain, such as tolls).

1.6.4 ENSURING A FAIR AND BALANCED TRANSITION: THE MISSING POLICIES

As policies escalate in perceived and real importance, the transition costs become more evident. Spain, which has one of the highest rates of risk of poverty and household exclusion in the EU, has multiplied risks for its most vulnerable households, as they allocate a higher proportion of their income to basic energy supplies.⁴⁴ The alternatives proposed in public debate and in policymaking focus on positive incentives, such as buying an electric car or renovating a house to make it more efficient, yet these still appear unreachable for many due to insufficient resources for the initial expenditure.⁴⁵

By not aligning these positive incentives with those who need them most, what we end up doing is damaging the price signal (as happened with policies such as gasoline subsidies or gas caps). Furthermore, considering that political parties aim to reach the median voter, who is not necessarily the most vulnerable but is also exposed to transition costs, support and resources tend to be spread more widely and are not just focused on low-income households. In the recent coalition agreement between the current government members, there were still vague but promising notions, namely:

- Making electric car aid more progressive. Indeed, the aid that already exists in Spain to enable investments in equipment changes (heat pumps, electric vehicles) and housing renovation is not clearly focused on income criteria.
- The wider use of the Institute for a Just Transition.
- The promise that support bonds for households with energy deficiencies will double their current limited coverage, although this will depend heavily on the design making it more easily accessible.⁴⁶

On this front, the political offering would have to catch up with the demand in Spain on the side of decarbonization, or another new offering will do so from another side, perhaps with arguments to delay the process.

⁴³ Valeria Bernardo, Xavier Fageda, Ricardo Flores-Fillol, "Pollution and congestion in urban areas: The effects of low emission zones," *Economics of Transportation*, vol. 26–27, 100221 (2021). <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ecotra.2021.100221>.

⁴⁴ Natalia Collado, "Ideas concretas para una transición energética justa," *Cinco Días*, July 14, 2023, https://cincodias.elpais.com/opinion/2023-07-14/ideas-concretas-para-una-transicion-energetica-justa.html?event_log=oklogin.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ Manuel Hidalgo, Natalia Collado, Jorge Galindo, Ángel Martínez, Carlos Victoria, "La invasión de Ucrania en España: impactos y políticas," *EsadeEcPol Insight*, #35 (2022). <https://www.esade.edu/ecpol/es/publicaciones/la-invasion-de-ucrania-en-espana-impactos-y-politicas/>.



1.7 France

Phuc-Vinh Nguyen, Jacques Delors Institute

In September 2023, “Environmental protection” (30%) ranked as the second most important concern for French people, behind purchasing power (46%) but ahead of topics like immigration or the future of the social system (24% each).⁴⁷ Despite the recent series of crises (COVID, energy prices, war in Ukraine) **environmental concerns have remained a top priority for the French, whether it is at national or European level.**⁴⁸

Seeking reelection, French President Emmanuel Macron vowed to have “France be the first major country to end its dependency on fossil fuels”.⁴⁹ As this pledge was made prior to the war in Ukraine, the pace initially foreseen has been strengthened since. It now materializes with the concept of “ecological planning” which is supposed to set out Macron’s vision of a “French-style ecology” which is “neither an ecology of denial (hinting at some comments made by the extreme/right-wing) nor an ecology of cure (referring to some proposals made by the left-wing that he considers too extreme)”. Concretely, in 2024, an additional €7bn will be allocated towards the energy transition (encompassing all sectors) in order to “double the overall rate of GHG emissions reduction”.

1.7.1 ENERGY AND INDUSTRY

In 2022, while the EU was dealing with an energy price crisis, France also had to cope with a domestic electricity crisis (due to lack of nuclear and hydro output). In response, France promoted **sufficiency measures to foster energy savings**, put forward tariff shields that would freeze the price of electricity and gas but also developed a **narrative making the European electricity market a scapegoat for soaring energy prices**, urgently calling for reform at the EU level. Having obtained satisfaction on that matter, France promptly created the “**Nuclear Alliance**” bringing together 10 other member states to promote an industrial approach to “strengthen European cooperation in the nuclear sector”. The objective for France was to have a collective say in incoming negotiations (like the Renewable Energy Directive⁵⁰ or the Net Zero Industry Act) without being accused of pushing its own national agenda unlike during the taxonomy regulation discussions. Here, France may have a twofold objective: laying the ground for deeper cooperation between member states who are part of the alliance (selling of French nuclear reactors, knowledge sharing...) as well as **having nuclear being put on an equal footing with renewable energy sources**. The latter could lead France and members of the alliance to demand greater recognition of the share of nuclear generation in the electricity mix which would imply an adjustment of national renewable electricity targets set in the renewable energy directive. France being the only EU member state that did not meet its renewable target for 2020, it also has a duty to provide guarantees regarding its

⁴⁷ French paper version: “Fracture françaises 2023: une alerte rouge vermillon”, Fondation Jean Jaurès, October 9, 2023, <https://www.jean-jaures.org/publication/fractures-francaises-2023-une-alerte-rouge-rouge-vermillon/>.

⁴⁸ Bruno Cautrès, Thierry Chopin, Phuc-Vinh Nguyen, Thomas Pellerin-Carlin. Les Français et l’environnement: évolution d’une préoccupation politique croissante. Jacques Delors Institute, April 2021, https://institutdelors.eu/wp-content/uploads/dlm_uploads/2021/04/PP265_FRetPolitiquesEnvironnementales_Cautres_Chopin_Nguyen_Pellerin-Carlin.pdf.

⁴⁹ Emmanuel Macron, “Reprendre en main notre destin énergétique,” Jacques Delors Institute, February 10, 2022, <https://www.elysee.fr/emmanuel-macron/2022/02/10/reprendre-en-main-notre-destin-energetique>.

⁵⁰ Paul Messad, “France finally satisfied with EU deal on renewables directive,” Euractiv.com, June 19, 2023, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/energy-environment/news/france-finally-satisfied-with-eu-deal-on-renewables-directive/>.



willingness to deploy RES and did join the Renewable Alliance on top of adopting a national law accelerating the deployment of RES.

The compromise recently reached at Member States level on the Electricity Market Design Directive could also pave the way for a joint call between France and Germany regarding an extension of temporary state aid rules.⁵¹ In France, the **narrative surrounding reindustrialization has been pushed by Macron as a way to ensure France's independence and sovereignty.**⁵² At European level, this means that **France will be seeking allies to support its effort to lower manufacturers' bills** (as well as final consumers who should also be able to benefit from cheap electricity produced thanks to the existing nuclear fleet) **while also setting up a favorable framework to attract new investors, especially from the cleantech sector.** Another crucial point for France will be about how to **finance the decarbonization of its industry.** So far, France has allocated €10 billions to the 50 most polluting industrial sites to have them reduce their emissions by half by 2030 (compared to 2015).

As the current French government has no absolute majority in its National Assembly, it could be tempted to overcome existing national blockages on several legislative files by taking the debate to the EU level where it could find allies of circumstance. Following the example of NextGenerationEU, a common borrowing to finance the energy transition appears to be more and more appealing from the French perspective given the current level of public deficit of the country that limits its room for maneuver. Upcoming European regulations could also play a key role. While the idea of banning gas boilers by 2026 was floating around, the French government decided, as France is a big producer, to opt for a less ambitious position and only reduce the financial aid the industry received. Despite aiming to produce 1 million heat pumps by 2027, France still struggles to fully align its reindustrialization objectives with an ambitious decarbonization strategy and could benefit from a stronger regulatory approach at EU level led by ambitious MS.

1.7.2 AUTOMOTIVE SECTOR

The automotive industry accounts for 10% of France's GDP. In line with the EU ban of new ICE cars by 2035, the French government deployed measures and objectives to accelerate the uptake of EVs. By tightening tax penalties for ICEs and encouraging the purchase of EVs through subsidies, the government aims to have an electric vehicle fleet of 15% by 2030 (vs. 1% currently). The transport sector, despite being the highest emitter, **remains a polarizing subject at national level.** Consequently, **France might not be willing to adopt a proactive stance when it comes to setting ambitious new targets** (as was the case within the Euro 7 file) since this would imply an additional burden to its automotive industry. As a matter of fact, the French president even recently called for an **"environmental regulatory break"** implying that the current regulatory framework (incl. the one that was newly adopted under Fit for 55) should be effectively applied and remain the same for the years to come to give more legal certainty to investors. In that regard, France was willing to openly oppose Germany's push on ICE regulation to preserve the 2035 deadline which **could hint at France being a potential strong advocate to at least prevent the European Green Deal ambitions being scaled back under the new European cycle.**

⁵¹ Varg Folkman, Giorgio Leali, Aoife White, "France and Germany risk EU rift over energy subsidies," Politico, October 26, 2023, <https://www.politico.eu/article/france-joins-germany-in-pushing-for-energy-aid-exemption/>.

⁵² "Accélérer notre réindustrialisation : le Président présente sa stratégie," Élysée, May 11, 2023, <https://www.elysee.fr/emmanuel-macron/2023/05/11/accelerer-notre-reindustrialisation-le-president-presente-sa-strategie>.



1.7.3 ENSURING A SOCIALLY FAIR TRANSITION

In France, the narrative regarding a just transition that is socially fair emerged following the Yellow Jacket Movement.⁵³ However, the government has so far struggled to fully embrace it when providing answers to the energy price crisis as some of the measures adopted (tariff shield, cap on the price of oil) benefited the wealthier in the population more.⁵⁴ **At the EU level, France could benefit from and support best practices coming from other EU MS to effectively deliver a climate policy that leaves no one behind.**

The European elections will be a pivotal moment for Emmanuel Macron and are at risk of being depicted as “midterm” elections by his national opponents. Traditionally pro-European and an advocate of strategic autonomy, Macron will have to defend his record at EU level (CBAM, nuclear inclusion, electricity market reform among others) while also putting forward a vision for a more sovereign Europe, especially in the area of energy. On that matter, being able to forge alliances with other MS would indubitably strengthen his position as a driving force for European action.

2 Comparison of the main narratives

2.1 Ensuring a socially fair transition

As the countries across the EU struggle with the impacts of rising energy prices, which significantly affect public perceptions of climate policies, balancing the economic impact of energy transition measures emerges as a common challenge. Even countries traditionally supportive of climate action, such as Germany, are witnessing a shift in public perception. Climate policies are perceived as expensive and socially unfair, with an apparent lack of understanding of the actual costs and the “real life” situations in rural areas. This argumentation emphasizes economic costs over environmental benefits and is present in all analyzed countries. However, it doesn’t necessarily translate into open questioning of EU climate targets.

Attitudes vary across the countries, ranging from openly questioning the EU climate agenda (as seen within the current Slovak government), its being questioned by opposition politicians in Czechia, or public discourse on the European Green Deal being disrupted by the fragmented political landscape and repeated general elections in Bulgaria. In contrast, while narratives in German public debate are changing, no significant political force (except for the AfD) questions European climate targets as a whole. Nevertheless, recent economic developments and political tensions weaken the adoption of concrete measures. For example, the Building Energy Code proposal in Germany faced public backlash similar to the Czech public debate about the Energy Performance of Buildings Directive proposal.

It is possible to make the European Green Deal more acceptable to the general population, and thus to gain broader political support, by ensuring a socially fair transition and using the financing available through several current instruments - e. g. the National Recovery and Resilience Plans, the Modernisation Fund, or the Just Transition Fund. As the case from Bulgaria described earlier shows, it is important to set up effective communication with businesses and citizens on how to implement measures to support the green transition.

⁵³ Camille Defard, “The need for a socially just European Green Deal,” Jacques Delors Institute, June 2022, <https://institutdelors.eu/en/publications/the-need-for-a-socially-just-european-green-deal/>.

⁵⁴ Étienne Fize, Philippe Martin, Hélène Paris, Marion Rault. La situation financière des ménages en début de crise énergétique. Conseil d’analyse économique, July 2022, https://www.cae-eco.fr/staticfiles/pdf/FocusCAE_o88-2022-Menages.pdf.



2.2 Energy transition and industrialization

In exploring energy transition narratives across European countries, several common themes and topics emerge, underscoring shared challenges and priorities.

Across Czechia, Slovakia, and Poland, concerns resonate regarding the impact of the European Green Deal **on industrial competitiveness**. The industrial sectors in these countries are often seen as vital sources of national wealth. At the same time, the examples of the analyzed countries show that there is a shared recognition of the pivotal role industry can play in driving the green transition – this potential is recognized for example in Bulgaria and Germany, and in some cases, Czech industry is even more ambitious than the government. However, challenges persist in balancing industrial priorities with the expansion of renewable energy sources. Whether it is Bulgaria's need to swiftly adopt innovative technologies, Spain's emphasis on renewables in production chains, or France's focus on reindustrialization for independence, industry is seen as a key player in achieving sustainability goals. There is a clear potential for collaboration among the EU states. France seeks partners for the decarbonization of its industry, aiming to lower costs for manufacturers. Simultaneously, it could prove beneficial for the V4 countries to engage in joint projects, both internally and with other EU nations facing similar challenges.

The countries in Central Europe (Poland, Germany, Czechia) also have to face the challenge of **transition from high dependence on coal**. Both Poland and Germany are actively working towards liberalizing regulations around onshore wind projects and formulating comprehensive strategies for a sustainable energy shift. Despite a decrease in the share of coal in Poland's national energy mix, the government faces the complex challenge of charting a socially acceptable and economically viable path beyond coal. Negotiations on extending the capacity market mechanism for coal-fired power plants highlight the country's ongoing struggle to balance economic and environmental concerns. Similarly Germany aims to accelerate the energy transition but is met with immediate challenges, particularly concerning electricity prices. Internal conflicts within the coalition government and the need to manage the social costs of transition pose significant hurdles. Czechia closely monitors Germany's situation, with the decision in October 2023 to restart three coal-fired power plants viewed as “evidence” by some Czech politicians that coal phase-out is perceived as ideological rather than a rational decision. Within the Czech debate, concerns also arise about the potential consequences of becoming an electricity importer if coal is phased out. Despite political support for coal consumption from both ruling and opposition parties, the official government stance is committed to finalizing the phase-out by 2033. The long-term challenges, in all the countries, of establishing a socially acceptable and ambitious path away from coal remain.

An example of a promising practice in addressing these challenges is **the existence of the Institute for a Just Transition in Spain, established in 2020**, with the goal of identifying and adopting measures to minimize the negative impacts on employment and depopulation in the transition toward a low-carbon economy, especially with regards to the coal regions. If, as anticipated by the coalition agreement between the current members of the government for the 2023-27 legislature, just transition agreements are expanded and solidified, the work in this and other industrial sectors could be more streamlined, especially if expanded to several of them—being a tool of co-governance that seeks the coordination of public administrations and the development of support instruments to reactivate areas where decarbonization may affect economic activity. In Slovakia, it was found to be crucial to institute pilot regions engaged in the transition away from coal, and draw on funds allocated for the transition by the European Union. Consequently, the commitment of Slovakia to coal phase-out by the end of 2023 underscores the pivotal influence of the EU in shaping and supporting this transitional process.



The transition from coal is also strongly interlinked with support for alternative sources - for this reason, Poland, Czechia and Bulgaria support recognition of nuclear power as a clean and viable source, a position bolstered by France and its Nuclear alliance. While France is officially part of the “Friends of Renewables” group it still has to demonstrate its broad public and political support for renewable energy, as in Spain. In this sense, the situation differs from Czechia, where the political opposition, particularly, portrays renewables as unreliable (interestingly, the situation is opposite in Slovakia, where the current opposition champions pro-climate and pro-renewable narratives). Despite this, the Czech public generally perceives renewable energy sources positively, with a clear majority supporting the expansion and endorsement of water, solar, and wind energy. On the other hand, the Bulgarian business sector has been increasing investments in renewable energy, but citizen engagement and participation in the energy transformation remains unsatisfactory. The tension between political narratives and public sentiment highlights the complexities of aligning policy decisions with public preferences. This dynamic is also evident in Spain, which experienced conflicting effects on climate narratives following the energy shock in 2022. While there is a pro-renewable reaction, reflected in the belief that renewables ensure long-term independence, there is also a strong reaction to high energy prices. The government's response, including a nationwide fuel subsidy and compensation for gas-generated electricity, indicates a nuanced approach that prioritizes expansion of renewables but also considers economic factors. Similarly in France, renewable energy sources are supported by both public and most of the political representatives (with the notable exception of the right wing), albeit with a pragmatic approach that considers industrial interests and broader economic implications. The country, despite not meeting its renewable target for 2020, adopted a national law in March 2023 to accelerate the deployment of renewable energy sources which has yet to have an impact.

Another aspect connected with the transition to renewable energy sources is the **security framing of energy and environmental issues** – which can, interestingly, be used to form both pro- and anti-EU narratives. For example in Slovakia, the economic consequences of the war in Ukraine have become intertwined with discussions about energy independence, diversification of energy sources, and overall energy security. These discussions often align with anti-EU and anti-NATO positions, framing decisions at the European level as endangering Slovak interests. Also, in Bulgaria, the link between dependence on Russian energy raw materials and the energy crisis in Europe, along with its impact on inflation, is not clear to all citizens. This highlights a potential clash between public perceptions and the need for strategic energy diversification. **In general, energy independence and diversification of energy sources are paramount in shaping the argumentation across the analyzed EU countries.**

Another highly polarized topic, both politically and in the public perception, is the **transition of the automotive industry**. Political figures (mainly, but not only, from the opposition) in Slovakia and Czechia share strong opposition to the proposed “ban” on new internal combustion engines by 2035. Politicians in both countries argue for market-driven decisions, emphasizing concerns about the impact on their significant automotive industries. These concerns highly resonate among the citizens, while the “combustion engines ban” is one of the very few topics associated with the European Green Deal. It is also used to deepen mistrust in the EU as such – as for example where Slovakia's SaS party's opposition to the legislation reflects a broader tension between national sovereignty and EU regulations. The party's EU-skeptical stance aligns with the narrative that decisions should be driven by the market rather than centralized EU directives. However, it is not only the case in Central Europe - the transport sector remains a polarizing subject also in France, with concerns about additional burdens on the automotive industry. The government is deploying measures, including tax penalties and subsidies, to accelerate EV uptake.



Positive incentives to decarbonize the vehicle fleet, such as subsidies and investments, are also favored by citizens and private stakeholders in Spain. However, The French president's call for an "environmental regulatory break" could suggest resistance to new ambitious targets as France also joined the coalition of states opposing the Euro 7 draft regulation (together with Bulgaria, Hungary, Italy, Poland, Romania, and Slovakia), led by Czechia.

3 Recommendations and potential for a positive change

As the examples above illustrate, the recurrent **clash between economic interests and environmental objectives** remains a central theme, perhaps the most significant barrier to public acceptance of the green transition. This underscores the need for clear (and ideally coordinated) communication in industrialized countries, as well as the need to implement strong and efficient just transition measures. **Effective communication and implementation of green measures emerge as common challenges** – for example in Germany, the ban on gas boilers caused political clashes, while France decided only to reduce financial aid for such boilers (also drawing on its experiences with the Yellow Vests movement). In Bulgaria, Slovakia and Czechia, commitments to environmental protection face skepticism, and are perceived as externally mandated and opposed by circles against EU objectives. A good example could be taken from Spain, where the existence of an Institute for a Just Transition signifies efforts to minimize negative impacts on employment and territories during the transition to a low-carbon economy.

It is noteworthy how the growing perception of the short-term costs of the green transition for the population is diminishing in the focus of political offerings (but not in demand), while the benefits will only be visible in the long term. Although there is a broad consensus on the need to act against climate change, support decreases to a minority when it comes to specific measures with a direct economic impact on individuals and companies, such as taxes or bans.⁵⁵ This trend is present in several countries (e.g. Spain, which experienced the first mass climate-related protest after the energy shock in 2022, Germany or Czechia), and also confirmed by public perception research.

Yet, the analyzed countries have the potential to engage in coalitions dealing with these challenges together, and even leading other EU states.

The opportunities for closer cooperation emerge in the field of **reindustrialisation**, concurrent with the accelerated processes of decarbonization and energy transition. These aspects have been one of the main priorities of the Spanish EU Council Presidency, as well a significant topic of the State of the European Union speech in 2023. The need for European states to collaborate in these efforts is underscored by the need for cohesive and synchronized efforts. It is crucial that the reindustrialisation programs of individual governments align rather than contradict each other. This alignment can be further strengthened by fostering joint projects and seeking novel coalitions, extending beyond traditional groupings like the V4. Even countries like France could benefit from participating in a coalition guided by an ambitious member state championing a more assertive regulatory approach toward decarbonization. The heavily industrialized states, such as Czechia, can leverage their economic structures and related expertise to assume a leadership role in EU-wide discussions on critical aspects of transitioning to a low-carbon economy. These include minimizing the negative consequences of decarbonization

⁵⁵ Sandra León, Lluís Orriols, Pablo Fernández-Vázquez, Natalia Collado, Jorge Galindo, Álvaro Fernández, "Radiografía de las divisiones y consensos de la sociedad española en torno al cambio climático," *EsadeEcPol Insight*, #39 (2022).
<https://www.esade.edu/ecpol/es/publicaciones/radiografia-de-las-divisiones-y-consensos-de-la-sociedad-espanola-en-torno-al-cambio-climatico/>.



on the economy, diversifying energy sources, and addressing the education and retraining needs of coal industry workers. By spearheading such conversations, governments involved in such a coalition could also present the Green Deal as an opportunity rather than a threat to their societies.

For instance, Bulgaria already has experience of sharing best practices with neighboring countries, which proved to be a promising approach. In October 2023, Bulgarian Prime Minister Nikolay Denkov hosted a trilateral meeting with delegations from Bulgaria, Romania, and Greece. Among other matters, they discussed the potential for energy cooperation. This endeavor holds immense significance, particularly in light of Russia's war against Ukraine which revealed the interconnectedness of energy systems.

Similarly, the countries of Central and Eastern Europe have a potential to build and lead coalitions focused on the social and economic considerations of the green transition. The **just transition** and adopting the necessary socially fair measures is a crucial way for making the European green deal more acceptable for citizens. The different EU countries have been trying to implement different measures to protect citizens from the energy crisis and inflation - nevertheless, the measures, such as the tariff shield or cap on the price of oil implemented in France, didn't always benefit the most vulnerable citizens. It would therefore be highly beneficial for the countries to exchange best practices and lead the push for EU measures that effectively deliver a climate policy that leaves no one behind.

To foster societal acceptance of the ongoing transition and ensure optimal implementation of associated measures, along with the effective utilization of various EU funds designated for the just transition, it is necessary that politicians spanning the entire spectrum engage in **clear communication regarding climate targets**. Emphasis should be placed on highlighting the opportunities rather than exploiting the subject for immediate political gains through nationalistic sentiments and fear-mongering. Such practices not only jeopardize the shared future but also undermine the overarching objectives of the European Green Deal. Internal political conflicts within the governments undermine clear communication on climate policies, affecting public perception and potentially influencing policy decisions, as is the case for example in Germany.

An efficient communication with the public, balancing public expectations, policy goals and real measures, is needed not only from the politicians, but also from **key stakeholders such as businesses**. Examples from Bulgaria or Czechia prove that the potential to drive the green transition is held by industry, which might be even more ambitious than the national governments (often due to their connections with international trends and European partners). Businesses from countries with a predominantly energy-intensive economic structure often face vulnerabilities in global supply chains and emphasize the need for swift action and adoption of innovative technologies to enhance competitiveness and align with European trends. However, a significant number of companies lack awareness about the tools provided by the European Green Deal. Therefore, effective communication should be implemented also between businesses and public administrations.

For efficient communication, it is necessary to look for the European Green Deal-connected **narratives that are perceived positively** in the respective countries. For example, in Czechia, the issue of nature restoration has the potential to bring the EGD closer to the general population. Czechs generally consider themselves nature protectors, with 71% of Czechs expressing the desire for the Czech state to implement measures aimed at revitalizing the landscape, such as attracting more birds and insects. This reflects how the effects of climate change are directly felt by society, even though the connection may not always be obvious to the public. Using such positively resonating narratives has the potential to "translate" the complex (and often confusing) EGD measures in an understandable and broadly accepted way.



Conclusions - Path to the 2024 European Parliament elections

The upcoming European Parliament election campaigns are likely to be significantly influenced by the green transition, the implementation of measures outlined in the European Green Deal (EGD), and their impact on the general population. For instance in both Czechia and France, these elections are likely to be framed by the current opposition as a "referendum" on the performance of the existing government. Political candidates are to be expected to question decisions made at the European level regarding measures for the green transition, portraying them as potential threats to the economic well-being of "ordinary citizens". As the problematic adoption of the Nature Restoration Law on the EU level proved, it doesn't apply only to representatives of conservative or extreme parties.

Ensuring a socially fair transition should be the priority, and not only in the coming months. This involves, among other things, setting (and communicating) green measures and subsidies in a way that is easily accessible and understandable to the general public. For instance, in Czechia it is important to address the prevalent issue of a disproportionate distribution of funds, with a significant proportion consistently favoring large initiatives. To promote a fairer distribution, funds need to be redirected towards households and small businesses in line with their different financial requirements. The EU member states should seek alliances with other EU countries, explore positive narratives, and learn from both successful examples and mistakes made elsewhere. Political leaders must demonstrate clear and decisive leadership, building alliances with like-minded partners to drive a fair and environmentally friendly transition in both energy and the economy.


Therefore, it will be necessary to cooperate with stakeholders and politicians on identifying such topics as could bear narratives supporting the measures aimed at achieving climate neutrality, and help build alliances of similar significance. Effective communication is key, and addressing the uncertainties and concerns of the population by politicians is crucial. It is especially important in the current context where the far-right and conservative parties are gaining significant support in pre-election debates across the EU by exploiting the general lack of information about EGD among the population, painting the green transition in a negative light only.

Sociological data underscores the importance of ensuring that the green transition is socially just; otherwise, it risks facing substantial resistance. The success of this transition hinges on proactively engaging with the public, dispelling worries and misinformation, and fostering a collective understanding of the necessary measures associated with the European Green Deal and its benefits.





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