

Article

Polish Climate Policy Narratives: Uniqueness, Alternative Pathways, and Nascent Polarisation

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Abstract

European Union (EU) climate politics have polarised over the past decade. Poland especially stands out as the EU member state that has most vehemently opposed numerous decisions to increase the EU's level of ambition, stirring some turbulence in EU climate politics. Yet, with the publication of the European Green Deal (EGD) in 2019, the European Commission has likewise created turbulence in the Polish parliament's climate debate. This article analyses those debates and identifies three distinct policy narratives: *Poland is in a unique situation*, *Poland pursues an alternative pathway*, and *climate policy endangers competitiveness*. The *alternative pathway* narrative, which advocates for the continued use of coal while capturing emissions, faded at roughly the same time when the EGD was proposed at the EU level. Simultaneously, the *unique situation* narrative, which calls for recognition of Poland's uniqueness in combination with increased (financial) support, became stronger. The analysis confirms the dominance of the governing party's narratives, but contrary to previous studies, detects nascent polarisation on climate policy between the right-wing political parties, on the one hand, and the centre-right and centre-left parties, on the other.

Keywords

climate policy; European Green Deal; Poland; polarisation; policy narratives; Sejm

Issue

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1. Introduction

European Union (EU) climate politics have become polarised over the past decade. Poland especially stands out as the EU member state that has most vehemently opposed numerous decisions to increase the EU's level of ambition, creating some turbulence in EU climate politics. Through this, Poland has shaped EU climate policy, but it has not succeeded in reducing its overall level of ambition. Nonetheless, it has left its imprint on features of not only EU climate policy but also the broader European Green Deal (EGD), most notably but not exclusively the Just Transition Fund. To understand and explain Poland's behaviour of unsettling EU climate politics, this article delves into Polish parliamentary debates on climate policy between 2015 and 2020. It analyses how Polish parliamentarians and government representatives

who were invited to speak in parliament advocate and justify their policy positions, and the climate policy narratives they construct. The analysis identifies three policy narratives that mark discussion in the Polish parliament: *Poland is in a unique situation*, *Poland pursues an alternative pathway*, and *climate policy endangers competitiveness*. The analysis confirms the dominance of the governing party's narratives, but contrary to previous studies, detects nascent polarisation on climate policy between the right-wing political parties, on the one hand, and the centre-right and centre-left parties, on the other.

Since the 1990s, the EU has gradually developed and increased its climate policy's level of ambition. In December 2019, the European Commission President von der Leyen ramped up ambitions—thereby creating some turbulence in EU climate policy—when the European Commission published the EGD

Communication (European Commission, 2019). The EGD is a comprehensive action plan to make the EU's economy sustainable. It pursues the overarching goal of climate neutrality by 2050, ratcheting up previous EU targets. The EGD's goal of raising the EU's climate ambition from the previous 40 percent target to 55 percent by 2030 and climate neutrality by 2050, requires an increase in investments and political will. The EGD announcement was followed by the Covid-19 crisis shortly afterwards. This created a turbulence and intensified the initial EGD challenge: Fundamentally changing the EU economy and increasing investments to achieve climate neutrality by 2050 in times of recovery from economic hardship due to Covid-19. Turning environmental and climate challenges into opportunities requires political commitment by all EU member states. Even if many laws are decided by qualified majority voting in the Council of the EU, the European Council decides the political guidelines by consensus. Moreover, EU climate policy needs to be transposed into member state policy, which is difficult when the government does not support the overall EU goals.

This article focuses on the policy narratives deployed in Poland's lower house *Sejm* to generate a better understanding of the underlying rationale of potential clashes between Poland and the European Commission/other member states. Analysing Poland's narratives on EU climate policy can help us understand why it resists EU goals and how policy objectives could otherwise be aligned. Policy narratives construct reality in different ways and reveal the meaning that individuals or groups attach to a specific policy. Different narratives lead to different policy outputs (Shanahan et al., 2018). Policy narratives thus go beyond observing facts to explain interests. Instead, they are a strategic construction of those facts by highlighting some aspects while neglecting others. This article's analysis therefore goes beyond the observation that Poland depends highly on coal for its electricity production—which to a great extent is mined domestically—and that transitioning out of coal is a great structural challenge, requiring massive investments in new infrastructure while at the same time accounting for the social impacts. It focuses on how Polish politicians advocate and justify their policy positions and what climate policy narratives they construct to do so. The study covers the period 2015–2020 to observe the stability and change of narratives in response to turbulence, in particular the EGD. 2015 coincides with the taking office of the Law and Justice (PiS) government, a right-wing populist party (Zuk & Szulecki, 2020).

The article contributes an in-depth analysis of the climate policy narratives used within the Polish parliamentary debate to improve our understanding of Polish political actions and their underlying rationale. Most academic studies analyse the Polish governments' activities at the EU level, while only few studies unpack domestic dynamics and details of the Polish debate. Zuk et al. (2021) focus on citizens' attitudes towards the use of coal, while Zuk and Szulecki (2020) analyse the Polish

right-wing populist media's discourse on energy transition. Marcinkiewicz and Tosun (2015) focus on politicians and show that despite the growing salience of climate policy in the Polish parliament, there was no polarisation among political parties that would have shifted their positions further apart from each other. They rather remained uniform in opposing ambitious climate policy. My analysis starts when Marcinkiewicz and Tosun's (2015) study ends—in the year 2015—providing a continuation of their research and conducting a qualitative content analysis of speeches by Members of the Polish Parliament's lower house. The analysis contributes to existing literature with its qualitative analysis of policy narratives that captures the nuances of argumentative patterns. So far, no analysis has specifically identified the different policy narratives.

The next section describes Poland's situation with regards to ambitious climate policy, the EGD, and polarisation among political parties on the issue. This is followed by an analytical framework to guide the systematic analysis of the narratives that actors use to argue for their policy preferences in Sejm debates. Section 4 describes the research design and method. The subsequent section presents the identified Polish policy narratives on the transition to a climate-neutral economy. Three distinct narratives were identified which portray Poland's situation as unique, postulate that Poland pursues an alternative pathway, and which see climate policy as a threat to competitiveness. Contrary to previous studies, the findings show nascent polarisation on climate policy between the right-wing political parties, on the one hand, and the centre-right and centre-left parties, on the other. The concluding section discusses the results and places them in the broader context of the EGD and turbulent governance.

2. Poland, the European Green Deal, and Polarisation

Poland is highly dependent on domestically produced coal for its electricity production, which poses a huge challenge for transitioning to climate neutrality and raises energy security concerns. It therefore does not come as a surprise that Poland has developed a track record of opposing EU climate policy decisions. This section first sketches Poland's main challenges with regards to the climate neutrality transition to provide the facts based on which the policy narratives are constructed. Then, it briefly introduces the EGD to highlight the turbulence it introduced before moving to a review of previous research on domestic climate policy polarisation to which this study aims to contribute.

2.1. Poland's Climate Challenge

Poland is the EU member state with the most carbon-intensive electricity sector due to the large share of coal in its energy mix. In 2019, more than 72 percent of Polish electricity was produced from hard coal and

lignite, which in fact was a decrease from previous years (Zuk et al., 2021, p. 2). Coal is not only a sensitive issue because of this large share of the energy mix but also because most of the coal is mined domestically. Eighty-six percent of EU coal production takes place in Poland (Zuk et al., 2021, p. 2). Moreover, the Polish coal sector depends on government subsidies and the grid infrastructure is poor, requiring investment (Brauers & Oei, 2020, p. 5). This raises questions of energy security. Poland's future energy mix needs to be reliable, and concerns about renewables' volatility frequently are raised in the political debate. Moreover, due to political and historical reasons, dependence on Russian gas—a fossil fuel that emits fewer greenhouse gases (GHGs) than coal—is a situation that the country strictly aims to avoid. Those factors explain the massive challenge that Poland faces with regards to climate policy. If it wants to transition out of coal, the country needs to make enormous investments in its electricity production and transmission infrastructure. Additionally, a significant number of workers depend directly or indirectly on the coal sector, which means that cushioning the social impact is difficult but highly important. Further, due to subsidies, electricity prices are relatively low. If new investments lead to price increases, the social impact could move beyond coal workers and extend to low-income households. Considering those factors, Brauers and Oei (2020, p. 1) conclude that Poland requires climate policies that are “implemented jointly with social and structural policy measures, addressing a just transition for the affected regions in line with the vision of a ‘European Green Deal.’”

Transforming Poland's energy sector is further complicated by the close entanglement between the government and the coal sector. State-owned energy companies were merged with some of the coal mining companies to rescue them from bankruptcy (Brauers & Oei, 2020), simultaneously linking energy companies' interests to that of the coal industry while also making the government partial owners of coal companies. In addition, the miners' unions have a particularly strong political influence (Brauers & Oei, 2020). As a general tendency, the Polish government has upheld a position very close to the interests of industry and large GHG emitters (Jankowska, 2011, p. 171). These structural factors can explain that when implementing the EU's climate policy for 2020—which was adopted in 2008—Poland resisted implementing renewable energy policy and instead made it fit with its coal-related interests. These experiences led to continued Polish opposition to ambitious EU climate policy for 2030 due to negative policy feedback and path dependency (Skjærseth, 2018, pp. 509–510).

2.2. EU Climate Policy and the European Green Deal

Although it was joined by other Central and Eastern European member states on several issues, Poland

stands out as the EU member state that most often opposed EU climate policy decisions and consistently dissented from the majority position in the Council of the European Union (Ćetković & Buzogány, 2019). The country has become overtly assertive, stressing its reliance on coal and defending its vital national interest (Bocquillon & Maltby, 2017, p. 94). So far, this has not hindered EU climate policy from moving forward, but it has shaped elements of its design. Initiatives such as the Just Transition Fund can, in part, be seen as a response to Polish concerns for requiring support to tackle the challenge.

At the EU level, several financial instruments directly or indirectly aim to support Poland and other EU member states in their transition to a climate-neutral economy. The EGD includes a Just Transition Mechanism, which provides support to mobilise at least 150 billion euros during the period 2021–2027 to address the transition's social and economic effects. Its three pillars are: a Just Transition Fund, the InvestEU Just Transition scheme, and European Investment Bank public sector loans. The Just Transition Fund provides grants to coal regions for economic diversification in their transition away from coal. This includes the reskilling of workers and assuring their active participation in designing the transition process. The InvestEU scheme supports energy and transport infrastructure investments. European Investment Bank loans also cover investments in energy and transport infrastructure while also covering energy efficiency measures. Already prior to the EGD, there was a fund aiming to support investment in EU member states' old infrastructure as part of the EU Emissions Trading System. The Modernisation Fund is fed by two percent of the allowance auction revenues. This fund is a solidarity mechanism to help the member states with the greatest challenges and was adopted as the result of Poland's and other Central and Eastern European countries' demands for their energy situation duly to be considered (Skjærseth, 2018). In addition to those funding schemes specifically dedicated to a just transition, Poland receives significant amounts of EU funding from the post-Covid-19 recovery package and EU cohesion funds. This creates a formidable opportunity to invest in transforming the country's electricity production, among other infrastructure investments. While there are some rules for the kinds of investment that can be made with the recovery funds, it is up to Poland and the other member states to determine how to use the grants and loans.

2.3. Climate Policy Polarisation in Poland

Looking at the political dynamics within Poland, research on climate policy polarisation remains inconclusive. While Marcinkiewicz and Tosun (2015) find that political parties did not polarise on climate policy, Zuk et al. (2021) find that public opinion about transitioning out of coal runs along political ideology lines: Supporters of the right-wing parties Law and Justice (PiS) and

Confederation (Konfederacja) plead to maintain the status quo, while backers of centre and liberal parties support the energy transition and climate policy. However, according to Zuk et al.'s survey, citizens agree across political party lines that the transition to clean energy of the Upper Silesian region—the largest coal basin in Europe—should be supported financially by the government (Zuk et al., 2021). My analysis contributes to these studies on domestic climate policy polarisation by analysing parliamentary debates since 2015. It delves into the details of policy narratives that political actors construct to justify their policy position, an analysis that—to my knowledge—has not yet been conducted.

Since the transition to climate neutrality requires profound economic and societal changes, it creates winners and losers, similar to the trends of globalisation (Koopmans & Zürn, 2019). This can widen cleavages within societies and among countries. Whether and how to remedy this development is subject to much political debate and polarisation. Polarisation is defined as a process when positions drift apart towards more extremes (de Wilde et al., 2016). Political parties can drift apart on their position of how climate policy should be designed and also on the relationship between climate policy, on the one hand, and economic growth and social prosperity, on the other. In a polarised debate, opposite arguments tend to be made. One typical discussion in climate policy is whether it is an opportunity to create new jobs and economic growth, or whether it is a threat to economic competitiveness and people's livelihood (Slominski, 2016). My analysis identifies policy narratives to then assess their evolution over time, determine whether different narratives have been used by different political parties, and to understand to what extent polarisation has taken place. The next section delves into the details and role of policy narratives.

3. Policy Narratives

The analysis of policy narratives can help explain underlying rationales of policy choices and identify coalitions and degrees of polarisation in a political arena. A narrative is a story that justifies policy positions by interpreting reality in a certain way. Narratives play a role in an actors' processing and communication of information, and the construction of such a story can shape an actor's decisions and policy choices. Different policy realities are thereby created when individuals or groups attach different meanings to certain policies. In practice, this is done when actors highlight certain aspects and neglect others to sway the opinions of other actors to support certain policy choices. Policy narratives are often bound by ideologies and belief systems (McBeth et al., 2014, pp. 229–230). While knowing a country's policy position does not necessarily reveal the reasons for the choices made, analysing the narratives used in the political debate can uncover those rationales and perceptions. For this reason, this article focuses on the climate policy

narratives that Polish parliamentarians and government representatives construct in parliamentary debates.

The Narrative Policy Framework was developed based on the observations above. This framework guides the systematic analysis of narratives used by actors to argue for their policy preferences (Shanahan et al., 2018). A policy narrative generally has four elements (McBeth et al., 2014, pp. 228–229):

- a) The specific setting in which it is situated. This refers to certain parameters such as geography, economic conditions and other factors pertaining to the policy problem. This setting can serve as a policy narratives' focal point.
- b) Different characters figure in a narrative. These characters include the hero who (tries to) solve the problem, the villain who (allegedly) causes the problem, the victim that is distressed by the villain and helped by the hero, the opponent who rejects the policy but is not a villain, and the ally who is aligned with the hero.
- c) The plot describes the relationship among the characters and situates them within the setting.
- d) The moral refers to the policy solution that a narrative promotes.

As a minimum, a policy narrative must at least have one character and put forward a policy preference (moral; Shanahan et al., 2013, p. 457).

Policy narratives operate simultaneously at the micro, meso, and macro level. Micro-level analyses focus on how individuals construct and are influenced by narratives. Meso-level research zooms into the deployment of policy narratives by different groups, and macro-level studies focus on how narratives shape public policy (McBeth et al., 2014, pp. 230–246). The focus of my study on Poland's climate policy debate is situated on the meso level, identifying the policy narratives shared by different groups of Polish politicians in parliament. I find that actor groups strategically construct and communicate policy narratives to justify and reflect their shared policy preferences and that groups with competing policy preferences tend to construct competing narratives, which emphasise different elements. By tracing different groups' policy narratives over time, possible policy belief changes are detected, which can be induced for example by changes in the setting (McBeth et al., 2014, pp. 237–240).

Actors and groups can employ different policy narrative strategies. When they perceive themselves as losing on an issue, actors tend to construct narratives that expand the scope of the respective policy issue to achieve results that are more favourable to them. On the contrary, perceived winners strive to contain the scope of a policy to maintain their benefit (Jones & McBeth, 2010; McBeth et al., 2007). Narratives construct a causal story that strategically connects elements to assign responsibility or blame. Moreover,

policy narratives often villainise the opposition while portraying the constructor of the narrative as a hero (McBeth et al., 2014, pp. 241–242; Shanahan et al., 2013). Identifying policy narratives and evaluating their strength/dominance provides insights into the polarisation among different groups. Additionally, understanding the policy narratives used to construct political realities helps explain policy processes and their outputs. The following section describes how the Polish climate policy narratives were identified.

4. Research Design and Methods

I employed a combination of inductive and deductive content analysis of climate policy debates in the Polish parliament's lower house, the Sejm. The analysis spans the period 2015–2020, which covers the entire eighth Sejm legislative term and the first year of the ninth legislative term. Analysing the debates of 2020 is crucial for an analysis of Polish perspectives on the EGD and the turbulence it stirred, since the Sejm debated EU-level developments such as the EGD and its Just Transition Fund. Furthermore, analysing the eighth term provides insights into the Polish debate directly preceding the development of the EGD, which is important since adoption of the EGD could have shaped subsequent Polish narratives and positions. In short, this timeframe allows for an analysis of whether and how the EGD created a turbulence in Polish climate policy.

The analysis includes all Sejm plenary and committee debates on national, EU, and international climate policy which were identified through the Sejm website's search tool. A total of 165 speeches were found. At times, a dialogue with multiple interventions by one speaker occurred, since many debates had the form of an information session by a government representative to Members of Parliament (MPs). In such cases, all interventions were grouped in one document and counted as one speech. Annex I in the Supplementary File provides an overview of all analysed debates. The format of information sessions by the government added a glimpse into the government's perspective to the analysis. All speeches were translated into English by Polish native speakers. On this, since I analysed whole arguments—rather than semantics—translating the speeches was suitable.

A content analysis (Mayring, 2014) of all speeches was conducted, using the qualitative content analysis software NVivo (Jackson & Bazeley, 2019). The coding proceeded in two steps. First, I thoroughly read all speeches and took notes on recurring arguments and narratives. Based on this first step, I identified different narratives and coded all speeches accordingly in a second step. In several debates a minister or high-ranking government representative gave a longer speech outlining the government's position on the respective topic. Some MPs asked questions rather than making statements that revealed their point of view. In these

instances, questions were not coded. Instead, I only coded statements in which MPs and government representatives took a position. NVivo allows for matrix coding queries that relate the coded statements to specified characteristics such as the speaker's political affiliation or the year in which the speech was given. This enables the analysis of trends and patterns. Section 5 presents the results of this empirical analysis.

5. Polish Climate Policy Narratives

Three distinct policy narratives could be identified that transcend most of the analysed Sejm climate debates. The first stresses Poland's unique situation, which highlights that the country's situation is different from the other EU member states and claims that Poland requires special consideration and financial support to (re)shape its specific climate and energy policy. The second builds on the first policy narrative and postulates that Poland (needs to) pursue(s) a special pathway. Prior to 2019, the described pathway was the continuation of using coal while absorbing emissions through forests and technological innovation. The policy narrative also stresses Poland's sovereignty in taking policy decisions, particularly with regards to its energy mix. The third narrative portrays climate policy as a threat to (international) competitiveness and economic growth. Analysis of the different narratives shows an incipient polarisation among the political parties on climate policy in 2020. This section first describes each of the narratives before discussing polarisation.

5.1. Poland is in a Unique Situation

A prominent narrative that transcends almost all debates is the assertion that Poland is in a unique situation. This was illustrated in a statement made by Michał Kurtyka (non-partisan), Minister of Climate and Environment, at the 2020 debate on the EGD and Poland's position: "All 28 countries agreed that we would move towards climate neutrality for the continent, while at the same time acknowledging—all of our 27 partners recognised it—the uniqueness of Poland" (M. Kurtyka, January 15, 2020). This narrative on Poland's uniqueness has translated into multiple calls for special consideration and more financial support for Poland from the EU. Compared to previous years, this part of the policy narrative became much more prominent in the 2020 discussions on the EGD and the Just Transition Fund. This is illustrated, for instance, by MP Tomasz Piotr Nowak's (Civic Platform) intervention: "We should possibly veto or threaten to veto the climate neutrality target to demand more funds apart from the Just Transition Fund and the Modernisation Fund for the transformation of the Polish energy industry" (T. P. Nowak, December 9, 2020). The individual references to the different narratives and their elements over time are shown in Figure 1 (see also Annex 2 in the Supplementary File).

In this policy narrative, Poland is victimised as a country that faces particularly great challenges conditioned by its setting of a highly-carbon intensive energy system. The EU is not portrayed as a villain but rather as a character who bears the responsibility to support the distressed country of Poland. The claim of Poland's uniquely-challenging situation is translated into a responsibility for the EU/other EU member states to act in solidarity of Poland. The proposed policy solution is to recognise Poland's uniqueness and to, therefore, increase (financial) support. This narrative does not exclude Poland's willingness to change its energy system, but it has a passive connotation, making change dependent on external support.

5.2. Poland Pursues a Different Pathway

Related to the narrative on Poland's uniqueness is the policy narrative on Poland pursuing a different pathway to climate neutrality and safeguarding its sovereignty. This narrative postulates that Poland can continue using coal while absorbing emissions through technological innovation and forests. In this context, several actors refer to the Lisbon Treaty provision that reserves the sovereign right for member states to determine their energy mix (Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, 2009, Article 194). This narrative was illustrated by MP Anna Paluch's (PiS) statement at the 2020 debate on a draft resolution announcing the climate emergency:

The implementation of the objectives of the low-carbon economy is one path, but the other path—the one that Poland has been promoting for years [...]—is to strike a balance between anthropogenic greenhouse gas emissions and the absorption by biosystems. (A. Paluch, January 8, 2020)

Another example is: "I believe that coal does not contradict climate protection. Therefore, it is necessary to implement a resource and energy economy in Poland in which coal does not contradict climate protection. We will have to invest in new coal technologies" (P. Safek, December 29, 2015). A number of politicians strongly promote forests to absorb carbon, which was one of the aspects that Poland promoted when hosting the 2018 COP: "Poland is a model in this respect... issues related to the Polish model of forest management will also be discussed" (J. Szyszko, November 25, 2015). However, the analysis revealed that this policy narrative was strong before 2019 and faded away afterwards, being replaced by the claim that Poland requires special consideration and financial support, which is part of the first narrative.

Poland's right to pursue its own climate pathway is, at several occasions, justified in reference to the Paris Agreement. Politicians consider the wording of the Paris Agreement that refers to net-zero emissions and the absences of the word *decarbonisation* a Polish success:

"There is nothing in the Paris Agreement about the fight against coal. The word decarbonisation is absent. There is only the so-called climate neutrality, and that has been preserved" (P. Safek, December 29, 2015). Some actors refer to the Paris Agreement as the agreement that binds Poland, rather than EU-level decisions:

As far as the source of the law is concerned, for Poles the source of law is the Paris Agreement, because this is an agreement that has been ratified by Poland. Climate neutrality in the second half of the 21st century is part of the Paris Agreement. In the strictly legalistic language, the Conclusions of the European Council are not a source of law. The source of law will be only the legal acts that will result from this. (M. Kurtyka, January 15, 2020)

In 2020, an EU Climate Law was adopted, which changed this line of argumentation by turning the EU climate neutrality goal by 2050 into a binding obligation. This EU-level event coincided with the shift in Polish narrative from the continuation of coal to conditional change.

This policy narrative emphasises Poland's sovereignty and aims to minimise the EU level's role and influence on Polish climate policy. It portrays Poland as a hero who pursues its own pathway against the interference from the villain EU. The narrative goes beyond emphasising that Poland is in a difficult situation in terms of the climate neutrality transition and rather outlines a sovereign and distinct approach compared to its EU partners. The reason for this different pathway is again the setting of a highly carbon-intensive energy system but also of the country's unique (forest) resources. In this narrative, the scope of the discussion on EU-level climate policy is expanded to include the option of GHG sequestration through forests and innovation as an alternative pathway to the decarbonisation promoted by the EU. This expanded scope is deemed more favourable for Poland. The proposed policy solution is that Poland takes sovereign decisions. This emphasis on sovereignty makes the narrative more difficult to reconcile with the EGD. Financial support from the Just Transition Mechanism alone seems inadequately equipped to influence this policy narrative and bring it in line with the EU's objectives. Yet, the shift away from the narrative of preserving the status quo of coal use while absorbing GHGs, towards the narrative which highlights the need for financial support to transition, shows that positions have changed and other options are now considered. However, the emphasis on Poland's distinctness remains.

5.3. Climate Policy Threatens Competitiveness

Overall, a third narrative runs through the debate, which argues that climate policy threatens Polish and EU competitiveness and economic growth. EU-level policy is portrayed as harmful to the Polish economy:

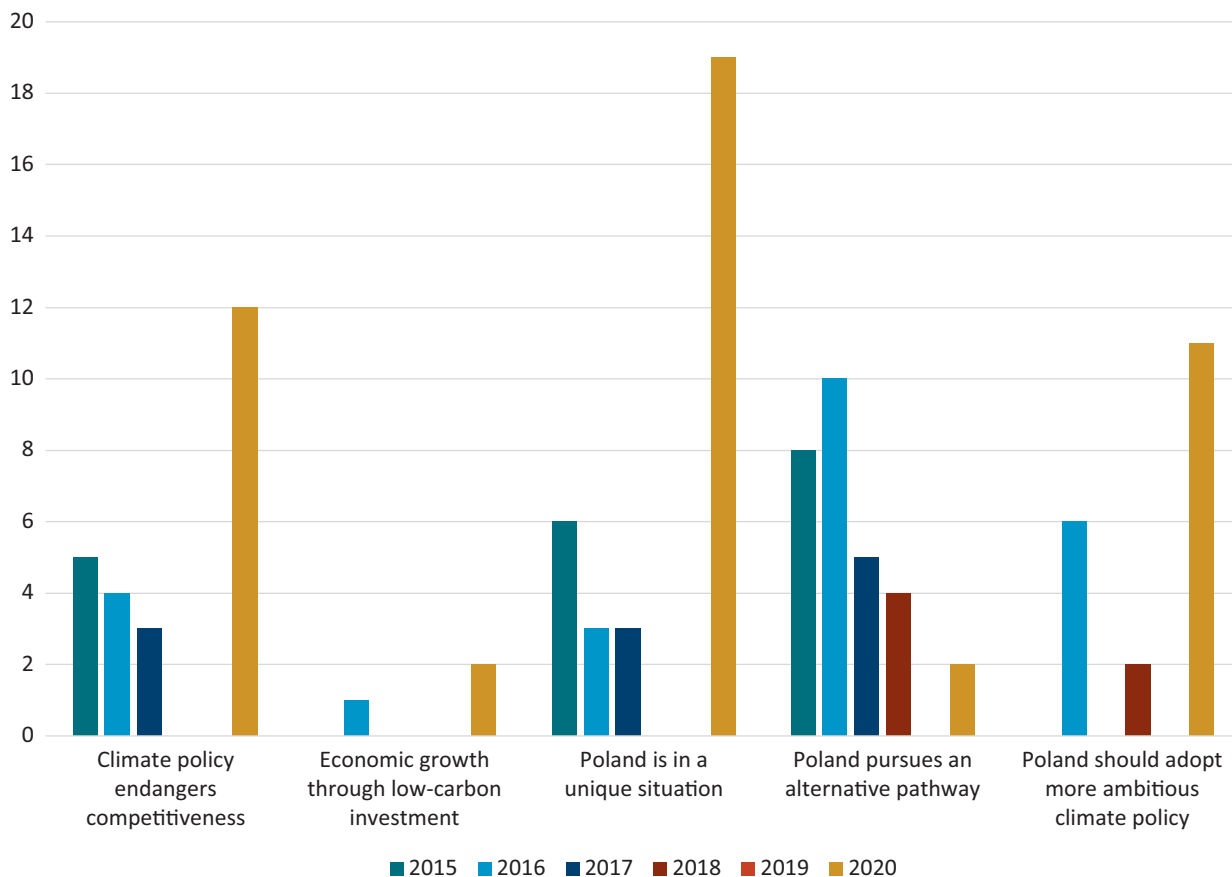


Figure 1. Individual references to the narrative over time (2015–2020).

I would like to emphasise the fact that the government is right to disagree with this type of restriction, because our natural resource, which is coal, will suffer a great deal under this solution. I think that our entire economy would slow down quite sharply if we were to adapt to these requirements. (P. Olszówka, February 8, 2017)

Further, several actors fear carbon leakage, which describes the situation in which companies relocate to outside of Europe where they are not covered by the same rules, allowing them to continue emitting GHGs. The analysis found that the narrative of climate policy threatening competitiveness is predominantly used by PiS politicians and to some extent by Polish People’s Party (PSL) representatives, as shown in Figure 2. Yet, the party is not entirely cohesive on this aspect. In the debate on the results of the European Council summit which took place on December 10–11, 2020, Konrad Szymanski, Minister for European Affairs from the ruling PiS party stated:

I think that throughout the whole discussion on transformation, we should take into account not only the costs of the transformation in themselves but also the costs of the lack of transformation. I have the feeling that this element is completely missed and that there

is the impression that the lack of transformation generates zero costs for the economy. (K. Szymanski, December 16, 2020)

Nonetheless, as shown in Figure 1, many individual references continue using the policy narrative of climate policy harming competitiveness in the 2020 debates. While the quote above is an exception to this trend, it could hint at a recognition of EGD policies by individual politicians. Yet, drawing conclusions based on one quote seems premature.

In this policy narrative, EU climate policies are villainised as incurring a burden on and a disadvantage for the Polish economy in the setting of a world that does not follow the EU’s example of ambitious climate policy. Poland is characterised as the victim of this policy. The proposed policy solution is the lowering of the EU’s level of ambition. However, another policy proposal that could help address this narrative’s concerns is a Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism as proposed by the European Commission in the summer of 2021.

6. Polarisation

The three identified policy narratives are not put forward by all political parties alike and they do not constitute opposing narratives. Rather, the governing party

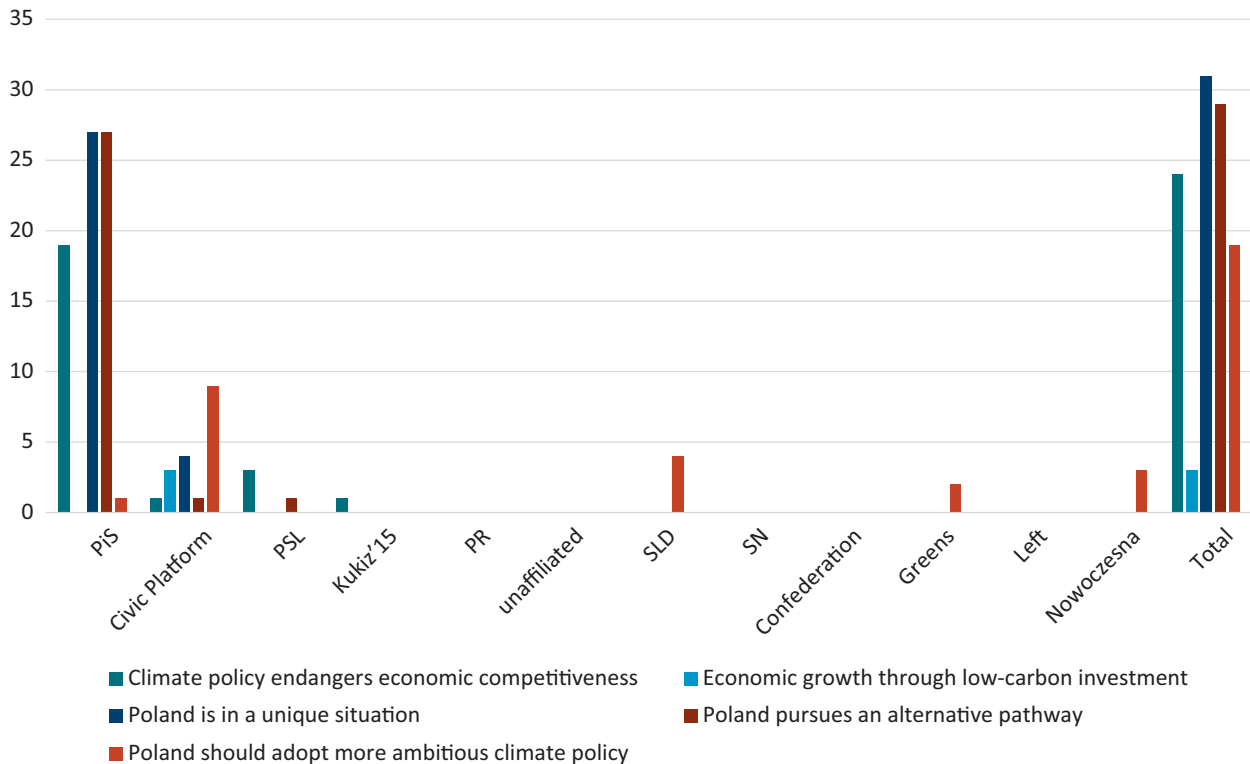


Figure 2. Individual references to the narratives per political party (2015–2020).

PiS dominantly uses all three narratives. This higher number of individual references is not surprising since PiS has more representatives in parliament than the other parties. In the ninth legislative term, it counted 198 of 460 MPs and its electoral coalition United Right 235 MPs, which was almost the same in the eighth term. Yet, it is surprising that no distinct opposition narrative was identified. Certainly, in the eighth Sejm legislative term, no clear polarisation trends could be identified, confirming earlier findings by Marcinkiewicz and Tosun (2015). Yet, in 2020 the picture slightly changed. On the one hand, two opposition party coalitions each submitted a draft resolution on the climate crisis and climate emergency, on which a polarised debate took place. One resolution was introduced by the Left (centre-left political parties) and the other one by Civic Coalition (centre-right political parties). The Civic Coalition resolution included a climate neutrality target by 2040 and the Left resolution by 2050. In the debate on the draft resolutions, polarisation between the government party (PiS) and other right-wing parties, on the one hand, and the Civic Coalition and the Left, on the other, was evident. Most statements that Poland should adopt more ambitious climate policy were made in 2020 by a growing number of political parties.

As mentioned above, the narrative claiming that climate policy threatens economic competitiveness was predominantly used by PiS MPs. In 2020, a counter-narrative highlighting that Poland could gain competitiveness through climate policy emerged, and was used by a few Civic Platform MPs. It emphasised the need for investments. Moreover, some Civic Platform, Democratic

Left Alliance (SLD; since 2020, New Left), Nowoczesna, and Green MPs called for more ambitious climate policy (see Figure 2). This points to a change in Polish climate policy of earlier periods. It shows nascent polarisation on climate policy between the right-wing political parties, on the one hand, and the centre-right and centre-left parties, on the other.

7. Conclusions

In EU climate debates, Poland has opposed decisions to increase the Union’s level of ambition at multiple occasions, creating political turbulence at the EU level. Poland’s position can be linked to three distinct narratives that I detected in the national parliamentary climate debate: First, politicians perceive Poland as being in a unique situation, which requires solidarity and recognition by the other EU member states. Second, politicians advocate for Poland to pursue an alternative pathway, which combines the continued use of coal with emission capture through forests and technological innovation. In this second narrative, the country’s sovereignty is emphasised. Third, climate policy is described as detrimental to economic competitiveness. The EGD and its Just Transition Mechanism respond to the first narrative, by recognising Poland’s challenges in transitioning to climate neutrality and supporting it in this process. The other two narratives are, however, more difficult to reconcile with the EGD.

Despite this, the analysis shows that the *alternative pathway* narrative faded at roughly the same time as the

EGD was proposed at the EU level, while the *unique situation* narrative simultaneously became stronger. Before 2019/2020, the narrative defending and preserving the status quo and emphasising that Poland is active on climate policy—just differently than the others—was strong. With the EGD, the narrative shifted towards calling for recognition of Poland’s uniqueness in combination with increased (financial) support. Nascent polarisation was noticed at this same time. While it is not possible to make causal claims based on the narrative analysis, the correlation suggests that the EGD has contributed to creating some turbulence in the Polish climate debate. Other factors such as public opinion, the need to modernise the electricity system, and weather extremes seem likely additional factors amplifying a possible EGD turbulence.

Turbulence is an event that is “highly variable, inconsistent, unexpected or unpredictable” (Dobbs et al., 2021, p. 317). The EGD constitutes what Dobbs et al. (2021) label a *policy turbulence*, which consists of the adoption of a fundamentally new policy that has changed, to some extent, the parameters and expectations based on which EU member states make their climate policy. The narrative shift that was noted in the 2020 Sejm debate hints at this. The design of how the EGD “governs with turbulence” (Dobbs et al., 2021, p. 317) is of course not the result of a unidirectional process from the EU to Poland. The Polish position and narratives also have left an imprint on the EGD. Nonetheless, the European Commission’s proposal and resolve to increase climate ambition and integrate it in many other policy fields has received a noticeable response in the Polish parliamentary debate. Future research could delve into the causal links between the EGD and changes in Polish climate policy narratives and positions, identifying to what extent it created a turbulence.

EU climate policy is based on decarbonisation, which includes abandoning the use of coal. This is diametrically opposed to the narrative of Poland’s pathway that continues to rely on coal. The Just Transition Mechanism aims to soften opposition to exiting coal by aiming to create alternative economic opportunities for affected communities. A stronger local narrative on the opportunities could help counter the alternative pathway narrative. This links to Zuk and Szulecki’s (2020, p. 9) conclusion that energy transition in Poland is not only a technological and financial issue. Rather, it relates to cultural, ideological, and political problems. EU financial support would need to be part of a mix of measures, which addresses ideological and related aspects of Polish decarbonisation to persuade Polish actors to get on board. This also links to the third narrative on competitiveness in that a counter-narrative on the opportunities created through climate policy could support just transition finances. First signs of such a counter-narrative have been noted in the 2020 debates.

The introduction of new funds like the Just Transition Fund aims at supporting Polish and other EU mem-

ber state coal regions. By making the climate neutrality transition fairer and more inclusive, the European Commission aims to generate more support for the ambitious EU climate targets as set out in the EGD. My analysis shows that there is some receptiveness to this development. However, narratives highlighting Poland’s sovereignty in taking energy-related decisions and portraying climate policy as detrimental to economic competitiveness are difficult to change with financial support alone. Engagement, recognition, and counter-narratives seem good complementary measures. My analysis shows signs of polarisation among political parties. Very few MPs used an emergent counter-narrative highlighting that low-carbon investments can generate economic growth. Climate policy has, to a limited extent, become an arena for party competition.

As such, my qualitative analysis of Polish climate policy narratives has shown that support for or opposition to EU-level climate policy can be justified with very different stories. Depending on the prevailing narrative, the EU reaction needs to be different. This article constitutes a first step to understanding the role of climate policy narratives in the interaction between the EU and its member states and how policy narrative analysis can help align both levels’ policies.

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Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the author (unedited).

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