



Full Length Article

Populist far right discursive-institutional tactics in European regional decarbonization

Mahir Yazar^{*}, Håvard Haarstad

Centre for Climate and Energy Transformation, Department of Geography, University of Bergen, Norway



ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Populist far-right
Backlash politics
Regional decarbonization
Discursive institutionalism
Europe

ABSTRACT

What rhetorical strategies are populist far-right parties using to delay regional decarbonization? This paper focuses on three populist far-right parties—the Conservative People's Party of Estonia (EKRE), Alternative for Germany (AfD), and Poland's Law and Justice (PiS)—and the discursive-institutional tactics each used from 2014 to 2021 to delay decarbonization of their carbon-intensive regions. We identify three discursive-institutional tactics used by populist far-right actors to delay decarbonization: (1) politicizing decarbonization, (2) reframing cultural values to form alliances with anti-decarbonization movements, and (3) dismantling key decarbonization institutions. We show that the populist far-right discursive-institutional tactics in European regional decarbonization are prevalent and vary widely. The politics of backlash against the EU-driven progressive public policies and anti-democratic rhetoric, including xenophobia and national sovereignty discourses are commonly used by these three populist far right parties to mobilize counternarratives against climate change and regional decarbonization. EKRE and PiS typically portray themselves as the protectors of social insurance and safety for vulnerable groups affected by regional decarbonization. PiS and AfD harness regional identity to mobilize civic engagement against decarbonization. All three parties work to empty and dismantle key decarbonization institutions. Overall, our findings suggest that carbon-intensive regions are particularly susceptible to the discursive tactics and institutional work of populist far-right parties, and may therefore provide opportunities for these parties to constrain decarbonization more broadly.

1. Introduction

Due to their production and heavy use of fossil fuels, carbon-intensive European regions are at the heart of the energy transition. Although these regions contribute to economic prosperity in their respective countries, carbon-intensive industries must be phased out. However, progressive state actions for decarbonization and structural changes to these industries appear to stimulate populist far-right backlashes. Consequently, managing decarbonization activities in carbon-intensive regions poses a clear political risk. Far-right populists and their influence on climate denialism have been studied broadly (Forchtner, 2019; Forchtner & Lubarda, 2022; Lockwood, 2018). Nevertheless, we know little about the strategic discursive and institutional tactics that populist far-right parties use to delay fossil phase-out in carbon-intensive regions.

This paper contributes to the literature by focusing on populist far-right anti-decarbonization discourses and institutional tactics in Estonia, Germany, and Poland amid regional decarbonization policies

and actions. We specifically focus on the Conservative People's Party of Estonia (EKRE), Alternative for Germany (AfD), and Law and Justice (PiS) in Poland, and their discourses surrounding the carbon-intensive regions of Ida-Virumaa, North Rhine-Westphalia, and Silesia, respectively. Our primary research question is: *What rhetorical strategies do populist far-right parties use to delay regional decarbonization?*

Regions are key to decarbonization because fossil extraction typically has significant regional employment and economic impacts, as well as influencing regional identity and politics. Therefore, we need to understand regions as 'social constructs that do not rise in a vacuum but that are made in broader social practice' (Paasi, 2009, p. 133). Herein, we applied the most basic classification of region, which Parr (2014) refers to as a *policy region*, in which highly carbon-intensive industries are located and are the subjects of decarbonization policies. Given the profound structural changes implied by European Union (EU)-driven decarbonization agendas, which directly concern these regions' economic and social prosperity, the populist far-right may navigate its national politics to specifically target regional decarbonization processes.

^{*} Corresponding author.

E-mail address: Mahir.Yazar@uib.no (M. Yazar).

Populism is a thin ideology that pits politicians and experts (i.e., *elites*) against *ordinary people* (Ivarsflaten et al., 2019; Mudde, 2010). Its proponents build discourses around the experienced or anticipated loss of control or values (Decker & Lewandowsky, 2017). This definition also includes a second requirement claiming that no one has the right to violate popular sovereignty (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2018). The far right is typically used as an umbrella concept encompassing a political landscape with flexible and blurred boundaries between diverse political parties, actors, and movements that spur nativist perspectives (e.g., protecting a specific ethno-racial group) and authoritarian political agendas (e.g., opposing key institutions that function liberal democracy such as independent judiciary and media) (Pirro, 2023; Mudde, 2019). Populist authoritarian politics often promotes taking back control in the name of “the people” to restore national sovereignty from “a brutal and ignorant mass” (Rancière, 2013) as “others” (at home and abroad). Hence, “populism serves simply to draw the image of a certain people (Rancière, 2016, p.102).” It is typically assumed that the widening gap between rural and urban amid the neoliberal era, due to the various challenges imposed on rural regions such as the increasing reliance on technology-based resource extraction and consequently unemployment, tight austerity measures and declining prosperity, convincingly plays a strong role in the rise of populism (Scoones et al., 2018; Bori and Gonna, 2022, also see Virtual Forum on Populist Ecologies, Menga (2021), and the Emancipatory Rural Politics Initiative at www.iss.nl/erpi).

There is increasing attention from researchers to understand how political ecologies intersect with populism, especially how political parties across the political spectrum (from far right to the radical left) empty and co-opt emancipatory concepts such as sustainability, anti-extractivism, or anti-neoliberalism to further strengthen marginalization, oppression, and authoritarian rule (McCarthy, 2019; Scoones et al., 2018). Far-right populism tends to be climate sceptical and supportive of fossil-intense economic growth through one or several of their core far-right narratives, such as ethnonationalism, Euroscepticism, or national security – distinguishing them from left wing populism (Lockwood, 2018). Populist left-wing parties or governments in Latin American countries, such as El Salvador, Nicaragua, or Ecuador, for instance, have long supported fossil-intensive economic growth but based this on anti-capitalist and anti-extractive narratives. Conspiracies linking climate change to foreign threats to national economic development are also emerging as a form of contemporary populism, especially in Brazil, where President Bolsonaro orchestrated the strategy of constructing “populist ecologies” to gain public support by claiming that the decision to exploit the environment for the benefit of the country falls under the purview of national sovereignty (Atkins & Menga, 2022). Meanwhile, globalization, a major trend, is strongly linked to populist narratives, with Trump being the most salient example, as he argues that trade competition harms local economies (Autor et al., 2020; Colantone & Stanig, 2018).

For this study, our empirical analysis centres on two important European-level climate policy milestones to analyse populist far right discursive-institutional tactics in Estonia, Germany and Poland amid regional decarbonization policies and actions. First, in 2014 the European Commission (EC) agreed to the 2030 Framework on Climate and Energy, which requires coal emission reductions. Second, in 2019 the European Green Deal was introduced. Within this context of EU-introduced decarbonization actions, we track the populist far-right parties’ evolving strategic discursive and institutional tactics to delay fossil phase-out in their respective carbon-intensive regions.¹ Although the average electoral gains by populist far-right parties in the 2019 European elections were modest compared with those in 2014 (Schraff

¹ See percent variation of carbon emission intensity, and percent variation of CO₂ at NUTS2 regional levels in Europe in the interactive online map designed by Climate_KIC scientist here: https://public.tableau.com/app/profile/sara.zanni/viz/Climate_KIC_Dashboard_15629388856350/Story.

et al., 2022), we track the tactics that were developed within both election periods and during two EU-level policy milestones.

We employed the process-tracing method and analysed 55 documents, including comprehensive academic literature and a corpus of issue-specific policy documents (e.g., position papers, press releases, party manifestos). We found that the three selected populist far right parties politicize decarbonization and climate change, reframe cultural values to form alliances with anti-decarbonization movements, and dismantle key decarbonization institutions. The remainder of the article proceeds as follows. Section 2 describes our theoretical framework, which is grounded in the political geography and environmental politics literature. The case study methods are described in Section 3. The results of the three cases are presented, within our theoretical framework, in Section 4. In Section 5 we discuss the three case study objectives, addressing the discursive-institutional tactics driven by the three populist far-right parties regarding anti-decarbonization. We close the paper with concluding remarks about the wider implications of the populist far-right anti-decarbonization tactics.

2. Theoretical context: populist far-right, discursive tactics, and institutional work

Discursive institutionalism suggests that ideas affect policy choices (Béland, 2009; Schmitz, 2017; Tyfield, 2014), and discourses are a crucial dimension shaping the extent to which ideas influence policy directions, outcomes, and public support (Schmidt, 2015; Yazar, 2022). Discursive institutionalism, thus, is understood as the capacity of actors to influence cognitive and normative beliefs of other actors (individual or collective) through ideational elements (e.g., culture, traditions, emotions) in both formal and informal institutional contexts (Béland & Cox, 2016; Carstensen & Schmidt, 2016; York & Yazar, 2022). All political actors seek to navigate discourses and institutions strategically to meet their ideology- and interest-based goals. Similarly, from other actors’ perspectives, populist far-right parties hold materialistic (resources, capacity) and ideological (narrative, discursive) power (Anderson & Secor, 2022) to participate substantively in decarbonization arenas (Brisbois, 2019). In the political geography and environmental politics literature, there is a growing interest in the effects on institutions of discourse and *meaning-making* by contentious actors (Bontje et al., 2019; Gillard, 2016; Jambrina-Canseco, 2023; Leitner et al., 2008; Patterson, 2022; Schmidt, 2015).

Studying populist far-right is arguably particularly relevant because they use their discursive strategies to undermine institutions and values generally seen as important to the *public good*, often via the institutions themselves. For example, discursive tactics like media campaigns, party manifestos (Brisbois, 2020; Christiansen et al., 2015; Geels et al., 2016; Lockwood et al., 2017; Smink et al., 2015; van Berlo & Natorski, 2020) and anti-clean energy protests (Fraune & Knodt, 2018; Sovacool et al., 2022) are used by the populist far-right and its political actors to influence policy processes, actions, and decisions. Within this context, populist far-right parties may navigate institutional complexities to increase their effects on decarbonization, such as by protecting self-interest, constraining decarbonization decision-making, or spurring authorities in institutionalizing (or delaying) decarbonization policies and actions.

Therefore, we argue that the institutional and discursive tactics of populist far-right are not static or linear, but dynamic and multidimensional. By examining populist far-right discursive tactics and their influences on institutions, we identify a typology of three tactics they use to influence institutional structures to delay decarbonization actions. The following subsection introduces these three discursive-institutional tactic types: first, the politicization of decarbonization via populist far right narratives; second, reframing cultural values to create alliances with anti-decarbonization movements; and third, dismantling institutions.

2.1. Politicization of decarbonization via populist far-right narratives

Climate change is a *valence issue* (Stokes, 1963). That is, it is perceived as a societal problem by most people, even if they do not agree on the appropriate solutions (Fraune & Knodt, 2018; Yazar et al., 2022a). Phasing out fossil-intensive industries is one important way to deal with climate problems. The alignment with energy transition among major Western European countries, for instance, prompts populist far-right parties to develop anti-climate rhetoric (Otteni & Weisskircher, 2022) embodied as post-truth politics (Abraham, 2020; Selk & Sonnicksen, 2017). Post-truth politics generate discussion and debate surrounding climate change by questioning expertise and science, and by using emotional appeals to influence policy outcomes (Fischer, 2019). Hence, politicization takes place in both formal and informal institutional settings, such as parliamentary speeches (accusing and shaming decarbonization supporters) and the media, to exert political influence (Avelino, 2017; Sminck et al., 2015) and increase political polarization (Farstad, 2018). But this does not take away from the fact that many people in carbon-intensive regions are likely to be (very legitimately) concerned over their own economic interests. People are worried about plant closures, unemployment and, over the long-run, depopulation and being “left behind” more generally (Rodríguez-Pose, 2018). All of these concerns may indeed materialize if nothing is done to mitigate the impacts of the transition. There is a spatial question here about where jobs will move next, which is key to understanding both the success of these topics and why populist far-right parties focus on them (MacKinnon et al., 2022).

Against this backdrop, climate change becomes a *value issue* (Belina, 2020; Lockwood, 2018; Yazar et al., 2022b) rather than a *valence issue*. Such meaning-making through value-based discourses reframes climate change as an *elite* issue and decarbonization as counter to the interests of *the people*. The discourse surrounding climate change and energy transition within populist far-right narratives have increasingly shifted from the realm of rational scientific debate to the domain of nationalist ideology and myths (Forchtner, 2019). Thus, we argue that a key populist far-right tactic reframes the energy transition, such that climate change shifts to core populist far-right narratives like Euroscepticism, ethno-nationalism, and national security and interests. This, in turn, serves to increase political polarization regarding conditions and processes of decarbonization policies and actions in carbon-intensive regions.

2.2. Reframing cultural values to create alliances with anti-decarbonization movements

Regional identity is closely linked to dimensions of regionality, which Paasi (2009) described as being formal and based on their relatively homogeneous and cohesive natural or cultural features. Such features can include natural habitat, ethnicity, or other cultural domains, which are also tied closely to regional identity. Regional identity can be expected to form a significant factor if a carbon-intensive region meets this formal region definition (e.g., based on cultural or ethnic similarities, or a common language). Thus, this becomes a second discursive-institutional tactic. We hold that the populist far-right seeks political opportunities by portraying themselves as the protectors of traditional or cultural values, such as traditional mine workers, or the function of traditional mining in maintaining family values or creating networks. This is accomplished in carbon-intensive regions through either mobilizing bottom-up movements or exploiting such events to attract more opponents to progressive climate policy and actions. For instance, strong political, economic, and workforce links are reinforced within carbon-intensive sectors by the extensive presence of the trade union membership, a mining industry that is either fully or partially owned by the state, and the substantial revenues generated by this industry that benefit the surrounding communities (Dzieciolowski & Hacaga, 2015; Szpor & Ziłkowska, 2018). Although the populist far-right has felt threatened by social movements and protests

demanding progressive change (Barros & Wanderley, 2020), network-organized protests are one of the most important tactics for mobilizing people against carbon-intensive phase outs (Sovacool et al., 2022).

Such staged mass demonstrations, either against mine closures or renewable investment, are often linked to fears that traditional or cultural values embedded within the carbon-intensive regional economy will be displaced. They position the populist right as gatekeepers for social insurance and protection against the radical changes introduced by the progressive climate agenda. Against this backdrop, we argue that the populist far right reframes cultural values to create alliances with anti-decarbonization movements, either through social media campaigns or by actively organizing anti-climate and anti-clean energy transition movements in those regions. These parties thus portray themselves as the protectors of traditions, social insurance, and safety for vulnerable groups in these regions.

2.3. Dismantling institutions

We argue that populist far-right parties' third tactic is navigating institutional complexities to gain influence over decarbonization processes, either by dismantling institutions that are key to decarbonization or by creating failed institutions by design. Multiple political parties and actors pursue the strategic dismantling of institutions to infuse their political agenda (Brisbois, 2019; Newig et al., 2019). Dismantling institutions is understood as ‘the removal or destabilization of existing institutions leading to them having diminished reach and influence’ (Patterson, 2021, p. 46). Such a strategy could be used to undermine global climate targets by removing government subsidies for them or by modifying laws important to achieving them (Skovgaard & van Asselt, 2019). Political actors can also target specific institutions that persist in pursuing their interests, thus delaying progressive decarbonization policies and actions. We argue that the populist far-right can dismantle institutions either by eroding the functions of the leading decarbonization institutions or by creating *empty* institutions that are designed to fail. Empty institutions are defined as ‘social arrangements that consist of relatively stable rules and procedures that exclude regulatory policymaking or policy implementation’ (Dimitrov, 2020, p. 627). Depending on their legislative power, the populist far-right is constitutionally entitled to follow certain global norms (e.g., human rights), but they can also distance themselves by implementing these norms through empty institutions. These institutions camouflage the absence of concrete policy and create public impressions of policy progress, when in fact they are designed to fail (Dimitrov, 2020; Patterson, 2021). These empty institutions, either newly created or malfunctioning within existing institutions run by incumbent governments, are part of the institutional structure. More importantly, they are not contradictory to governments. Their climate agendas are not binding, potentially leading to soft goals with limited substantive authority under hard regulatory instruments (Torenvlied & Akkerman, 2004).

3. Case studies and methods

In this section, we examine the three discursive-institutional tactics introduced above as an analytical framework for our case series. The analysis focuses on three populist far-right parties—the EKRE, AfD, and PiS (see Table 1)—and the discursive rhetoric they use regarding anti-decarbonization in three respective carbon-intensive regions: Ida-Virumaa (Estonia), North Rhine Westphalia (Germany), and Silesia (Poland). These regions represent a high degree of diversity in terms of fuel type (see Table 1) and progress of energy transformation. Despite differences in their political experience, PiS, for instance, has longer government experience, these three far-right parties are selected as they are the popular (in terms of voting) far-right parties in their countries. They have all played significant roles in delaying regional decarbonization processes. Our empirical approach, including the rationale for

Table 1
Populist far right parties selected for empirical evaluation.

Carbon-intensive region	Estonia	Germany	Poland
	Ida-Virumaa	North Rhine-Westphalia	Silesia
Regional profile	Shale oil mining and power generation; petrochemical industry	Lignite mining and power generation; emission-intensive industries (aluminium, paper, petrochemical industry); automotive industry	Hard coal mining and power generation; emission-intensive industries (basic metals); automotive industry
Selected populist far right political party	EKRE	AfD	PiS
Party details	Founded in 2012 National conservative and populist far-right In coalition government from 2019 to 2021	Founded in 2013 National conservative and populist far-right Held federal and state parliament seats in almost every parliament since 2017	Founded in 2001 National conservative and populist far-right In the majority national government since 2015

addressing these specific cases and the data collection methods, is presented in the subsections below.

3.1. Estonia and the Ida-Virumaa region

The EKRE was established in 2012 after merging two far-right parties, the People's Union of Estonia and the Estonian Patriotic Movement. Since its establishment, the EKRE has built an ethno-nationalist camp using populist far-right rhetoric in Estonian politics.

After the March 2019 national election, the Centre Party (EK), Isamaa Party (Christian democrats' centre-right party), and the EKRE (populist far-right) coalition government formed and governed until 2021. Looking at the European elections of 2014 and 2019, the EKRE increased its support by 12.7 percentage points in 2019 (Valimised, 2014, 2019). The party is known for instigating divisive domestic policies, and its leaders have been remarkably unrestrained in their public insults of the EK for their energy policies in the Ida-Virumaa region. Therefore, we focus on the EKRE when examining the populist far right in Estonia.

Ida-Virumaa, one of Estonia's 15 counties and located in northeast Estonia, contains large deposits of shale oil used in power plants and the oil industry. Ida-Virumaa County has a population of 136,240, 73% of whom are Russian-speaking Estonians. Currently, around 5000 people are directly employed in the shale oil industry, and it indirectly employs another roughly 20,000 (e.g., logistics, services). In the shale oil sector, there has been a gradual employment decline, by about 500 people annually, due to both efficiency increases in the mining sector and regional restructuring of the electricity and oil industries. In Ida-Virumaa County, there was only a 24.3% participation rate in the 2019 European elections. Low voter turnout was attributed to Russian speakers' disapproval of the EK coalition with the populist far right EKRE (De Sio et al., 2019).

3.2. Germany and the North Rhine region

Founded in 2013, the AfD is now represented in almost every German state parliament. Overall support for the AfD has been stronger at the federal level, in both the 2014 and 2019 European elections. In its 10 years of existence, the AfD used to be a Eurosceptic right-wing party but turned to the radical right in 2015. Today AfD is considered a 'far-

right party, propagating an identarian ideology with a strong anti-constitutional group' (Schaller & Carius, 2019, p. 84). It is increasing its anti-climate and energy transition rhetoric, in the North Rhine-Westphalia and its urban centres of Cologne, Düsseldorf, and Aachen. Compared with the 2014 European election, the AfD increased its support by almost 3.1 percentage points in the North Rhine-Westphalia region in 2019 (The Federal Returning Office, 2014, 2019; also see Arzheimer & Berning, 2019; Heinze, 2022 for the AfD's ideological and electoral development at the subnational levels).

In the North Rhine mining area, the highest shares of gross value added in 2015 were attributed to lignite mining and power generation, accounting for 13% and 11%, respectively. On the other hand, the economic significance of lignite in the entire Rhineland lignite region is low, with mining and power generation contributing 0.6% to value creation and employing less than 10,000 people, constituting around 0.3% of the entire working population (Oei, Brauers, & Herpich, 2020). Also, this NUTS-2 region encompasses a significant petrochemical industry, hosting many petroleum refineries, large-scale chemical raw material production plants, a major Ford Motor Company production plant, and other automotive suppliers. A total of more than 90,000 people are employed in these energy-intensive industries.

3.3. Poland and the Silesia region

The 2015 parliamentary victory of the national conservative and populist far-right PiS ushered in unprecedented polarization in Poland, including the party's climate and environmental policy agendas. PiS support was stronger at the national level in both 2014 and 2019. Compared with the 2014 European election, the PiS increased its support by almost 9 percentage points. in the Silesia region in 2019 (Państwowa Komisja Wyborcza, 2014, 2019). Herein, we focus on the PiS, though it is notable that a far-right party formed in early 2019, which then merged with the right-wing party KORWIN and the radical right National Movement, winning 11 national parliament seats (6.81% of votes).

Silesia is the largest remaining hard coal mining region in the EU, in terms of both output and employment (approximately 70,000 mine workers). Over the last three decades, Silesia has undergone an economic transition within the broader economic restructuring and decentralization of the Polish economy. Although the productivity of traditional coal-related industries has increased, both employment and physical output have decreased. Simultaneously, the region has seen robust growth in new manufacturing, including vehicles and vehicle parts. Unemployment and poverty rates are low compared with other Polish regions, though these growth benefits and restructuring costs have been distributed unevenly across the region (Bukowski et al., 2018; Yazar et al., 2022a).

3.4. Methods and data collection for the three cases

For the three cases outlined above, we use a qualitative approach to explore empirically these populist far-right parties' discursive framing of decarbonization via the three identified institutional tactics. The parties' policy discourses and strategic practices targeting decarbonization were analysed using a systematic review of the comprehensive academic literature and corpus of issue-specific policy documents (e.g., position papers, press releases, party manifestos) (Hajer, 2005). We also analysed the involved actors' political speeches, policy briefs, and newspaper interviews related to anti-decarbonization actions specific to the three identified regions. This process-tracing method allowed us to explore actors' characteristics and strategic practices vis-à-vis energy transitions, the EU climate and energy agendas, and climate change. The method is broadly used to understand how discourses are tied to political actions and serve as sources of legitimation and justification of policy decisions (Beach, 2017; Van der Heijden, 2019). The rationale for using this method is that it best fulfils our aim of achieving the broadest

possible basis for interpretation, by combining complementary evidence across the three cases.

To identify the relevant materials for each country, we collaborated with researchers in each country who have long-standing experience with their respective regional political environments related to energy transition. Through these collaborations, we developed time periods for document selection to focus specifically on the energy transition in each carbon-intensive region, and the debate over the 2019 European Green Deal, with a particular focus following the election of the EC in December 2019. The resulting analysis timeframes for the included documents were 2014–2020 for Germany and Poland and 2016–2021 for Estonia when the EKRE became a major opposition in national politics.

The collaborators in these regions also helped identify documents for analysis by searching websites and other databases for text-based material—some authored by the populist far-right parties in the selected regions—that were designed for public consumption. We also identified relevant sections in longer policy documents, such as vision and mission statements, executive summaries, and introductions describing decarbonization, clean energy investments, or structural changes. We scanned newspaper articles, especially those in which political figures were interviewed, and opinion pieces related to energy transition in the identified carbon-intensive regions. We used Google Translate to translate relevant documents to English for analysis, with regional collaborators checking these translated transcripts for plausibility and errors.

In total, the analyses herein are based on 55 documents (19 for the EKRE, 15 for the AfD, and 21 for the PiS). We used document codes (e.g., E1, G1, P1, respectively, and noted parenthetically below) for the case study (see Appendix I for the documents included herein and the codes for each country/region). We then systematically compared the coded documents (see [Bernard et al., 2016](#)) to identify statements that best represented the three discursive tactic types: politicization of climate change via populist far right narratives, reframing cultural values to create alliances with anti-decarbonization movements, and dismantling institutions.

Appendix I shows that most of EKRE's sources are from newspaper articles, especially *Uued Uudised*, a conservative newspaper that publishes opinion pieces from the EKRE party. This allows us to track the evolution of discourses surrounding specific events and issues related to regional decarbonization. AfD has a variety of sources available online, including party programs from different years, political actors' blogs, and federal parliamentary speeches, as well as different newspaper outlets. For PiS, we also rely on multiple sources, including party programs, parliamentary and policy documents, and various newspaper outlets to analyse content and trends related to energy transition and regional decarbonization in the selected regions over time. Although document availability varies depending on the political party and its history in active politics (PiS, for instance, has more extensive political history than the other two parties); we maximized variance in data sources that fit best to capture these three parties' common discourses based on politicization of climate change, reframing cultural values, and dismantling institutions.

4. Results

4.1. Politicization of climate change via populist far right narratives

4.1.1. The EKRE: Saviour of shale oil production in the Ida-Virumaa region

The 2016 EC Clean Energy Package can be considered a milestone in Estonia's populist far-right narratives, linking anti-decarbonization to their core ideas. The EK under Kaja Kallas's leadership had an agenda for renewable investments, phasing out carbon-intensive industries, and creating new job opportunities in Ida-Virumaa (E4). Then, the 2018 elections led to the formation of a right-wing coalition government among the EK, the EKRE, and Isamaa. The EKRE's anti-decarbonization

discourse focused primarily on unemployment and self-determination as they pertain to the Ida-Virumaa region (E1, E3, E5). Also, considering the Russian minorities and conservatives' votes from the region, the EU-driven progressive agendas based on gay rights and immigration are underscored by the party when national-sovereignty is portrayed at stake and the potential for Russian involvement in the region is questioned (E2).

The EKRE's 2019 European Election manifesto described the EU as the European coal and steel community (E11). These narratives were reiterated, especially by Jaak Madison, EKRE MP, who stated that the EU must return to the times when coal and steel unions dominated (E7). Euroscepticism was also highly emphasized in this party manifesto, with the EU described as a threat diminishing 'the standard of living of the citizens of nation-states' (E11). In 2020, the national government gave EKRE Minister of Finance Martin Helme the authority to increase the equity capital of Eesti Energia (a public limited energy company) by €125 million (E13), positioning the EKRE as the protector of the region's shale oil sector and job security, before the coalition collapsed in early 2021. When the coalition government took power in 2019, the EKRE Minister of Finance prioritized energy security, and Eesti Energia was given a primary role in preserving oil shale mining (E8). Although the EK blamed the EKRE for the construction of a new shale oil plant in the region in 2019, the party agreed with the EKRE and Isamaa on the efficient use of oil shale and worked with them to reconcile renewable energy objectives and national defence interests (E10, E11, E12).

Although the EKRE can be characterized as an ethnonationalist and far-right party, there was an overall shift in the party's populist narratives from 2016 to 2021, when they toned down their ethnonationalist narrative. Party members began targeting the EK's energy transition plans (e.g., investing in renewables, phasing out oil shale mining) and liberal public policies (e.g., supporting same-sex marriage and immigration). The EKRE's Minister of Finance introduced family values to his arguments, stating that they were threatened by support for gay rights and that migration from Ukraine already jeopardized job security in the region (E14, E18).

4.1.2. AfD: denies human-caused climate change and promotes disinformation

The AfD 2014 party manifesto was based on criticizing the 2014 Renewable Energy Law. The party did not support abandoning renewables but opposed public spending (e.g., tax funding) on them (G1). After 2014, the AfD increasingly denied that human activity caused climate change. The 2016 electoral programme stated that 'no one denies the warming climate, but it is questionable that this warming has only negative effects (also see [Küppers, 2022](#), pp. 1–21). Because CO₂ is the foundation of all life on Earth, its emissions should be promoted and not restricted, also because that would increase the growth of plants which ultimately would fight world hunger' (G2). The party emphasized that the Earth's climate has always changed, climate research uncertainties, and that the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change was working with 'hypothetical climate models which are based on computer-based simulations' (G3). Similarly, the party's manifesto for the 2017 elections questioned the validity of climate science, argued against green energy transition schemes, and promoted exiting the Paris Agreement (G3).

The 2019 AfD Energy Program linked the anti-climate and energy transition agenda with traditional industrialism. The party positioned Germany as a minor contributor to global warming and prioritized energy security and the German 'Wirtschaftswunder' (economic miracle) legacy. Euroscepticism also emerged because the EU was conceptualized as a threat to employment, prosperity, and international competitiveness (G6). Although rejecting global climate action, the AfD underlined the importance of clean water, a healthy balance of game animals, and improved animal husbandry, promoting the protection of local ecosystems generally (G6). They used both the regional parliament and its media channels, including blog posts and YouTube, to infuse a climate

scepticism discourse. For instance, Christian Loose, AfD energy policy spokesperson in the state parliament of North Rhine-Westphalia, is notorious for his hate speeches and anti-climate rhetoric. In a 2019 parliamentary speech, Loose claimed, ‘the real problem is not likely to be global warming, but the population explosion in the African-Muslim states’ (G7). Loose also describes the coal phase out as ‘dark doldrums’ (G8), and climate actions as ‘dogmatically promoted’ (G9). Although fossil phase-out has started in the region as a result of national policy, the AfD continues actively to promote the continuation of mining activities (G10, G15). The state parliament group constantly calls on the state government to stand up to the federal government and to preserve jobs in the mining area’s ‘cleanest and more efficient coal-fired power plants’ (G7).

4.1.3. PiS: clean coal and sympathy for renewables amid climate negotiations

The 2014 PiS party platform advocated fossil fuel development to improve energy security and pledged to expand public investments in coal, which was seen as the primary Polish energy source (P1). Euro-scepticism also strongly influenced the party in 2014, by opposing EU climate policy and emissions trading and promising to exempt Poland from the 2007–2008 EU Climate and Energy Package (P1). Concerns about unemployment and national energy security were raised by stating that renewable energy is based entirely on foreign technology, and cannot be replaced with ‘clean coal produced with Polish combustion technology’ (P1). The 2014 party programme also denounced the Paris Agreement as a *fatal decision* in which other European nations would intervene in Poland’s sovereignty (P1). When the PiS formed the national government, the 2015 Recovery Plan of Kompania Węglowa S.A. was established to ensure that the state’s energy security would be supplied by domestic hard coal over the next 30 years (P9). The PiS was strongly opposed to onshore wind investments.

National parliamentary meeting minutes reveal that the Paris Agreement and the EU-level follow-up climate policies caused heated debates around energy security, climate change, and renewables (P10; P11). Compared with 2014, the PiS 2019 agenda recognized the Paris Agreement and Poland’s COP24 leadership (P2). At that time, the PiS seemed more cautious about climate change and aimed to achieve one-third of energy production from renewable sources by 2030. However, energy independence, especially from Russian coal, was still prioritized, and energy security was framed as ‘the principle of sovereignty’ (P2; P18). Hence the party made efforts to maintain certain renewable energy policies under the EU mandate and supported smaller-scale renewables (e.g., solar photovoltaics, biomass, hydropower) (P2).

The party’s changed renewable energy narrative is attributed to two factors: international visibility in climate change negotiations, especially after COP24, and Polish citizens’ growing interest in environmental matters (P3). In contrast, Pawel Salek, 2015–2018 Ministry of the Environment Secretary of State, urged that ‘the use of coal is not contrary to climate protection’ (P10; P12). Further, PiS Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki and Minister of Energy Krzysztof Tchórzewski were cautious in political speeches, considering the support their party gained in Silesia in 2019, especially from mining trade unions. Thus, PiS rhetoric has been influenced by international climate negotiations, public environmental concerns, and political support by residents of the carbon-intensive region. For instance, Prime Minister Morawiecki, introduced the Program for Silesia in December 2017 to gradually replace traditional sectors with new ventures by 2030 (P17).

4.2. Reframing cultural values to create alliances with anti-decarbonization movements

4.2.1. The EKRE portrays itself as the protector of family and work values

We found that EKRE ministers label themselves as the protectors of family values by opposing liberal public policies (E14, E18) and investing in fossil industries (E15, E16, E17), which they claim gives

locals ‘dignified living with their own work’ (E18). However, we found no evidence in the Estonian case that the EKRE had created alliances with social movements around the issues of family or work values.

4.2.2. AfD becomes visible in pro-diesel and anti-wind movements

Document analyses revealed that the AfD asserted that regulations and incentive schemes aimed at facilitating energy transition, especially the 2014 Renewable Energy Law, were initiatives driven by the elite, imposing burdens on everyday Germans (G6, G11). The AfD sought opportunities to advocate for traditional industrialism, primarily by encouraging the use of diesel cars, fracking, and nuclear energy (G4, G5). AfD federal board member Paul Hampel criticized the North Rhine-Westphalia state government for the Stuttgart diesel ban. This ban triggered the anti-ban *German yellow-vest* protests in January 2019. AfD politicians, including Dirk Spaniel, the transport policy spokesperson for the AfD’s federal parliamentary group, were among the protesters. Although the protest’s organizer denied affiliation with the AfD or any other political party, the presence of the AfD logo was evident on numerous protest signs (G12). Building on their discourse on the ecological implications of the energy transition by highlighting renewable-based landscape deformation and its adverse effects on humans and animals (G6), the AfD has sought to align itself with local protest movements opposing onshore wind power (Eichenauer et al., 2018; Otteni & Weisskircher, 2022). It has also been documented that the AfD also mobilized against energy transitions in other regions where its main electoral strongholds, such as Lusatia in Eastern Germany (Weisskircher, 2020).

4.2.3. PiS increases credibility by delaying a rapid energy transition

Document analyses revealed a shift in the PiS’s efforts to increase its credibility in the Silesia region. In 2014, the government’s transition plan for Silesia triggered unions and mine workers to organize a demonstration, known as the Miners’ Manifestation. The PiS framed the situation as having been caused by former Prime Minister Tusk and others’ adoption of the *climate pact* and closing mines in the region (P4, P6, P7, P8).

Grzegorz Tobiszowski, Silesia’s PiS parliamentary club 2014 election member, described mining as ‘characteristic of us’ and positioned himself as a defender of mining and hard coal (P5). In fact, when he became the Minister of Energy, Tobiszowski attempted to navigate the politically complex energy transition by considering international and EU-level commitments, as well as voters’ support for the PiS (P13). Intelligent Mine, a flagship project implemented under the Program for Silesia, purportedly used technologically advanced solutions to increase hard coal mining efficiency, ensure underground miner safety, and minimize mining’s negative environmental impacts (P11). Mining Areas Support Platform Subcommittee Chairperson Izabela Kloc raised questions in the national parliament to counteract polarization in the region during mining area growth and development (P16). Contradictory declarations were made by PiS members to address concerns related to the ‘commitments made to EU to the energy transition’ vs. protection of *traditions* and *traditional mine workers*. In September 2019 at the Economic Forum in Krynica, Minister Tchórzewski stated, ‘We can afford the development of renewable energy sources ... We want to follow the step that we have negotiated, and we will do everything to achieve the set goals ahead of us’ (P3). In contrast, Poland’s President Andrzej Duda, who had been a PiS member from 2005 to 2015, claimed that he would not allow anyone to murder the Polish mining industry as long as he was president, using cultural connotations in stating, ‘We have too much tradition in it—for example, this holiday of St. Barbara, your Barbórka, whose customs are inscribed on the list of our cultural heritage’ (P14, P15).

4.3. Dismantling institutions

4.3.1. The EKRE ruptures ministry of the environment functioning

In Estonia, most of the EKRE party members' criticism is directed at the Riigikogu Environment Committee, a national parliament standing committee that drafts legislation on environmental and natural resource policy and ratifies international environmental agreements. Committee members were questioned by EKRE members in 2018, particularly Jaak Madison, who blamed the committee for not considering the socio-economic consequences of phasing out shale oil (E6). Then, when the EKRE gained two key ministries (Ministries of the Environment and Finance), these were used to help block energy transition and continue investing in shale oil; at this time, the Committee of Environment was malfunctioned. First, the EKRE Minister of Finance supported Eesti Energia's shale mining and accelerated construction of a new oil factory in the region. This decision was also supported by the EKRE Minister of the Environment, Rene Kokk. Kokk raised many concerns about energy security, asserted that oil shale production complemented investments in nuclear and renewable energy, and disagreed that the future need be limited to renewables (E9). Kokk also argued that construction of the oil plant supported climate policy and the energy economy because the technology used in Eesti Energia 'is known to be the most efficient and industrially proven oil shale refining technology with the lowest environmental impact in the world' (E19).

4.3.2. AfD relies on 'shadow institutions' for disinformation

The AfD delayed decarbonization-related decisions by opposing climate policy recommendations by the Federal Committee on Climate Action and Energy. AfD representatives in regional government have also engaged with a counterinstitution to spread climate change and decarbonization disinformation. To push their climate denial agenda, AfD members have teamed with pundits in the European Institute for Climate and Energy (EIKE), a German thinktank founded to defame climate science and climate protection policies generally (G13). In fact, EIKE Vice President Michael Limburg helped prepare the AfD's 2017 party programme and advised Karsten Hille, AfD member and climate policy spokesperson to the federal parliament (G14). This shadow network leveraged the party to develop proposals harmful to the climate agenda. EIKE is also connected to a European subsidiary of CFACT, a lobbying organization that advocates for free market solutions to environmental issues, and the Heartland Institute, a US conservative think-tank (G12). Although disinformation generated by the EIKE has been proven misleading and inaccurate, it continues to be used by climate sceptic groups and local protesters against technology like wind turbines (Eichenauer et al., 2018).

4.3.3. PiS forms non-competing climate agendas for selected ministries

Our document analysis revealed clear examples of constitutional malfunctions under the PiS government. In particular, these included sidelining the Ministry of the Environment and merging various ministries to achieve common goals and prevent opposition to the government's pro-coal agenda. In particular, the Prime Minister and the Ministry of Energy overshadowed and sidelined the Ministry of the Environment and Government Plenipotentiary for Climate Policy in formal bureaucracy channels and decision-making. The Ministry of the Environment was positioned as a *full-consent institution* supporting the Ministry of Energy. This manufactured climate network was also influential in opposing EU-level decisions by building coalitions with other big emitters in Europe, including Czechia, Estonia, and Hungary (P19).

The PiS government established the Ministry of Climate Change after COP24, to which the appointed Minister was Michal Kurtyka, Secretary of State of the Ministry of the Environment from 2018 to 2019 and Government Plenipotentiary for the Presidency of COP24. This Ministry was limited to conducting international climate negotiations but was also responsible for the creation of the Act on Electromobility and Alternative Fuels (P21), a PiS renewable energy policy that was included

in the party's 2019 manifesto (P2). To disfunction the role of the Ministry of the Environment, *to protect the environment* as defined by the 2001 Environmental Protection Law, the Ministry of Climate Change was merged with the Ministry of the Environment in 2020 under a new title, the Ministry of Climate and the Environment. Prime Minister Morawiecki still determines the direction of the EU Green Deal in Poland and has stated that the deal should include *clean coal* in future fuel production (P20).

A comparative assessment of the cumulative discursive-institutional tactics used by the three populist far-right parties is described in Table 2.

5. Discussion

Previous studies have focused on the three populist far-right parties examined herein (Belina, 2020; Berbuir et al., 2015; Lockwood, 2018; Petsinis, 2019; Selk & Kemmerzell, 2021; Żuk & Szulecki, 2020). But this paper further advances our understanding of how these parties use discursive-institutional tactics to alter or delay decarbonization in carbon-intensive regions of Europe. The findings are elaborated below, within three categories: politicizing regional decarbonization, social insurance and safety protection amid the energy transition, and reliable institutions to accelerate the populist far-right anti-decarbonization agenda.

5.1. Politicizing regional decarbonization

Unsurprisingly, the three populist far-right parties have much in common. In particular, they use ethnonationalism and anti-democratic rhetoric to politicize decarbonization and climate change. Despite the commonalities in their shifting narratives, our empirical results reveal that each party has its own defining politicization tactics, which centre on *value issues* versus *valence issues*. We observed that the EKRE and AfD have merged their primarily ethnonationalist narratives with climate denialism and anti-decarbonization to fill the gap left by the typically pro-environment political discourses in the respective countries, whereas the PiS uses its parliamentary power strategically to navigate decarbonization actions.

Both the EKRE in Estonia and the AfD in Germany have politicized decarbonization by building anti-democratic discursive tactics around decarbonization actions and climate change. The EKRE's Euroscepticism is coupled with conservative public policy, emphasizing that the real threat is not climate change but risks to traditional family values. This message has received positive responses in Ida-Virumaa. Our analysis provides evidence of this discursive tactic in the politicization of decarbonization in Estonia. Recent political party ratings show that support for the EKRE has increased since 2019 among the Russian community of Ida-Virumaa County (NorStat Party Ratings, 2021). Such support from Russian speakers in the region may be attributed to the EKRE's opposition to energy transition plans and its support of conservative public policy.

In contrast, *post-truth* politics shape the AfD's discursive tactics. That party acknowledges climate change but criticizes how climate change is conceptualized and politicizes its reality by praising the importance of CO₂ for the Earth and life on it. In this way, the party navigates a conflicting terrain to claim that climate change is not actually a societal problem.

The PiS in Poland issued more radical statements related to decarbonization before it became the ruling party in 2015 (for a second time, after governing the country during 2005–2007). This party relied heavily on national sovereignty and Euroscepticism, opposing Eurocentric decarbonization actions, which are seen as threats to traditional mining and the 1960s *good old days* of expansive industrialization in Silesia. The PiS nevertheless navigates its constitutional power on legislative and executive decisions to minimize conflicts over the energy transition and European climate negotiations.

Table 2
Comparative assessments of selected populist far-right parties' discursive-institutional tactics.

Discursive-Institutional Tactics by populist far-right parties	EKRE (Estonia)	AfD (Germany)	PiS (Poland)
<i>Politicization of decarbonization via populist far-right narratives</i>	Conservative public policy linked to energy transition	Xenophobia and climate denialism linked to climate change and energy transition discourse	National sovereignty linked to energy transition
<i>Reframing cultural values to create an alliance with anti-decarbonization movements</i>	No alliances created with social movements Protector of family values and traditional mine workers	Participate in and mobilize protests against low carbon mobility and wind turbines	Reframe cultural values to create an alliance with anti-decarbonization movements Protector of traditional mine workers
<i>Dismantling institutions</i>	Committee of Environment malfunctioned Close collaboration between Ministries of the Environment and Finance on shale oil investments	Delays decisions on opposing climate policy recommendations by Federal Committee on Climate Action and Energy Counterinstitution via the EIKE to spread disinformation	Dismantles the legally defined role of the Ministry of the Environment Creates politically reliable climate networks between the Ministries of the Environment and Energy Opposes EU-level decisions by building coalitions with other large emitters in Europe

5.2. Social insurance and safety protection amid the energy transition

Our empirical results are limited to describing the strong networks established between the populist far-right and anti-decarbonization movements in the reference countries, and their carbon-intensive regions. However, we have observed that all three parties portray themselves as the protectors of social insurance and safety, though each uses a different tactic. A rhetoric of nostalgia, the *good old days*, is propagated by the AfD and the PiS, as they supported and joined the anti-decarbonization movements in their respective regions. Further, in the PiS's early years, we observed that the party infiltrated unions to trigger protests in Silesia and praised mine workers as the protectors of the region's cultural tradition. More interestingly, the EKRE, which is known for its ethnic nationalism, instrumentalizes conservative family values and shale oil mining as protectors to win over the ethnic Russian population of Ida-Virumaa. During the 2019 coalition, the EKRE positioned itself as the protector of the fossil fuel industry, and in doing so increased sympathy among locals in the carbon-intensive region of Ida-Virumaa, including Russian-speaking ethnic groups. The EKRE is currently building trust among those who are the most vulnerable in the energy transition, a trend that is an avenue for future research.

Although the AfD remains the most prominent anti-climate and anti-decarbonization party, our findings show that it does not deal exclusively with structural change in the North Rhine Westphalia region. One of the most crucial elements that distinguish the AfD from the other cases is its anti-decarbonization policies designed to alleviate the economic challenges of the Energiewende in carbon-intensive regions and for Rhineland workers. This rapid transition is attributed to the corporatist collective bargaining system in Germany that allows unions to actively engage in industrial decision-making, thus involving workers in climate and industrial policy (Hager, 2015). However, our findings also reveal that the AfD is the most visible party, either directly organizing or involved in many protests targeting the governments' advanced climate policies in the German states.

Temporal politics and swings in national leadership determine the PiS's approach to protests in the Silesia region. Before the party came to power in 2015, PiS members were the strongest supporters of protests against the national government's decarbonization actions in the region. Although the PiS tried to prove that rapid decarbonization was rational after 2015, party members emphasize the complexity of the process and the inability to carry it out relatively quickly, while praising traditional mining and its cultural values in Polish society. The largest political camps in Poland see the need for energy transformation and are pushing the national government to accelerate the transition. However, the PiS is aware of Poland's dynamic economic development over the last four years and seeks common ground for decarbonization by focusing on clean mobility and renewables; they are also easing political tensions in the region by securing coal mining activities.

5.3. Reliable institutions to accelerate the populist far right anti-decarbonization agenda

All three parties have carried out institutional work to not only deliver their discourses to the broader public but also to shape climate policy outcomes. Specifically, the EKRE and PiS deliberately changed and damaged existing institutions within their formal bureaucracies, while the AfD collaborated with a counterinstitution outside its formal government to claim space and legitimacy for their anti-climate discourse to influence climate policy processes and outcomes.

In the 2019 coalition government, the EKRE strategically held two important ministries, the Ministry of the Environment, and the Ministry of Finance, remaking these according to its fossil-intense economic growth agenda. The strong coalition formed by these ministries ensured the acceleration of shale oil investments in Ida-Virumaa. This institutional tactic ruptured the checks-and-balances role of the Committee of Environment in the Estonian parliament on environmental regulations.

The AfD has collaborated with a counterinstitution, the EIKE, to justify its climate denialism and spread disinformation to politicize climate change and decarbonization actions by the federal and state parliaments in Germany, as well as among the public. The pressures that the AfD imposes on the Federal Committee on Climate Action and Energy through inaccurate political discourse have not led to changes in the role of the institution, as in the cases of the EKRE and PiS. Yet their discursive-institutional tactics certainly create barriers and delay progressive climate policy agenda-setting and decision-making.

The PiS has created strong political coalitions within the bureaucracy to carry out its political agenda. Similarly to the EKRE, the PiS sabotaged and side-lined the Ministry of the Environment and created a political consensus on the operations and decisions of the Ministry of Energy in the energy transition and climate policy. Another institutional tactic used by the PiS has been the creation of new institutions, such as the Ministry of Climate Change, which later merged with the Ministry of the Environment, to deal with climate diplomacy. One advantage of this tactic has been to cause cooling off periods for controversial decisions. For instance, although the country was represented as a pioneer in international climate negotiations at COP24, these institutions failed to intervene in the PiS's decision to continue investing in and importing overseas coal. Thus, these institutions are not failing by mistake, but are instead designed to fail, as previously suggested (Dimitrov, 2020).

6. Conclusion

Although populist far-right and their influence on climate denialism have been studied broadly (Forchtner, 2019; Forchtner & Lubarda, 2022; Lockwood, 2018), we know less about the strategic discursive and institutional tactics that populist far-right parties use to delay fossil phase-out in carbon-intensive regions. In comparing the three populist far-right parties in Estonia, Germany, and Poland, and these parties'

discursive-institutional tactics on regional decarbonization, we found that decarbonization is often contentious and has been increasingly used as a political tool by the populist far-right. The three discursive-institutional tactics—politicization of climate change, traditional values coupled with social movements, and dismantling institutions—highlight that populist far-right parties orchestrate these tactics against political opponents to delay or dismiss decarbonization actions and claim space and legitimacy by politicizing climate change and decarbonization in public discourse. Moreover, such politicization also leads to institutional change by destabilizing the role of institutions within the formal bureaucracy, to carry out their energy and climate agendas. Understanding how institutional changes are carried out by the populist far-right is not a simple task, particularly once we move beyond a straightforward assessment of decarbonization policy outcomes.

This study contributes to a better understanding of populist far-right forces by analysing their common discursive and institutional tactics within dynamic, regional-level energy transformation. Studying populist far-right discursive-institutional tactics is key to understanding how regional transformations influence national politics, especially to politicize decarbonization and climate change. The three cases evaluated in our article reveal that these parties politicize decarbonization by infusing disinformation. This disinformation includes the so-called benefits of CO₂ for the planet and that clean coal technology is part of the green future while arguing that the real threat is not climate change but overpopulation, especially in countries with ethnic and racial majorities that are not European majority. Disinformation is also a common tactic when populist far right parties deliberately misrepresent regional decarbonization as a direct threat to national sovereignty, and the elements of regional identity, such as unique family and cultural traditions.

We observed that the selected far-right parties manipulate progressive agendas (e.g., same sex marriage) for their own bidding, generating ethnonationalist narratives that target specific minority groups (e.g., gay, or specific ethno-racial groups). Through this strategy, these parties aim to convince the public that the primary challenges facing society do not stem from climate change or carbon emissions, but rather from broader societal concerns related to specific progressive agendas that undermine traditional values. This study's findings on the discursive-institutional tactics of three far-right parties can contribute to raising new questions on broader populism research to unpack intersectional marginalization and climate change.

Overall, our findings suggest that carbon-intensive regions are particularly susceptible to the discursive tactics and institutional work of populist far right parties. Carbon-intensive regions may therefore provide opportunities for the populist far-right to constrain decarbonization more broadly. These regions could constitute a weak point in national decarbonization strategies and may help populist far-right parties gain wider national support. Politicizing decarbonization agendas to create political conflicts and to delay rapid decarbonization policy actions and outcomes may cause system lock-ins at the regional scale. For political actors seeking to advance decarbonization, it may become particularly important to provide safety nets and skills retraining for workers affected by decarbonization. This will be important in its own right but may also help circumvent populist rhetorical strategies.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Acknowledgements

This project received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under the grant agreement CINTRAN "Carbon Intensive Regions in Transition - Unravelling the Challenges of Structural Change" (No: 884539), the objective of which is

to understand the multiple characteristics of the identified carbon-intensive regions, towards identifying their transition challenges. The authors thank our project partners in Estonia, Germany, and Poland, Eeva Keskula, Lukas Hermwille, Max Schulze-Steinen, and Izabela Fortuniak, for document selection and helpful comments on earlier versions of this article. The authors also appreciate the generous and insightful comments of the Editor and three anonymous reviewers.

Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2023.102936>.

References

- Abraham, J. C. (2020). *Populist just transitions*. Virginia Tech): Doctoral dissertation.
- Anderson, B., & Secor, A. (2022). Propositions on right-wing populism: Available, excessive, optimistic. *Political Geography*, 96, Article 102608.
- Arzheimer, K., & Berning, C. C. (2019). How the Alternative for Germany (AfD) and their voters veered to the radical right, 2013–2017. *Electoral Studies*, 60, Article 102040.
- Atkins, E., & Menga, F. (2022). Populist ecologies. *Area*, 54(2), 224–232.
- Autor, D., Dorn, D., Hanson, G., & Majlesi, K. (2020). Importing political polarization? The electoral consequences of rising trade exposure. *The American Economic Review*, 110(10), 3139–3183.
- Avelino, F. (2017). Power in sustainability transitions: Analysing power and (dis) empowerment in transformative change towards sustainability. *Environmental Policy and Governance*, 27, 505–520.
- Barros, A., & Wanderley, S. (2020). Brazilian businessmen movements: Right-wing populism and the (dis) connection between policy and politics. *Organization*, 27(3), 394–404.
- Beach, D. (2017). Process-tracing methods in social science. In *Oxford research encyclopedia of politics*.
- Béland, D. (2009). Ideas, institutions, and policy change. *Journal of European Public Policy*, 16, 701–718.
- Béland, D., & Cox, R. H. (2016). Ideas as coalition magnets: Coalition building, policy entrepreneurs, and power relations. *Journal of European Public Policy*, 23, 428–445.
- Belina, B. (2020). Political geography lecture: Social forms, spatial forms, and the New Right. Celebrating capital at 150 and explaining the rise of the AfD. *Political Geography*, 81, Article 102091.
- Berbuir, N., Lewandowsky, M., & Siri, J. (2015). The AfD and its sympathisers: Finally a right-wing populist movement in Germany? *German Politics*, 24(2), 154–178.
- van Berlo, M., & Natorski, M. (2020). When contestation is the norm: The position of populist parties in the European parliament towards conflicts in Europe's neighbourhood. *European union contested: Foreign policy in a new global context*, 191–211.
- Bernard, H. R., Wutich, A., & Ryan, G. W. (2016). *Analyzing qualitative data: Systematic approaches*. SAGE publications.
- Bontje, L. E., Gomes, S. L., Wang, Z., & Slinger, J. H. (2019). A narrative perspective on institutional work in environmental governance—insights from a beach nourishment case study in Sweden. *Journal of Environmental Planning and Management*, 62, 30–50.
- Brisbois, M. C. (2019). Powershifts: A framework for assessing the growing impact of decentralized ownership of energy transitions on political decision-making. *Energy Research & Social Science*, 50, 151–161.
- Brisbois, M. C. (2020). Shifting political power in an era of electricity decentralization: Rescaling, reorganization and battles for influence. *Environmental Innovation and Societal Transitions*, 36, 49–69.
- Bukowski, M., Śniegocki, A., & Wetmańska, Z. (2018). *From restructuring to sustainable development. The case of Upper Silesia*. Warsaw, Poland: report by WiseEuropa for WWF Poland Foundation. December 2022: slask_restrukturyzacja ANG-final-logo.pdf (euki.de).
- Carstensen, M. B., & Schmidt, V. A. (2016). Power through, over and in ideas: Conceptualizing ideational power in discursive institutionalism. *Journal of European Public Policy*, 23, 318–337.
- Christensen, L. T., Morsing, M., & Thyssen, O. (2015). Discursive closure and discursive openings in sustainability. *Management Communication Quarterly*, 29(1), 135–144.
- Colantone, I., & Stanig, P. (2018). The trade origins of economic nationalism: Import competition and voting behavior in Western Europe. *American Journal of Political Science*, 62(4), 936–953.
- Decker, F., & Lewandowsky, M. (2017). Rechtspopulismus in Europa: Erscheinungsformen, Ursachen und Gegenstrategien. *Zeitschrift für Politik*, 64, 21–38.
- Dimitrov, R. S. (2020). Empty institutions in global environmental politics. *International Studies Review*, 22, 626–650.
- Dzięciolowski, K., & Hacaga, M. (2015). Polish coal at the turning point: Uneasy past, challenging future. *Journal of Energy Security*, 6.
- Eichenauer, E., et al. (2018). Bürgerinitiativen gegen Windkraftanlagen und der Aufschwung rechtspopulistischer Bewegungen. In O. Kühne, & F. Weber (Eds.), *Bausteine der Energiewende* (pp. 635–653). Wiesbaden: Springer VS.
- Farstad, F. M. (2018). What explains variation in parties' climate change salience? *Party Politics*, 24, 698–707.
- Fischer, F. (2019). Knowledge politics and post-truth in climate denial: On the social construction of alternative facts. *Critical Policy Studies*, 13, 133–152.

- Forchtner, B. (2019). Climate change and the far right. *Wiley Interdisciplinary Reviews: Climate Change*, 10, Article e604.
- Forchtner, B., & Lubarda, B. (2022). Scepticisms and beyond? A comprehensive portrait of climate change communication by the far right in the European parliament. *Environmental Politics*, 1–26.
- Fraune, C., & Knodt, M. (2018). Sustainable energy transformations in an age of populism, post-truth politics, and local resistance. *Energy Research & Social Science*, 43, 1–7.
- Geels, F. W., Berkhout, F., & Van Vuuren, D. P. (2016). Bridging analytical approaches for low-carbon transitions. *Nature Climate Change*, 6(6), 576–583.
- Gillard, R. (2016). Unravelling the United Kingdom's climate policy consensus: The power of ideas, discourse and institutions. *Global Environmental Change*, 40, 26–36.
- Hager, C. (2015). Germany's green energy revolutions: Challenging the theory and practice of institution change. *German Politics and Society*, 33(3), 1–27.
- Hajer, M. A. (2005). Coalitions, practices, and meaning in environmental politics: From acid rain to BSE. In *Discourse theory in European politics* (pp. 297–315). London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Heinze, A. S. (2022). Dealing with the populist radical right in parliament: Mainstream party responses toward the alternative for Germany. *European Political Science Review*, 14(3), 333–350.
- Ivarsson, E., Blinder, S., & Bjånesøy, L. (2019). How and why the populist radical right persuades citizens. In *The Oxford Handbook of electoral Persuasion*.
- Jambrina-Canseco, B. (2023). The stories we tell ourselves: Local newspaper reporting and support for the radical right. *Political Geography*, 100, Article 102778.
- Küppers, A. (2022). 'Climate-Soviets', 'Alarmism', and 'eco-dictatorship': The framing of climate change scepticism by the populist radical right alternative for Germany. *German Politics*.
- Leitner, H., Sheppard, E., & Sziarto, K. M. (2008). The spatialities of contentious politics. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 33, 157–172.
- Lockwood, M. (2018). Right-wing populism and the climate change agenda: Exploring the linkages. *Environmental Politics*, 27, 712–732.
- Lockwood, M., Kuzemko, C., Mitchell, C., & Hoggett, R. (2017). Historical institutionalism and the politics of sustainable energy transitions: A research agenda. *Environment and Planning C: Politics and Space*, 35(2), 312–333.
- MacKinnon, D., Kempton, L., O'Brien, P., Ormerod, E., Pike, A., & Tomaney, J. (2022). Reframing urban and regional 'development' for 'left behind' places. *Cambridge Journal of Regions, Economy and Society*, 15(1), 39–56.
- McCarthy, J. (2019). Authoritarianism, populism, and the environment: Comparative experiences, insights, and perspectives. *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 109(2), 301–313.
- Menga, F. (2021). Virtual Forum introduction: Populist ecologies: Nature, nationalism, and authoritarianism. *Political Geography*, 1–2. art. n. 102549.
- Mudde, C. (2010). *The populist radical right: A pathological normalcy* (Vol. 33, pp. 1167–1186). West European Politics.
- Mudde, C. (2019). *The far right today*. John Wiley & Sons.
- Mudde, C., & Rovira Kaltwasser, C. (2018). Studying populism in comparative perspective: Reflections on the contemporary and future research agenda. *Comparative Political Studies*, 51(13), 1667–1693.
- Newig, J., Derwort, P., & Jager, N. W. (2019). Sustainability through institutional failure and decline? Archetypes of productive pathways. *Ecology and Society*, 24(1), 18.
- NorStat Party Ratings. (2021). *Erakondade reitingud - igapäevane erakondliku eelistuse kiisitus*.
- Oei, P. Y., Brauers, H., & Herpich, P. (2020). Lessons from Germany's hard coal mining phase-out: Policies and transition from 1950 to 2018. *Climate Policy*, 20(8), 963–979.
- Otteni, C., & Weisskircher, M. (2022). Global warming and polarization. Wind turbines and the electoral success of the greens and the populist radical right. *European Journal of Political Research*, 61(4), 1102–1122.
- Paasi, A. (2009). The resurgence of the 'region' and 'regional identity': Theoretical perspectives and empirical observations on regional dynamics in Europe. *Review of International Studies*, 35, 121–146.
- Państwowa Komisja Wyborcza. (2014). https://pe2014.pkw.gov.pl/pl/wyniki/wojewo_dztwo/view/24.html. December 2021.
- Państwowa Komisja Wyborcza. (2019). https://pe2019.pkw.gov.pl/pe2019/pl/organy_wyborcze/okregowe/11. December 2021.
- Parr, J. B. (2014). The regional economy, spatial structure and regional urban systems. *Regional Studies*, 48, 1926–1938.
- Patterson, J. J. (2021). Remaking political institutions in sustainability transitions. *Environmental Innovation and Societal Transitions*, 41, 64–66.
- Patterson, J. J. (2022). Backlash to climate policy. *Global Environmental Politics*, 1–23.
- Petsinis, V. (2019). Identity politics and right-wing populism in Estonia: The case of EKRE. *Nationalism & Ethnic Politics*, 25, 211–230.
- Pirro, A. L. (2023). Far right: The significance of an umbrella concept. *Nations and Nationalism*, 29(1), 101–112.
- Rodríguez-Pose, A. (2018). The revenge of the places that don't matter (and what to do about it). *Cambridge Journal of Regions, Economy and Society*, 11(1), 189–209.
- Schaller, S., & Carius, A. (2019). *Convenient truths. Mapping climate agendas of right-wing populist parties in Europe*.
- Schmidt, V. A. (2015). Discursive institutionalism: Understanding policy in context. In *Handbook of critical policy studies*. Edward Elgar Publishing.
- Schmitz, H. (2017). Who drives climate-relevant policies in the rising powers? *New Political Economy*, 22, 521–540.
- Schraff, D., Vergioglou, I., & Demirci, B. B. (2022). *The European NUTS-level election dataset: A tool to map the European electoral geography* (Vol. 13540688221083553). Party Politics.
- Scoones, I., Edelman, M., Borrás, S. M., Jr., Hall, R., Wolford, W., & White, B. (2018). Emancipatory rural politics: Confronting authoritarian populism. *Journal of Peasant Studies*, 45(1), 1–20.
- Selk, V., & Kemmerzell, J. (2021). Retrogradism in context. Varieties of right-wing populist climate politics. *Environmental Politics*, 31, 755–776.
- Selk, V., & Sonnicksen, J. (2017). Between opportunism and limitation: The resurgence of populism and the right-wing populist 'Alternative for Germany' (AfD). *Desenvolvimento em Debate*, 5, 79–93.
- Skovgaard, J., & van Asselt, H. (2019). The politics of fossil fuel subsidies and their reform: Implications for climate change mitigation. *Wiley Interdisciplinary Reviews: Climate Change*, 10, Article e581.
- Smink, M. M., Hekkert, M. P., & Negro, S. O. (2015). Keeping sustainable innovation on a leash? Exploring incumbents' institutional strategies. *Business Strategy and the Environment*, 24, 86–101.
- Sovacool, B. K., et al. (2022). Conflicted transitions: Exploring the actors, tactics, and outcomes of social opposition against energy infrastructure. *Global Environmental Change*, 73, Article 102473.
- Stokes, D. E. (1963). Spatial models of party competition. *American Political Science Review*, 57, 368–377.
- Szpor, A., & Ziłkowska, K. (2018). *The transformation of the Polish coal sector*. International Institute for Sustainable Development. Available at: <https://www.iisd.org/sites/default/files/publications/transformation-polish-coal-sector.pdf>.
- The Federal Returning Office. (2014). <https://www.bundeswahlleiter.de/en/europawahlen/2014/ergebnisse.html>. December 2021.
- The Federal Returning Office. (2019). <https://www.bundeswahlleiter.de/en/europawahlen/2019/ergebnisse.html>. December 2021.
- Torenvlied, R., & Akkerman, A. (2004). Theory of 'soft' policy implementation in multilevel systems with an application to social partnership in The Netherlands. *Acta Politica*, 39, 31–58.
- Tyfield, D. (2014). Putting the power in 'socio-technical regimes'—E-mobility transition in China as political process. *Mobilities*, 9(4), 585–603.
- Valimised. (2014). <http://ep2014.vvk.ee/detailed-en.html>. December 2021.
- Valimised. (2019). <https://ep2019.valimised.ee/en/voting-result/index.html>. December 2021.
- Van der Heijden, J. (2019). Studying urban climate governance: Where to begin, what to look for, and how to make a meaningful contribution to scholarship and practice. *Earth System Governance*, 1, Article 100005.
- Weisskircher, M. (2020). The strength of far-right AfD in eastern Germany: The east-west divide and the multiple causes behind 'populism'. *The Political Quarterly*, 91(3), 614–622.
- Yazar, M. (2022). *Norm domestication challenges for local climate actions: A lesson from Arizona*. USA: Environmental Policy and Governance.
- Yazar, M., Hermwille, L., & Haarstad, H. (2022a). Right-wing and populist support for climate mitigation policies: Evidence from Poland and its carbon-intensive Silesia region. *Regional Sustainability*, 3(4), 281–293.
- Yazar, M., York, A., & Larson, K. L. (2022b). Adaptation, exposure, and politics: Local extreme heat and global climate change risk perceptions in the phoenix metropolitan region. *Cities*, 127, Article 103763. USA.
- York, A., & Yazar, M. (2022). Leveraging shadow networks for procedural justice. *Current Opinion in Environmental Sustainability*, 57, Article 101190.
- Žuk, P., & Szulecki, K. (2020). Unpacking the right-populist threat to climate action: Poland's pro-governmental media on energy transition and climate change. *Energy Research & Social Science*, 66, Article 101485.