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## Conditional environmentalism of right-wing populism in power: ideology and/or opportunities?

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### ABSTRACT


This study focuses on right-wing populists (RWP) in power and their discourses and policy preferences on environmental issues. Through a content and frame analysis of electoral manifestos, party communication and semi-structured, in-depth interviews with party representatives, this paper examines whether ideological or contextual factors (political opportunities) determine RWP positioning on the environment. By focusing on the only three cases in Europe of RWP in government in a prominent position, i.e. alone or as a major coalition partner (also representing key ideological varieties of RWP), Law and Justice – PiS in Poland; Fidesz in Hungary and Lega in Italy, this study shows that ideological positions (and especially differences) are less important in determining RWP environmental discourses than are opportunities and institutionalization. Moreover, we also find that the shared features across these actors reflect a conditional, ‘yes-but’ environmentalism of these parties, embedded in the discourse of ecological modernization and oppositional, Manichean framing.

**KEYWORDS** Populism in government; environment; ideology; opportunities; inclusion-moderation

This study focuses on right-wing populists in power and their political and policy discourse on environmental issues (in particular climate). Environment is increasingly the battlefield of (also) right wing political actors: ‘Counteracting climate change is one of today’s most important challenges’; ‘We are one of the leaders in the “climate championship”’; ‘We need to engage better with the environment (...) bring the ecological question to the center of politics’. These statements may appear like excerpts pulled from a press release of any Green party, but they are not. In fact, all three were produced by right-wing populists (RWP): the

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first is by Mateusz Morawiecki, Poland's Prime Minister (Law and Justice, PiS, party); the second by Viktor Orbán, Hungary's Prime Minister (*Fidesz*, Hungarian Civic Alliance party); and the third is from the 2019 Election manifesto of the Italian *Lega per Salvini Premier* (henceforth, Lega). All three have been produced since these parties have been in power.

How can we explain this? If it is now clear that RWP parties are not simply 'anti-environmentalist' (Gemenis *et al.* 2012), it is not clear whether this actually indicates an ideologically 'green' turn within this political spectrum. After all, this turn (if there is one) has come after years of unfavorable positions by RWP towards the protection of the natural environment (Tosun and Debus 2020, Vihma *et al.* 2020, Huber *et al.* 2021a). Yet not only are RWP leaders publicly adopting 'pro-environmental' discourses but with 17 populist parties currently in power around the world, RWP parties have the potential to impact environmental policies through their position within governing coalitions (Caiani and Meardi 2022). This capacity to exercise power therefore raises a series of questions about what determines the environmental, political and policy positions that these parties take, and whether they are the result of ideology or the outcome of contextual 'political opportunities'. To put it another way: are the policy positions adopted in the political discourse by RWP parties in power primarily the result of ideological or political opportunities, namely contextual and positional factors? Do parties (still) tend to follow their ideological convictions as 'anti-environmentalists' or they moderate their positions once assuming power?

Ideology can indeed be a determinant of environmental policy preferences (McCright and Dunlap 2013) but in many situations, the context can assume prevalence (Criado and Herrerros 2007). Secondarily, RWP is not a monolithic ideology, with several variants (i.e. subgroups) within this party family, which can also be expected, in turn, to influence the (degree and) forms of these actors' political discourse (on environment). Examples of these varieties include 'national conservatism' on the one hand and the 'populist radical right' on the other (Zulianello 2020). A third subtype, 'neoliberal populists', is not included in our study as none of these parties has assumed power so far (at least, in Europe). We then also investigate, from a resource mobilization approach (della Porta and Diani 2006), if the differences among different types of actors can account for explaining the environmental politics of the RWP parties.

By focusing on the only three cases of RWP in Europe sharing a similar (strong) 'formal position' in power: Law and Justice in Poland; *Fidesz* in Hungary and Lega in Italy (also representing key ideological variants of RWP, see Table 1 about our cases), and drawing on content and frame analysis of electoral manifestos and organizational documents and semi-structured interviews with representatives, this paper explores the extent

**Table 1.** Our cases. Authors' elaboration

Populist Actor (name and country)	Type of RWP ideology	Institutional context (formal role and duration in power) In government (2018-2019, 2022-today)	Cultural and discursive context/opportunities
Law and Justice (Poland)	National Conservatism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Broader institutional context: semi-presidential system</li> <li>• In government (2005-2007; 2015-today but not with a 2/3 majority)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Medium salience of environment<sup>1</sup></li> <li>• Weak green parties (electoral strength)</li> <li>• Moderate movement mobilization on environment/climate change<sup>2</sup></li> </ul>
Lega (Italy)	Populist Radical Right (PRR)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Broader institutional context: parliamentary democracy</li> <li>• In government (2018-2019)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• High salience of environment</li> <li>• Weak green parties</li> <li>• High movement mobilization on environment/climate change (e.g., FFF)</li> </ul>
Fidesz (Hungary)	National Conservatism/ PRR	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Broader institutional context: (quasi-) majoritarian parliamentary d.</li> <li>• In government (1998-2002), 2/3 majority (2010-today)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Medium -to-high salience</li> <li>• Weak green parties<sup>3</sup></li> <li>• Moderate-to-high mobilization on environment/climate change</li> </ul>

and the forms (i.e. content, directions) of RWP political discourse on environmental issues and the changes across time. In fact, another relevant difference between the three cases is related to the time spent in power – institutionalization.

Acknowledging the complexity of the terminological debate and the mainstreaming of the radical right, we refer to our cases as representatives of a broad ‘right-wing populism’, following the ideational approach (Mudde 2007) and the commonly accepted classifications of populist parties in Europe. We also acknowledge Bonikowski’s (2017: S182) argument that focusing on RWP as a whole is ‘inhibiting the ability to recognize the phenomenon’s causes and consequences’. However, instead of focusing on the components of RWP in isolation (Manicheanism, ethnonationalism and authoritarianism), we try to differentiate ideological positions within the RWP spectrum. This enables us to develop comparative propositions for understanding both how RWP parties (with, in principle, similarly few constraints in implementing their political project, Caiani and Graziano 2022) act in power in different national contexts, and how ideological differences between them (i.e. subtypes) might affect their policy positions, comparing the national conservative or ‘radicalized mainstream’ (Bustikova and Guasti 2017) of PiS and Fidesz, with the populist radical right of Lega.

In the following, a critical reflection on the scholarship about RWP (and the radical right) and environment will provide us with the relevant concepts for the analysis. We then present the data and method, and in the following sections, we provide an in-depth empirical analysis of political positions on the environment over time of three respective cases. We then turn to the discussion building on the empirical analysis of the three cases. In the conclusion, we point to the key takeaways of RWP environmentalism (in power) and the lessons learnt for future research in this domain.

### **RWP and environmental politics: ideology and/or opportunities?**

A growing body of academic literature provides evidence of how RWP and far-right parties act on the environment (Lockwood 2018, Forchtner *et al.*, 2018; Schaller and Carius, 2019; Lubarda 2020), including the attitudes of their voters (Huber *et al.* 2021b; Duijndam *et al.* 2020; Domorenok and Prontera 2021). Most of the scholarships agree that the RWP have assumed critical positions against protective, ambitious European and national climate policies (Huber *et al.* 2021b; Tosun and Debus 2020, Vihma *et al.* 2020). Some relate this to the right-wing (and populist) *ideology* as key determinants of RWP environmental policy (Böhmelt 2021). Right wing populist ideology constructs the environment at a number of levels: privileging the national against the global domain of international policy-making, as is, for example, visible in climate change policy (Farstad 2018); foregrounding nostalgia and ‘retropias’ (Elçi 2022), where nostalgia for the past environments is a motivational frame and a call for policy action-restoration (Hanusch and Meisch 2022); or discursively centering ‘the people’ against the elites (i.e. the ‘polluting outsiders’, such as immigrants or elites or the elites making the people bear the costs of climate change, Lubarda 2017).

There are of course differences between RWP parties: for some, it is nationalist preferences and not populism per se that influence their view on environmental issues (Kulin *et al.* 2021), whilst others argue that populism serves only as an ‘enhancer’ of existing ideological attitudes (Huber *et al.* 2021a) on this topic. Because of their nationalism, as well as opposition to multiculturalism and internationalism, RWP forces and politicians frequently support local and national environmental policies that protect the countryside (i.e. rural vs. urban), nature and the homeland (Forchtner 2019), but often express skepticism about global environmental problems like climate change and oppose policies to address them. Second, ideological interpretations are particularly relevant when it comes to the far-right ideology, as the ecocentric emphasis on blood and soil of the so-called ‘ecofascism’ (Hughes *et al.* 2022) is generally narrower than far-right ecologism, which also includes conservative and populist sentiments

(Lubarda 2020). Moreover, with regard to policy attitudes, nationalist ideology (a feature of RWP) has been shown to be more influential than traditional left–right political ideology, environmental values and political trust (Kulin *et al.* 2021).

Populist attitudes play an important role in explaining climate change skepticism and opposition to environmental protection: yet, populism offers an orthogonal dimension to partisanship and left–right self-placement (Huber 2020), which broadens the scope of the concept of ideology suggested by Bartha *et al.* (2020). These analyses also point to the potential policy heterogeneity within the RWP spectrum: examples of ‘green’ RWP, such as environmental populism of anti-extractive or climate justice movements (Buzogány and Mohamad-Klotzbach 2021) and far-right ecologism (see the volume by Forchtner 2019), are cases in point. However, research on this topic is still scant and centered around the presumed association between RWP and denialism, based on the anti-establishment sentiments of RWP against the ‘green lobbies’.

Beyond ideology, there are also other factors that may matter for RWP positioning on the environment. First, the political opportunities provided by the institutional framework of the country within which populists act. Second, the formal power that populist parties have in government (Biard *et al.* 2019). Third, the role of coalitions: in most European parliamentary democracies, the populists act within governmental coalitions that constrain their power (Albertazzi and McDonnell 2015). However, in semi-presidential systems, such as Poland, and in (quasi-)majoritarian parliamentary ones, such as Hungary, populists have the possibility of governing either alone or as the dominant political force in a coalition – that is, they face minimal constraints in following their policy preferences (Kriesi 2018). Fourth, procedural gaps can allow RWP to obstruct environmental policies in parliamentary debates by positing an alternative expertise, using their own ‘pro-RWP’ scientists, to substantiate the party claims (Böcher *et al.* 2022).

Likewise, the impact of governmental responsibility on policy discourses and positions depends on both the length of stay in power and their overall existence as a party, as these factors affect the stage of the institutionalization process (De Lange and Art 2011). Parties tend to moderate their discourse with time spent within the institutions: the inclusion-moderation (Caiani and Graziano 2022). Once reaching power, RWP parties experience a tension between their anti-elitist profile and their governmental responsibilities. As a consequence, parties moderate their positions and become less radical in their programmatic stances after experiencing electoral successes. However, the inclusion – moderation thesis is not always confirmed (Akkerman 2015), since radicalization and ideological flexibility are fine-tuned in accordance with the preferences of the electorate (Bartha *et al.* 2020).

Party competition thus matters for policy positioning (Minkenberg 2001). For example, the lack of a strong opposition within the electoral systems in Hungary and Poland means that the costs of abandoning radicalism are much lower for the dominant RWP parties than in countries where the party competition is more pronounced. These contextual constraints are also evident in environmental policy as the distances between policy positions and preferences of parties forming coalition governments fluctuate depending on the disagreements and the time spent in power (Tosun and Debus 2021). The links of RWP parties and other (also non-party) actors with the fossil fuel industry can also determine RWP positions on environmental and especially climate policies (Jeffries 2017). Finally, political cultures can also be important: specificities among Eastern and Western Europe in the effects of populism have been continuously emphasized, although evidence has been mostly context-specific and not easily generalizable (Leininger and Meijers 2020). In terms of environmental issues, the range of ideas, frames and ultimately, policies that resonate with the public is determined by the contextual and country-specific markers (Cherp *et al.* 2017).

Of course, the question of the role of ideology and opportunities on policy preferences is hardly an ‘either-or’ one, as both impact policy preferences and outcomes. Yet, if both play a role, it is unlikely to be an equal one. Despite the increasing research interest in the issues of RWP, environment and RWP in power, the existing scholarship has not attempted to parse out the RWP ideological spectrum in order to assess its role in generating policy preferences (and outcomes). Moreover, the distinction between the ‘national conservative’ and ‘the populist radical right’ has not been systematically employed in light of its discursive and policy relevance. Similar attempts to parse out the spectrum have been made with respect to the far-right communication on climate change in the European Parliament (Forchtner and Lubarda 2023) but reflections on the broader and a lot more politically influential spectrum of RWP are still missing.

## Data and method

As noted in the introduction, our study presents three European cases of RWP in power as a coalition partner in national government. Founded in 2001, PiS is a national-conservative party with close relations to the Polish Catholic Church and resembling (and, in recent years, deviating from) the tradition of Polish conservatism. The party has already been in power, from 2005 to 2007 as a part of a right-wing coalition with the populist *Samoobrona* (‘Self-Defence of the Republic of Poland’) and the far-right *League of Polish Families*, before returning to power in 2015 in ‘The United Right’ (*Zjednoczona Prawica*) coalition with a few minor parties,

obtaining 37.5% of the vote; in the 2019 national elections, PiS got 43.5% of the popular vote. Since 2015, PiS has carried out numerous institutional changes paired with the rhetoric of national political messianism, both of which are characteristic of RWP parties (Stanley and Cześniak 2019). This shift towards authoritarianism has led to conflicts with EU institutions but also to a development of a set of characteristic socio-economic policies and an intention to replace the *układ*, or corrupted elites (Kim 2021), with a ‘nationally conscious’, conservative oligarchy. At the same time, the PiS’s lack of a parliamentary supermajority inhibits constitutional change.

In Hungary, Fidesz was in power for the first time between 1998 and 2002, in coalition with two smaller parties, before losing to the Hungarian Socialist Party. However, after 8 years out of government, Fidesz returned to power in 2010 for the second time by winning the general election with 52.73% of the vote, creating a supermajority (two-thirds of the Parliament) in coalition with the national-conservative KDNP. The party also won the three following elections in 2014 (44.87%), 2018 (49.27%), and 2022 (54.13%), cementing its position as the most dominant party in Hungarian politics. Susceptible to several ideological shifts, from liberal to religiously oriented, national-conservative and RWP politics in the 2010s, Fidesz is currently entangled in a Manichean struggle against the elites (symbolized by George Soros) and nationalist historical revisionism (Toomey 2018). Such discursive shifts also entailed severe democratic backsliding under the banner of systemic change (Palonen 2018), including constitutional changes and pressures on the judiciary. Through practices such as land grabbing, pocket contracts for government-related oligarchs in agriculture (Gonda 2019), a cultural war against academic freedom, and co-opting opposition demands (Enyedi 2018), Fidesz has managed to secure both an economic and ideological base for promoting its brand of national conservative RWP politics.

Similar to PiS and Fidesz, Lega has already been in power as a minority partner in the coalitions in 1994, 1995–98, 1999–2003, 2018–19 (with a record 17% of vote) and 2022, after winning the elections as a part of the self-proclaimed ‘center-right’ coalition with Silvio Berlusconi’s Forza Italia and the far-right Brothers of Italy (*Fratelli d’Italia*), led by Giorgia Meloni. Rebranding from a regionalist ‘Lega Nord’ to an ethnonationalist RWP party under the leadership of Matteo Salvini, Lega has developed into an unambiguous PRR party (Albertazzi *et al.* 2018). In its 2018–19 mandate, Lega predominantly focused on the issue of migration, suggesting the contingency of issue salience as the most plausible determinant of policy preferences (Dennison and Geddes 2022).

Thus, our study represents a ‘most-dissimilar systems design’ (Tarrow 2010, p. 234): with governmental position, broad RWP ideology, the relatively weak status of green parties in domestic politics and high salience of the issue in the public (over 80% of public support for environmental policies in general, see



Eurobarometer 2017) being virtually the only similarities across the three cases. These similarities are, however, overshadowed by numerous differences: years in power (i.e. institutionalisation) and the type of majority conditioning the ‘autonomy’ of acting on the environment, different geographical regions pointing to different institutional settings, political and discursive opportunities with respect to environment, and the different ideological subtypes of RWP (Table 1).

Methodologically, our study combines formalized content analysis (i.e. counting the recurrences of certain topics) with frame analysis (Lindekilde 2014)-meant to identify the meaning attributed to them, namely the cognitive schemes according to which political entrepreneurs construct the diagnosis of a problem, its prognosis and motivation for action on this knowledge (Caiani 2023). The corpus consists of party electoral national and European manifestoes and organizational documents related to the environment (i.e. policy initiatives, programmatic statements, news items, official party social media outlets): leaders’ speeches and newspapers articles (for details on the sources, see the online Appendix). The time frame of the analysis is the time the party spent in power, with a few exceptions due to the limited time spent in power (Lega) that allows for an easier tracing of the changes in policy preferences. For triangulation purposes, we also included five qualitative, semi-structured interviews conducted with representatives of the three parties.

As per our analysis, we first conducted a dictionary-based analysis of party manifestos to perform wordcounts through the *Yoshicoder* software. Wordcounts served to detect how often terms potentially pointing to environmental issues appear (e.g. ‘environment’, ‘nature’, ‘climate’, ‘biodiversity’, etc.) in manifestos, as formal documents that outline policy preferences and facilitate a reliable comparison. We then conducted the frame analysis, aiming to generate, develop, and refine themes as patterns occurring in the data, also taking into consideration further specifications, such as for instance ‘linguistic qualifiers’ as adjectives or adverbials related to environmental policy, aiming at the construction of identity and oppositional frames (e.g. the EU, the people, environmentalists, coal, smog), as well as the diagnosis and prognosis related to environmental policy. Beyond problems of accessibility, the selection of different types of sources was conditioned by the different communication strategies of the parties.

## Empirical analysis

### *PiS: from denialism to skepticism and technocracy?*

The environmental discourse of PiS has mirrored several important changes in Polish environmental politics, which have long been marked by the lack of substantial awareness of climate and environmental issues. The analysis of 2015 and 2019 electoral manifestos reveals consistency in the number of

mentions, with the exception of climate change (see Table 2a of the Appendix). Environment as a topic remained a secondary topic of the party discourse (2% in 2015 and 1.7% in 2019), lumped together with agriculture in the 2015 manifesto (10 pages out of 166) and appearing as a separate section in the 2019 manifesto (10 pages out of 229).

As per the framings and the overall environmental politics, PiS's discourse is visibly (national) conservative. The diagnostic frame asserts the continuity of environmental protection in the country (since 1918, see PiS 2015: 104), but as prognosis, it also aims to protect the 'authentic' national species, such as the bison. In terms of the oppositional frames, the rejection of both 'excessive environmentalism' and the 'robbery model of the extractive economy' (PiS 2015: 105) is twofold. On the one hand, environmentalists in PiS's discourse are framed as 'irrational' – for instance, NATURA 2000, the EU network of protected areas, is merely a 'hindrance to economic growth' (PiS 2015: 169). On the other hand, the antagonism towards the elites is the RWP cornerstone of this national conservatism, explaining the initial climate skepticism of PiS (until circa 2019). Elites are damaging both the environment and the people. Examples of such framing are numerous and easily found in the materials: from 'the anti-carbon lobby . . . imposing obligations to reduce CO<sub>2</sub> emissions' (PiS 2015: 105), 'the dogma from Brussels' (PiS 2015: 106) the monopolies hampering regional waste management (PiS 2015: 167–168) to 'EU investors who are allowed to receive money for absorbing carbon dioxide from the atmosphere through forests', against 'a Pole who does not have such an opportunity' (PiS 2015: 169).

However, the 2019 Manifesto signaled a 'climate turn' (see also Zuk and Szulecki 2020), claiming that the 'Polish government is actively working to prevent climate change and mitigate its effects', introducing Municipal Adaptation Plans (MPA44) for 44 Polish cities (PiS 2019: 163). This shift mostly comes as a realization of the political (and economic) opportunities that come with climate politics. The solution: a 'conditional' environmentalism which will not impede economic growth:

My view is that global warming is a very serious problem so we have to make some counter-measures and profit as a party and a country from it, so it is important that we deal with it [. . .] but we cannot do it in a crazy way. Because that is something that different parties, groups of interests want to push in that direction . . . The real problem is that Poland doesn't matter in the overall production of CO<sub>2</sub>, but countries like China or even Germany in Europe. . . I would like to see the fight against climate change done in a more rational way, which I think PiS is doing. (ID 2)

As a motivational frame, this conditional environmentalism may read like a 'necessary evil' but also a 'pillar of the modern welfare state'. It is ultimately about ecological modernization (Hajer 1995): 'innovative ecological economy', (Manifesto 2015: 104) 'green economy', 'green energy', 'smart energy'

and ‘ecological growth’ (Manifesto 2019: 161, also ID 3), all indicate the possibility of adding the environment to the equation of capitalist technological development that keeps up with the pace of environmental degradation. For instance, the party suggests that ‘we have to focus on economic development while respecting native nature and Polish landscape’ (2015: 104), while ‘improving the quality of life of citizens and rapid economic growth in a way which ensures the needs of the future generations’ (PiS 2019: 161). Such a society would be autarkic, relying on domestic resources: high-sulfur coal and lignite (PiS 2015: 104).

These motivational frames reveal ideological inconsistencies caused by pragmatic policy shifts, such as those linked to climate acceptance in the wake of COP 24 in Katowice or the launch of the *National Clean Air Program* in 2019 in response to the extensive air pollution. Other examples include a pledge to build six large-scale nuclear reactors by 2040 (Rogers 2020) and focus on carbon capture, developing offshore wind and supporting electric mobility (2019 manifesto: 162). Some of these were developed in line with the pressures exerted by the partners of the United Right coalition, but they have been mostly caused by a realization of how economically and politically lucrative even a ‘conditional’ environmentalism can be (Interview with Katja, 23/01/2020).

### ***Lega: shifts amid incongruities***

Similar to other parties in this analysis, the environmental positioning of Lega has gradually changed over the years, being marked by ideological inconsistencies in framing and policy stances. These inconsistencies may be linked to the shift of Lega towards the populist radical right, following the leadership of Matteo Salvini (since 2013), but also the broader contextual processes. The content analysis of the manifestos mirrors these inconsistencies, e.g. the word ‘environment’, increases in appearance but not percentage over time (3 times in 2013 elections, 11 in 2014, 31 in 2019, 66 in 2022), whereas ‘climate’ increases in appearance only since the 2022 elections (see Table 2b of the Appendix). There is also one constant: environmental issues occupy a marginal position in the overall manifesto, usually subordinated to energy or economy.

The diagnostic, prognostic and motivational frames, including the oppositional ones, are strikingly similar to those of PiS. Environmental policies are a ‘good thing’ (Lega 2009: 4), suggesting a ‘common sense’ environmentalism in a ‘decarbonized, but productive world’ (Ilomei, 05/15/2019). Thus, the environmental discourse of Lega is a lengthy list of buts and caveats. Those include the effects environmental policies have on Italian companies (Lega 2009: 42) or the oppositional frames aimed at the green elites (‘For many years, environmentalism has addressed only a limited and aligned part of the

population' (Lega 2018: 35–36) or the EU ('heavy conditions even though Italy is among the least polluting countries in Europe' (Lega 2009: 43) or 'forced deindustrialization [...], reducing happiness of [Italian] citizens' (Lega 2014: 49). Likewise, renewable energy should be 'approached with caution' (Lega 2013: 7) and environmental policies require 'professional attention' (Lega 2013: 9). Ecological modernization, through the frames of 'green economy', 'smart cities' and the 'fiscal benefits' for investing in renewables (Manifesto 2013: 9) or 'fostering entrepreneurship in the national parks' (Manifesto 2018: 38), remains central to this (mild) green turn in mid-2010s. At the crux of ecological modernization is the rejection of ideology as the 'demagogy' of the left:

Now, when the greens appear to be only on the left, is when they fail to make a real change. Because they only have the ideology to offer, not practice. For it to be effective, the green component should be present in all parties – if it is only the greens-leftists that are dealing with it, they will fail to make a real change. (ID 1)

But the manifestos are still very ideological, entailing many of the far-right ecologist elements. Most of them entail linking cultural patrimony to environmentalism or masculinity, such as Salvini's backing of compulsory military service was on the grounds of 'ingraining the respect for the past, for the animals, for environment, and the community' (Il Giorno 2019). Other prominent examples include energy and food autarky, naturalism/nativism ('protecting the genetic heritages of various local communities', Manifesto 2009: 43), 'respecting local realities' (Manifesto 2018: 37) and food production and consumption, thus accentuating the link between human beings and the land, the blood and soil (Forchtner and Tominc 2017).

To defend the environment, it is also fundamental that we eat the products of our own land, from our own sea and from our own coasts as this reduces pollution. . . eating and drinking Italian does good to our health and good to the environment. Even buying the groceries is a political act: let's leave the crap produced thousands of kilometers away from us, with the exploitation of minors. (Matteo Salvini, Askaneews, 09/29/2019)

Two key elements embolden Lega's shifts-moderation in environmental communication. One is in relinquishing the oppositional framing, implying a conflict between environment and economy. The other is related to climate change acceptance. Similar to PiS, the questions such as 'Is global warming real?' (Manifesto 2009: 41–42) were replaced by calls for 'action to mitigate climate change' and 'the transition towards more sustainable models of economy and management of renewable resources (Manifesto 2018: 36–7)' prior to assuming power. These calls were followed by the policy proposals, such as green procurement, taxes on polluting vehicles (Manifesto 2018: 35) or the national fund for energy transition on the principles of 'energy

federalism', focusing on increasing the energy supply where demand is met (in the North of the country). Even the skepticism is no longer about the evidence related to climate change but the imposition of policies amid inaction of the global(ist) polluters (Van Rensburg 2015).

It is not like the parties of the right are against global warming. We are certain that there are things happening, that there is change happening. The problem is that the biggest polluters responsible are not the parties – countries caring about national identity, but the globalists. Take for example the US, the biggest polluter. It is the big, global identities that pollute the world, not national identities. (ID 1)

But this does not mean that Lega is now a champion of climate policies. The leader of the party, Matteo Salvini, has often made ambiguous public statements in relation to the issue, contextualizing and negating 'global warming' because the 'weather has never been colder in Italy' (Aterini, 05/20/2019), and has also ridiculed 'Fridays for Future' protests although giving credit to its leader, Greta Thunberg (Di Corrado, *Il Tempo*, 09/26/2019). Lega did not vote for ratification of The Paris Agreement in the Italian Parliament nor for the 'Decreto Clima' (Climate Law).

The changes in Lega's environmental policy seem to be predominantly induced by the pressure of the more moderate wing of the party, including the regional membership and the realization of opportunities that such a shift entails (ID 1). Examples include the support for the waste-to-energy plant in Lombardia, proposals against air pollution in the Ternana area, as well as several activities conducted at the youth level of the party, e.g. proposals to increase green areas in Massafra. The Ligurian chapter of Lega even developed an environmental manifesto ambivalent in its diagnosis towards the European Green New Deal (IVG 01/21/2020), whereas others (Consiglio Regione Lombardia, 01/30/2019) called for establishing the state of 'climate emergency'.

### ***Fidesz: between 'rational modernisation' and stewardship***

Scrutinizing the environmental discourse of Fidesz solely based on the party's electoral manifestos is a virtually impossible task since the party has not had an elaborate electoral manifesto ever since the EP elections of 2009 (Table 2c in the Appendix). It was only in late 2019 that climate change was given more space in the party's discourse, coinciding with Viktor Orbán's New Year address. Fidesz's environmental communication since re-entering government in 2010 can be subsumed to ecological modernization paired with stewardship, embodied in the conservative motivational frame of responsibility for the future or the 'absent' generations (Pilbeam 2001: 500). However, 'responsibility for future generations' (Fidesz Website

2012) is a theme appearing across the ideological spectrum, not necessarily a concomitant of ‘conservative, right-wing green politics’ (Kafkadesk 2021). In Fidesz’s discourse, the stewardship frame appears rather as a form of all-encompassing management of resources (Backstrand and Lövbrand 2006) than a religiously motivated appreciation of nature as a part of the nation and nature’s gift (Baxter 1999, 2007). Fidesz’s environmentalism is rational – ‘cold-headed’ and ‘non-ideological’ with respect to environmental issues, as the opposite may result in environmental policies becoming a ‘desire propaganda’ (Website 2018). This echoes the coinage of Judit Varga, the Hungarian Minister of Justice, of ‘conservative, methodical approach to green policy’. In her words, the characteristic of this frame is in ‘calm and well-founded responses to the challenges of climate change’ (Euractiv, 02/28/2020).

Thus, the calculated environmentalism or conditional care of Fidesz is at odds with the populist-Manichean, oppositional framing in environmental politics. However, Manicheanism remains prominent, through ‘not allowing the Brussels police to pay the costs of the fight against climate change with poor people and poor countries’ (Kormány 2019) or arguing that ‘the costs of climate protection should be borne by companies and countries that cause the most pollution instead of the Hungarian people’. Likewise, Fidesz has provided opposition against cyanide mining in Europe, as well as palm oil extraction, particularly pinpointing ‘interests of large companies, which often do not take into account the perspectives of local residents’ (Fidesz 04/04/2017) There are also elements of nativism in the ‘Hungarian green foods’ coinage, ‘planting ten trees for every newborn in the country’ (About Hungary 2020), or banning the import of sewage sludge as Hungary ‘does not want anyone else’s dirty washing’ (Kormány 07/18/2019).

Only in recent years has climate change been conjoined with energy stability as the main pillars of Fidesz’s environmentalism. Hungarian minister of Foreign Policy Péter Szijjártó claimed that ‘the country is a frontrunner in the fight against climate change’, at the inauguration of a solar power park in Budapest (Kormány 11/07/2020). Again, Fidesz prioritizes concrete actions over ‘deliberate language framing [such as that of “climate emergency”]’ (Fidesz, 11/28/2019). These actions include the ‘Climate Protection Law’ and ‘Climate and Energy Strategy Plan 2020–2030 (Index, 01/18/2020)’. This plan entails, among other things, transitioning to 90% carbon-free Hungary until 2030, banning single-use plastic and waste imports, increasing solar power output and introducing electric buses (Hungary Today, 21/02/2021). The plan itself was conditioned by the political opportunity structures, namely the attitude of (mostly younger) voters (ID 5) and the political competition: the ‘Pact of Free Cities’, signed by non-RWP mayors of V4-captials and indicating an intention to lobby directly to the EU for city-based green solutions (Hungary Today, 21/02/2021). In addition to this, the

influence of the minor coalition partner, KDNP, should not be undermined. The party officials have also been promoting a ‘moral and spiritual renewal’ amid environmental degradation, stating that ‘climate change is a fact to which everyone must adapt’ (Magyar Nemzet, 01/16/2020).

In practice, these concrete actions by the Fidesz-KDNP coalition have hardly ever materialized as the proposals outlined in the plan are not necessarily new. Moreover, the party members have voted against the EU electricity market package because it would ‘prohibit member states to regulate their own markets’ (Fidesz 2019). One of the most visible characteristics of Fidesz’s rendition of the environment remains the discrepancy between the domestic and international arenas (Lubarda 2023, p. 97), hinting at the ideological inconsistencies and the role of political opportunity structures in molding the environmental agenda.

### **Discussion: similarities and differences in RWP approach to environment**

An overview of environmental communication and policy of the three RWP parties in power shows notable similarities. In terms of the content analysis, we noticed a relatively low salience of environmental issues in the manifestos over time, albeit slightly increasing in some cases (PiS) as the parties entered power. The frame analysis of the manifestos reveals common ideological features of the three parties irrespective of their RWP subgroup (national conservative or the populist radical right): prognostic and motivational framing (ecological modernization, autarky), oppositional framing (Manicheanism) and the overarching frame of ‘conditional’, ‘yes-but’ environmentalism. Being the most salient feature of RWP environmental discourse, ecological modernization indicates the possibility of adding the environment to the equation of capitalist development. Equally present across the RWP spectrum (and beyond) is the theme of ‘responsibility for future generations’ present in both national-conservative and the PRR variants.

Conditional, balanced care that does not harm the people’s economic interests diverges from the broader feature of uncompromising RWP Manicheanism, which portrays politics as a ‘zero-sum’ game of friends and foes and either-or choices. This does not mean that national-conservative or PRR discourse is purged of Manicheanism, as seen through the contempt towards emotionally invested environmentalists and policy elites from the EU. The shared motivational frame that adds to the ‘yes, but’ environmentalism is autarky, especially in relation to energy and agriculture (small, sustainable, family farms). Long present in far-right ecologism (Del Arco Blanco and Gorostiza 2021), autarky depends on the polity point of reference,



differing across cases: the state in the case of PiS and Fidesz, regions in the case of Lega ('energy federalism'). Yet, these are due to contextual rather than ideal-type or ideological features. Overall, autarky cannot be reduced to a nativist 'ego-ecology' (Hoerber *et al.* 2021), although elements of pride in the 'traditional' species are visible in PRR Lega but also in PiS's discourse. Equally (meagre) presence in the overall policy of RWP parties is the issue of animal welfare: the national conservatives seem to be as interested (if not more) as the radical right (Lega) – going against the 'ideological' leanings established in the literature (Backlund and Jungar 2022). Thus, drawing the line between national conservative and PRR framing on ideological grounds is virtually impossible.

Policy preferences and solutions reveal significant changes between the three parties that cannot be explained solely on (sub)ideological grounds, one of them being in (or being close to entering) power. For instance, climate policy: the shift from open denialism (Lega and PiS) to skepticism with regard to policy responses (aimed at the EU) has to do with the increasing popular support for climate policies, and to a much lesser extent, the pressure exerted by coalition partners. Ideology is unhelpful in explaining the enduring climate acceptance of Fidesz or the strong shift made by PiS in the late 2010s. But even though they pledged ambitious energy and climate policies, these remain overshadowed by the extensive support these parties offered to the carbon-based industry because of their importance to the national economy. This does not mean that climate policy is devoid of ideology, as in visible tensions between globalist solutions and national interests. Both ideology and opportunities explain the relatively insignificant contributions to policy amid a promising agenda outlined in recent years (Iboya 2019) but the data also go against the findings alluding to the conflict between 'globalist science' and 'situated expertise' evident in far-right circles (Böcher *et al.* 2022).

We found little evidence that the overall environmental moderation was caused by the pressure exerted by coalition partners, except in the case of PiS. Although coalitions have, in the case of Lega and Fidesz, contributed to, or at least, bandwagoned (KDNP) the moderation of environmental policy, their role was overshadowed by the increasingly illiberal (hence, authoritarian) nature of populisms in power. The institutional hegemony has enabled Fidesz and PiS to enter arrangements with 'polluters' of their choice – a leitmotif of populist environmentalism in practice. The relatively weak position of the opposition, evidenced by the crushing defeats in 2019 elections in Poland and 2022 in Hungary, means that the political system was



hardly an intervening factor for the environmental positioning of both national conservative parties in this analysis.)

## Conclusion

In this study, we compared three cases of RWP in government to work out whether their positions on environment and climate change are best explained by ideology or by the contextual political opportunities (inclusion-moderation) and whether the sub-ideological variations can have an effect in this, our analysis elucidated the tension between ideology on the one hand (relatively stable, consistent, extremist) and inclusion-moderation on the other (dynamic, moderating). In spite of this tension, it is clear that the debate on ideologies and political opportunities is not entirely ‘either-or’, since both might affect RWP environmental positioning and since the separation between ideology and practice itself is not theoretically watertight. For instance, the ‘conditional care’ for environment emerged in all three parties is predominantly conditioned by opportunities, but it is also ideological in its justifications (not going against the economic growth, strengthening the ‘pro-people’, identity frame of populism in environmental politics, Marquardt *et al.* 2022). The visible lack of a ‘radical’ commitment towards climate goals evident in all three cases appears incongruent with the radical nature of populist ideology (similar to the findings of Ramos-González and Ortiz 2022). Similar outcomes indicate that ideological variations within the RWP spectrum are not as important, although they do have an effect on the discursive forms: ideology matters for RWP policy but only on a very general level.

This also confirms the ‘inclusion-moderation’ thesis but in a slightly different way: RWP parties, be it national conservatives of the PRR, do not tend to relinquish their populism (as suggested by, e.g., Huber *et al.* 2021a) as they enter government by rejecting environmental policies in general, but rather morph it into the policies themselves – thus relinquishing ‘radicalism’ upon entering power. Thus, political opportunities, after all, determine the decision-making of RWP parties in power more than ideology. The differences between national conservatives and PRR parties are less clear, overshadowed by domestic political opportunities and salient debates. One notable finding is the absence of a strong nostalgic and authoritarian component in Lega’s PRR discourse, which we would expect given the perceived importance of authoritarianism for far-right ecogism (Olsen 1999). In other words, PRR Lega has more in common with other right-wing parties than classic far-right ecogists.

Right-wing populism seems to support environmental protection if the issue provides a political-electoral opportunity (Spoon *et al.* 2014) idea. It is the focus on institutionalization and the role of RWP parties

in power that presents an additional layer of explanation relevant for prospective studies exploring this linkage. In spite of the relevance of oppositional frames in their discourses, the ‘pro’ vs. ‘anti’ logic of environmentalism is becoming less useful in understanding environmental politics of RWP in power. This does not imply a return of the valence thesis, where environment is a topic parties across the ideological spectrum agree on. Instead, it urges us to understand and identify the myriad of ways in which ideologies and parties can claim to be ‘environmentalist’. Since environment is no longer an issue that can be simply ignored or opposed, whatever these terms may entail, it is clear that right wing (populism) politics in power will be affecting environmental politics in the years to come.

## Notes

1. Eurobarometers since 2017.
2. Sources: country reports of various Research Centers (e.g. <http://cosmos.sns.it/>); (only Italy) Calculli *et al.* (2021).
3. Source: Kovarek and Littvay (2022).

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