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## THE EUROPEAN RADICAL-RIGHT AND THE ENERGY CRISIS: A WINDOW OF OPPORTUNITY

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The year 2022 saw soaring inflation and public fears about energy insecurity. While the energy crisis is a major financial burden on households and firms, it is also a window of opportunity for radical-right parties across Europe to push forward their agenda. Best-known for their views on immigration and integration policy, radical-right parties also tackle other issues in their bid to sway voters. In France, the protection of purchasing power was at the core of Marine Le Pen's 2022 presidential campaign.<sup>1</sup> In coal producing countries such as Poland and Hungary, the radical-right continues to favour coal mines as a way to ensure cheap energy, to provide jobs and to retain mining as a source of national pride.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, radical-right actors across Europe vehemently support nuclear energy production, framing it as a 'cheap and reliable' energy source.<sup>3</sup> Financial and economic themes have penetrated radical-right discourse in an environment of high gas prices and questions about energy security.

A combination of ideological and strategic motives helps explain why radical-right parties are among the most vocal actors in this debate in some European countries. In fact, the current situation provides an excellent political opportunity structure to shore up support for their program. This is not in the least because their responses to the crisis get conveniently connected to

longstanding positions and ideological views associated with the radical-right.

### The radical-right and energy imports

When it comes to battling the increase in gas and electricity prices, there have been widespread attempts to reduce European dependence on energy imports. This call for domestic energy production, or energy autarky, resonates loudly with radical-right parties, in line with their **nationalist** views. For example, some radical-right politicians would like to sever ties with Islamic regimes in oil producing countries like Qatar or Saudi-Arabia and focus on domestic energy production instead. In Britain, former *UKIP* party leader Nigel Farage, currently the chairman of *Renew UK*, favours renewed oil exploitation in the North Sea as an alternative to oil imports from the Middle-East.<sup>4</sup> In this particular example, Farage's comments are related to the radical-right's culture war against Islam, which they treat as a dangerous religion and an inferior culture.

Radical-right politicians across the continent denounce conservative Islamist autocrats because of their anti-democratic policies, but some of these politicians cosy up with other dictators in their pursuit of a 'realistic' energy policy. For example, while many radical-right parties across the continent have condemned Russia's invasion in Ukraine as a violation of national sovereignty (the

Dutch *Forum for Democracy* leader Thierry Baudet being a notable exception)<sup>5</sup>, skyrocketing energy prices provide an excellent excuse to play nice in the relationship with Putin. Radical-right parties across Europe have called for a removal of the sanctions against Russia at least since the beginning of the summer of 2022, as they hope the uninhibited flow of gas will calm the markets and reduce the price of gas and electricity. The German *Alternative für Deutschland (AfD)* even asked to open the Nord Stream 2 pipeline.<sup>6</sup> They claim European leaders need to be pragmatic and must protect the interests of the people. Interestingly, while the energy crisis was the sign for some radical-right parties to rekindle the relationship with a violent and belligerent regime, mainstream politicians focused on making a reduced dependency on Russian gas work. And indeed, at the turn of the year, the most acute phase of the energy crisis has subsided for now. While much work still needs to be done and current mainstream policies seem far from perfect, the contrast with the strategy of radical-right ‘*Putinverstehers*’ is striking.

Remarkably, this ‘pragmatic’ viewpoint appears to be most popular among politicians and parties that used to have cordial relations with the Kremlin before the invasion. European radical-right parties and Russia’s regime share a conservative or even reactionary disdain for Western cosmopolitanism and what they call ‘gender ideology’. Ideological similarities and potentially even financial support from Moscow could be a reason for radical-right parties to turn a blind eye towards that particular autocratic regime.<sup>7</sup> However, the position vis-à-vis Russia is also one of the major splits between Europe’s radical-right parties. Poland’s ruling party *Prawo i Sprawiedliwość (PiS)*, for example, has been critical of Russian foreign policy in the years prior to the war because of historical and personal reasons, and has supported strict sanctions against Russia.<sup>8</sup> Another exception is Georgia Meloni, the current prime minister of Italy, who changed course in an effort to present herself as an acceptable partner on the international and European level. Meloni also maintains close ties with *PiS*, as the two parties belong

to the same group in the European Parliament: the *European Conservatives and Reformers*. Meloni’s U-turn shows that tactics also play an important role in the stance towards Russia and the energy crisis. In short, energy imports usually do not fit a nationalist and protectionist agenda, unless strategic considerations or an admiration for the anti-liberal credentials of energy exporters trump nationalist ideology.

### Renewable energy or nuclear power?

Domestic energy production typically pleases radical-right actors, but not all types of power sources are treated equally. For example, many radical-right parties have supported nuclear energy production and this position is even more common than before. Back in 2012, Gemenis and colleagues noted that radical-right parties in Austria, Germany and Denmark reject nuclear power, while many other members of that party family were in favour.<sup>9</sup> Today however, the *AfD*, and the *Nye Borgerlige* have become staunch defenders of nuclear energy in Germany and Denmark respectively. Only Austria stands out as one of the few European countries where nuclear energy is still deemed unacceptable across the political spectrum. Radical-right proponents of nuclear energy support prolonged lifespans of active reactors, but also call for investment in new, modular, nuclear plants. One of the main arguments for prioritising this type of domestic energy production are the supposedly lower financial costs. Apparently, they regard nuclear energy as the silver bullet to reduce high electricity prices. A Belgian member of parliament for *Vlaams Belang* stated that energy production must be “reliable, affordable and environmentally friendly” and claims that nuclear energy is the best way to achieve these goals.<sup>10</sup>

The focus on the financial benefits of nuclear energy is remarkable considering its high investments costs and the very low marginal costs of the most obvious alternative: renewable energy sources.<sup>11</sup> Additionally, renewable energy provided by photovoltaics and windmills also ensures domestically produced energy and could as well be treated as a source of national pride. Therefore, some radical-right parties accept

renewables, for example to complement nuclear energy. However, nationalism is more often an obstacle than a facilitator for investment in renewable energy sources. Many radical-right parties have serious issues with these forms of energy production. Windmills in particular draw criticism because they are believed to be environmentally unfriendly and because they 'spoil the view' on natural landscapes. This bond between the people and their ancestral lands is a strong theme in far-right communication and blood and soil politics do not always go hand in hand with renewable energy if the latter threatens the natural environment.<sup>12</sup> In short, while there is some scattered support for renewable energy sources among radical-right parties across the continent, wind energy is typically viewed as a threat to society and is therefore rejected.<sup>13</sup>

Fierce resistance against wind energy is also related to conspiracy theories. In Finland, the radical-right Finns' Party launched a fantastical story about windmills that would cause bats to explode. A heated debate ensued in the (tabloid) press, but soon it became clear that Finnish bats were safe. The party also argued that windmills have detrimental effects on human health, but again, their claims lack proof. Ultimately, a spokesperson for the Finns' party admitted that the story about the exploding bats was primarily meant to cause controversy.<sup>14</sup> These events show that energy policy has ended up in what Ruth Wodak has called 'the far-right perpetuum mobile'. She illustrates how far-right actors make outrageous claims to generate public attention and mobilise militants. When confronted with criticism and ridicule, such parties claim that their opponents, 'political elites' or 'leftists', are out of touch with the experiences of ordinary people. By the time public interest faded away, the party had attracted days or even weeks of media coverage it would otherwise have missed out on.<sup>15</sup> It remains unclear whether support for the construction of new windmills has changed, but the case probably did not much to increase the willingness of party voters to accept wind power.

In sum, the radical-right does support different types of energy generation. They claim to be

mostly concerned about financial considerations and stable supply, although nationalist preconceptions or conspiracy theories can influence their rhetoric.

### Radical-right climate scepticism

Domestic energy production is not the only reason why European radical-right parties have been on top of energy debates. The political choice to favour certain forms of energy production over others is intimately connected to the challenge of global warming. Climate scepticism among radical-right actors has evolved over time. Several European radical-right parties used to doubt human-made climate change in the past, but many of these parties no longer explicitly deny the existence of climate change (although there are still exceptions). However, two alternative types of climate scepticism have come to the fore.<sup>16</sup> Doubts about the scientific knowledge generation process or criticism of the political decision-making process has been called process scepticism. Response scepticism on the other hand entails criticism of the actual climate policies, and that is where energy policy comes into play. While the latter two arguments appear to be less extreme than outright climate change denial, they are still used to justify the idea that no special efforts to combat global warming are needed.<sup>17</sup>

The energy crisis in the context of efforts to reduce Greenhouse Gas (GHG) emissions has been an extra opportunity to delegitimise and insult Green politicians and climate activists. In the rhetoric, the decision-makers who need to tackle global warming are responsible for higher gas and electricity prices. Greens and leftists in particular are accused of deliberately crafting the current crisis to reach their 'dubious' goals. In response to fears about potential energy shortages this winter, a senior member of the Swiss radical-right party SVP stated: "Their [The Greens'] secret plan for the purpose of re-educating the population and expanding a state eco-dictatorship is working out."<sup>18</sup> Georgia Meloni, leader of the radical-right *Brothers of Italy* speaks of 'climate fundamentalism' after denouncing the dependency on raw materials to support the electrification effort.<sup>19</sup>

Such extreme partisanship, also called affective polarization, is a phenomenon which has been associated with right-wing **authoritarianism**.<sup>20</sup> Radical-right parties delegitimise and insult proponents of ambitious climate programs, reminiscent of how they treat foreigners or minorities. The ‘othering’ of political opponents can also happen in a **populist** fashion. The radical-right can frame the soaring energy prices supposedly caused by climate policy as a symptom of a corrupt and malevolent elite failing to defend the interests of the people.<sup>21</sup> In turn, radical-right politicians promise to take up the mantle. Thus, these parties appeal to the political cynics among their voters by suggesting the political system cannot be trusted because it bears the responsibility for the current energy crisis.

Response scepticism, another manifestation of climate scepticism boils down to criticism of the policy instruments to reduce the human impact on global warming.<sup>22</sup> The radical-right rejects current climate policies and proposals to increase efforts mitigating global warming in a way that is typical for **conservatives**. Resisting political and social change comes in the form of at least three arguments that have been used by reactionaries time and again.<sup>23</sup> The *perversity thesis* posits that every progressive political action will be counterproductive and lead to the opposite to the intended situation. In Belgium, the Federal Government planned to open new gas power plants to compensate for the closure of nuclear plants. Radical-right party *Vlaams Belang* continuously criticised these policies for being hypocritical and counterproductive. Even before Russia’s invasion in Ukraine in 2022, gas power was regarded as too polluting and too expensive. With the *futility thesis* a conservative politician claims that political action is futile. Going back to the same example, *Vlaams Belang* indeed argues that any policy to reduce carbon emissions is pointless because they argue that the European Union is currently responsible for less than 10% of global emissions. Instead, policy must become much more inward looking to account for the *jeopardy thesis*, or the claim that progressive policies will counteract previous achievements in society. High energy

prices in particular have been linked to current climate policy instruments. While climate policy might have perverse effects or be even completely futile, *Vlaams Belang*’s main concern is that it will cost society and the economy dearly in terms of stable energy supply and the price of energy.<sup>24</sup> The energy crisis has also resulted in renewed calls for a reduction in (or even the abolishment of) taxes and levies on energy products, reflecting the desire to roll back the state. Analysis of the climate discourse of other radical-right parties suggest that the concerns about the socio-economic impact of current climate policies are widely shared by the European radical-right.<sup>25</sup> It illustrates that the old conservative goal to protect society against change is particularly widespread among the European radical-right.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, the energy crisis provides a good opportunity for radical-right parties to push through their ideas in an ideologically consistent way. They successfully implement their core ideology in their discourse about energy policy: nationalism, conservatism, authoritarianism or populism are clearly visible. More generally, they succeed in connecting the crisis to longstanding positions such as a pro-nuclear or pro-Russian stance. While the radical-right party family is flexible enough to respond to a developing situation and members strategically adapt to a particular national context, the many similarities in the discourse of European radical-right parties are clearly noticeable. It indicates that radical-right parties could appeal to voters even outside the context of immigration policy by adapting old arguments to a ‘new’ context. The adaptation of radical-right ideas to debates about the energy crisis also suggests that radical-right parties need not fear a political environment where immigration is not on top of the political agenda and it could even help normalise radical-right views and positions.

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