

2 Navigating the discourse

Unravelling climate change communication, political orientation, and populist far-right ideology

In this chapter I discuss the state of the art of the literature regarding the question of how political parties communicate climate change, focussing on PFRPs. Besides PFRPs communication, the legacy media (see e.g. Antilla, 2005; Bell, 1994; Boykoff, 2007; Dolšák & Houston, 2014; Feldman & Hart, 2018; Stoddart & Tindall, 2015; Weingart et al., 2000) as well as social media (e.g. Jones-Jang et al., 2020; W. Shi et al., 2020) have been major actors that has been analysed regarding their climate change communication. Nearly a decade ago, Rickards et al. (2014) found little research on how politicians understand and frame the complex issue of climate change (an exception is Fielding et al., 2012 about Australian politicians). However, since then, the number of studies has been growing constantly as the climate crisis and related issues increasingly concern scholars from social science disciplines. Willis (2016) investigated how politicians articulate climate change in general and analysed speeches by Members of the UK Parliament regarding discussions of the Climate Change Bill in 2008 using corpus analysis. Her analysis showed that politicians framed the climate crisis as an economic and technical issue. Like Espinosa et al. (2017), Willis (2016) describes the ways in which ‘politicians, rather than responding in a straightforward or linear way to climate science, actively craft and shape the issue to fit with their outlook, and those of their supporters and other actors’ (Willis, 2016, p. 213). More and more similar studies are focusing on language-related aspects, which highlight the importance of the central role of language in identifying and defining political issues and positions (Fairclough, 1992, 1995, 2000). These support the view that language serves not only as a tool for communication but also as a means for actors to exercise their power and advance their own agendas, as has been argued by Bourdieu (1991) and colleagues.

However, due to the focus of the present investigation, this chapter concentrates on the nexus of climate change and populist far-right actors, with special consideration of communication-related studies. Scholarly attention on ‘right-wing’ climate change communication increased enormously in the past years and spread from a broad focus on contemporary conservative actors (see e.g. Anshelm & Hultman, 2014; Campbell & Kay, 2014; Capstick & Pidgeon, 2014; Carvalho, 2007; Jacques et al., 2008; Jaspal et al., 2016; Kaiser & Rhomberg, 2015; Koteyko et al., 2015; McCright et al., 2016; McCright & Dunlap, 2011a; Painter & Gavin, 2015; Poortinga et al., 2011; Tranter, 2017; Woods et al., 2018) to more specific investigations

on the far right (see e.g. Barla & Bjork-James, 2022; Bennett & Kwiatkowski, 2020; Forchtner, 2020b; Hatakka & Välimäki, 2020; Hultman et al., 2019, 2020; Jylhä et al., 2020; Tarant, 2020; Taylor, 2020; Toni & Feitosa Chaves, 2022; Yazar & Haarstad, 2023). As described in the introduction, far-right actors in particular tend to obstruct climate action in one way or another (Forchtner et al., 2018; Forchtner & Kølvrå, 2015; Forchtner & Lubarda, 2022; Gemenis et al., 2012; Hanson, 2023; Küppers, 2022; Lubarda & Forchtner, 2023; Schaller & Carius, 2019).

In order to provide a fruitful discussion, I first present the literature on climate obstruction and clarify how the term is used in the present research. I then discuss the state of the art of climate change communication in connection to political orientation to delve deeper into the topic, addressing the nexus between climate change communication and (populist) far-right party and non-party actors. In the last section of this chapter, I provide a critical analysis of the ideational approach of populism and how the role of populism is considered on this issue.

Conceptualisations of climate change scepticism, denial, and obstruction

Climate change obstruction is not a new phenomenon, and a substantial body of scientific literature exists dealing with the issue (Björnberg et al., 2017; see e.g. McKie, 2019; Parkes, 2013; Tāngh Wrangel & Causevic, 2021; Washington & Cook, 2011a). The situations in the US (Dunlap et al., 2016) and in Australia (Moffitt & Sengul, 2023; Tranter, 2017) in particular have been widely researched. A literature review on science denial by Björnberg et al. (2017) identified the majority of the articles as climate-related (see e.g. Andersen, 2015; Jacques, 2006; Jacques et al., 2008 for denial related to stratospheric ozone depletion; see e.g. Oreskes & Conway, 2010 for denial about sulphur, nitrogen and chlorofluorocarbon emissions). Accordingly, '[c]limate science denial is by far the most coordinated and well-moneyed form of science denial, constituting the backbone of the opposition to environmentalism and environmental science in general' (Björnberg et al., 2017, p. 235; Dunlap & McCright, 2011). However, this section does not want to review the literature on predictors, explanations, distributions, or psychological, social, and cultural factors of climate obstruction. Instead, I introduce a variety of classifications and types of climate obstruction present in the literature, outline their development, discuss the terms most present and finally conclude with the arguments for choosing climate obstruction as the prevailing terminology for this work.

As explained in the introduction, scholars distinguish between different variants of climate obstruction and use different terms. I already mentioned in the Introduction the trend-attribution-impact typology elaborated by Rahmstorf (2005) that has been enjoying wide currency (see e.g. P. Matthews, 2015; McCright, 2016; Poortinga et al., 2011). Engels et al. (2013) added a fourth type who aim to deny the scientific consensus on human-caused global warming, dubbed 'consensus denial' (see also Cohen, 2001). Also widely referenced in the literature are Van Rensburg's (2015) categories of objects of scepticism: evidence scepticism (denial regarding scientific evidence on trends, causes, and impacts of human-made climate change),

process scepticism (denial or criticism of the administrative, political, and scientific procedures that underpin mainstream climate science) and response scepticism (scepticism of the public and private responses to the climate crisis). Scholars such as Petersen et al. (2019, p. 117) examine the concept of ‘ideological denialism’ – a failure to acknowledge a growth-dependent economic system as a primary driver of climate change.

Moreover, in his book *States of Denial: Knowing about Atrocities and Suffering* Stanley Cohen (2001) proposes three types of denial in society. First, literal denial is simply claiming that something is not happening, for instance that the climate is not changing. Second, there is interpretive denial, in which actors reinterpret what is occurring in such a way that it loses importance, for instance, if one views raising global CO₂ emissions mainly as beneficial for plant growth. Third, implicatory denial applies when individuals, institutions, and states refuse to act (or block feasible acts) despite knowing they should, due to moral, political, and psychological preferences of these actors. This last classification can also be connected to Lamb et al. (2020), who look at four discourses of delay that accept the existence of climate change but rationalise inaction or insufficient effort. For instance, proponents of climate delay would highlight negative effects of climate mitigation, plead for non-transformative solutions, or cast doubt on the possibility of mitigating climate change.

In fact and as stated in the introduction, in recent research, the explicit denial of climate change is viewed as only one way to obstruct climate action or policy (Almiron & Moreno, 2022; Ekberg et al., 2022). Cohen's (2001) implicatory denial, Van Rensburg's (2015) process and response sceptics as well as Lamb et al.'s (2020) discourses of delay all look at those who accept climate change but do not act (appropriately). In addition, the types of obstruction suggested by Ekberg et al. (2022 see Introduction), that is, primary (denial of climate science/climate change), secondary (acceptance of human-made climate change combined with delay or forestall valuable climate mitigation), and tertiary obstruction (acceptance of human-made climate change combined with the retention of business as usual), all have in common that they ‘need to be equally acknowledged as they all contribute towards the same outcome: lack of taking urgently needed steps’ (p. 11). These types of climate obstruction need to be separated but can be overlapping and entangled in many, complex ways.

Having presented a selection of types of climate denial, scepticism, and obstruction, considering also their progression over time, it is time to also discuss terminologies. As various terms used in the literature are politicised and contested, their clarification of is needed in relation to their use in this manuscript. Therefore, I will outline discussions regarding the use of phrases such as ‘climate’ sceptic’, ‘climate contrarian’, ‘climate denial’, and ‘climate obstruction’ (Howarth & Sharman, 2015; Jacques, 2012; Jankó et al., 2014; O'Neill & Boykoff, 2010).

Regarding ‘climate sceptic’, I refer to the Oxford English Dictionary (OED) that provides the following definition in 2022:

climate sceptic *n.* and *adj.* (also **climate skeptic**) (*a*) *n.* a person who or institution which rejects the idea (or the evidence) that climate change caused by human activity is occurring, or that it represents a significant threat to human

and environmental welfare; cf. *climate denier* n.; (b) adj. that rejects the idea (or the evidence) that climate change caused by human activity is occurring, or that it represents a significant threat to human and environmental welfare. (Oxford English Dictionary, 2022)

Various scientists reject the term ‘sceptic’ in this context, claiming that science is intrinsically ‘sceptical’ in the sense of challenging presumptions and deferring judgment until the evidence is convincing (Garrard et al., 2019; see also O’Neill & Boykoff, 2010). According to the website Sceptical Science, created by John Cook, research assistant professor at the Center for Climate Change Communication at George Mason University scientific scepticism is healthy. Scientists should always challenge themselves to improve their understanding. Yet this isn’t what happens with climate change denial. Sceptics vigorously criticise any evidence that supports human-made global warming and yet embrace any argument, op-ed, blog or study that purports to refute global warming (Sceptical Science, 2020).

Moreover, Washington and Cook (2011b, p. 1) claim that scepticism ‘is about seeking the truth and realizing the world is a complex place’ and genuine scepticism ‘is one of the ways that science progresses, examining assumptions and conclusions’. Therefore, scepticism or sceptics are generally seen as ‘an integral part of the scientific method’ (O’Neill & Boykoff, 2010, p. E151) and as an essential aspect in the development of knowledge ensuring that research is carried out systematically and according to high scientific standards (e.g. peer review processes). Indeed, scepticism is

the heart of the scientific method. Genuine skeptics don’t come to a conclusion until they have considered the evidence. In contrast, people who deny well-established science come to a conclusion first, and then discount any evidence that conflicts with their beliefs. That means that denial and skepticism are polar opposites.

(Sceptical Science, 2022)

Also according to Poortinga et al. (2011), there is a substantial amount of variety among those who identify as sceptics, making the term ‘scepticism’ ambiguous with different connotations in the context of the complicated discussions around climate change (Tranter & Booth, 2015).

The term ‘denial’ is the most widely used alternative to sceptic, but various scholars highlight that the term is contested (Björnberg et al., 2017; Garrard et al., 2019; Van Rensburg, 2015). The term recalls ‘holocaust denial’ (see e.g. in the German context Goodbody, 2019) and as in the movie *An Inconvenient Truth* Al Gore quoted Winston Churchill comparing the climate crisis to the Nazi threat, the analogy has been criticised (Rudrum, 2021). However, regardless of how confident climate scientists are in their predictions, it is unlikely that they would ever assert that historical records and future scenarios are epistemically equal (Garrard et al., 2019, pp. 21–22). A frequent definition of (science) denial is the refusal to accept the validity of the existing scientific evidence (Björnberg et al., 2017; Dunlap, 2013; Goldsby & Koolage, 2015; Howarth & Sharman, 2015; Liu, 2012). Researchers

point out that a key component of science denial is the spreading of unproven claims about the validity of scientific findings and data, as well as the misrepresentation of scientific research and the rejection of the scientific consensus (Diethelm & McKee, 2009; Dunlap & Jacques, 2013; Oreskes & Conway, 2010; Rosenau, 2012).

The term ‘contrarian’, which is occasionally used, appropriately describes how anti-environmentalists see mainstream research, but it also carries negative overtones of ‘personal pettiness’ (Van Rensburg, 2015, p. 9). The phrase ‘Flat Earther’ has been also used to describe people who deny climate science, but the use has also been criticised, in particular, because the President of the Flat Earth Society accepts the science of climate change (Garrard et al., 2019).

The term ‘climate obstruction’ goes beyond simply denying or not denying climate change. Academic research has revealed that political inaction and delay in climate mitigation policies cannot be explained solely by the denial of climate science (Almiron & Moreno, 2022). Indeed, I illustrated above that various types of denial and scepticism proposed by scholars such as Cohen (2001), Van Rensburg (2015) and Lamb et al. (2020) focus on the obstruction of climate mitigation rather than the outright denial of human-induced climate change. Due to the use and further development of terms such as ‘sceptic’ and ‘denial’ in previous research, most recently scholars argue that ‘climate obstruction’ appears as a sophisticated conceptual and analytical framework ‘that provides more nuance and aligns with the evidence emerging from academic research’ (Moreno & Thornton, 2022, p. 9). The obstruction of necessary climate mitigation has often ‘ended in the conceptual deadlock of “denialism”, that is, of thinking about and looking for explicit and “extreme” cases of outright denial of the effects of human-induced greenhouse gases or the existence of climate change altogether’ (Ekberg et al., 2022, p. 8). Since a clear consensus of climate science exists and has been available for many decades now (IPCC, 2014, 2022), its literal denial might not be the only efficient way to obstruct climate mitigation. In fact, studying mainly political parties and politicians, I can assume that such actors have easy access to the existing knowledge of climate science. Ferkany (2015, p. 710) speaks of ‘motivated’ denial although access to adequate information is available, and claims that climate obstruction is rooted in ‘cultural cognition’. He distinguishes it from ‘naïve’ denial, which is mostly based on ‘ignorance of the facts about climate change or mainstream climate science’ (Ferkany, 2015, p. 710).

In the book *Climate Obstruction: How Denial, Delay and Inaction Are Heating the Planet*, Ekberg and his colleagues (2022) look at various actors with different agendas and how they are implicated in obstruction. To further strengthen the use of the framework climate obstruction, I briefly outline the presence of different actors in the academic literature, showing that often outright denial is less common than the obstruction of climate action.

Governments certainly feature as actors in this research field (Editorial, 2008; McCright & Dunlap, 2003, 2010; Young & Coutinho, 2013). Generally, they do not actively deny climate science entirely or human-made climate change but doubt the necessity of taking immediate action to stop it (Björnberg et al., 2017; Dunlap & McCright, 2011), that is, obstruct its mitigation. Furthermore, much of the existing literature analyses political and religious organisations, often with a geographical

focus on the US (Antonio & Brulle, 2011; Armitage, 2011; Dunlap, 2014; Dunlap & Jacques, 2013; Dunlap & McCright, 2015; L. C. Hamilton & Saito, 2014; Jacques, 2006, 2008, 2012; Jacques et al., 2008; McCright & Dunlap, 2010; McKewon, 2012; Wright & Mann, 2013) (for religion see Copeland Nagle, 2008; Daley Zaleha & Szasz, 2013; Danielsen, 2013; N. Smith & Leiserowitz, 2013). Björnberg et al. (2017, p. 236) also mention industry as ‘important funders of activities inimical to environmental science’ (Dunlap & McCright, 2011; Freudenburg & Muselli, 2012; Mann, 2021; Salinger, 2010; Talbot & Boiral, 2014; Wright & Mann, 2013). Many such companies promoting climate obstruction are involved in oil or coal production (Exxon Mobil, Peabody Coal), and in the steel, mining, and car industries (see e.g. Mann, 2021). Climate obstruction is also widespread in the media, as scholars show (see e.g. Brüggemann & Engesser, 2014; Elsasser & Dunlap, 2012; Feldman et al., 2012; Freudenburg & Muselli, 2012; Hoffman, 2011; Painter & Ashe, 2012). Here, studies often point to a strong correlation between (far) right-wing orientation and the publication of denialist articles (Dunlap & McCright, 2011; Feldman et al., 2012). Social media also plays a role as an ‘echo chamber’ of climate obstruction (Elgesem et al., 2014; Elsasser & Dunlap, 2012; Holder et al., 2023; Jacques & Connolly Knox, 2016; Lewandowsky, 2014; Lewandowsky et al., 2013; P. Matthews, 2015; Nerlich, 2010; Sharman, 2014; Wu & Xu, 2023). In addition, the public is the focus of many studies, with surveys often used to analyse the different varieties of obstruction and factors (e.g. demographic, ideational, socio-economic) (Gauchat, 2015; Kiral Ucar et al., 2023; McCright et al., 2014; McCright & Dunlap, 2011a, 2011b; Poortinga et al., 2011; Ratter et al., 2012; Scruggs & Benegal, 2012; Whitmarsh, 2011); (see also Lo & Jim, 2015 for Hong Kong; Milfont et al., 2015 for New Zealand; Ojala, 2015 for Sweden; J. Shi et al., 2015 for Switzerland; Tranter & Booth, 2015 of 14 industrialised nations). The least focus is on scientists, and generally only a small minority of scientists actively deny the evidence of climate or environmental issues (see Björnberg et al., 2017). Most of these scientists are not part of the established academic community, have no academic institution affiliation, and often work for think tanks such as the Heartland Institute in the US or The Institute of Public Affairs (IPA) in Australia (Anderegg et al., 2010; Lahsen, 2008, 2013; McKewon, 2012; Oreskes & Conway, 2010; Plehwe, 2014). For literature on the effect of climate change denial on the scientific community, see, for example, Lewandowsky et al. (2015).

In short, based on the current literature as well as on the characteristics of the present research, I will mainly but not exclusively rely on the framework (and terminology) of climate obstruction. Where appropriate and necessary, however, terms such as ‘climate change denial’ and ‘scepticism’ continue to be used.

Climate change communication and political orientation

It is nothing new that political orientation has been identified as an influencing factor for climate change beliefs and attitudes (Böhmelt & Zhang, 2023; Dupuis & Knoepfel, 2013; Hao et al., 2023; Knollenborg & Sommer, 2023; Ziegler, 2017) and ultimately also climate obstruction. According to the current state of the art, political ideology and orientation explain a notable amount of climate scepticism

and support for environmental protection, with left-right ideology in particular at its core (Dunlap et al., 2001, 2016; Guber, 2013; Häkkinen & Akrami, 2014; Jylhä et al., 2021; Jylhä & Hellmer, 2020; McCright et al., 2016; McCright & Dunlap, 2011b; Neumayer, 2004). The following first outlines left-right ideology and its role in climate change communication, moving towards the far right of the political spectrum. Here I discuss parties of the far right and their stances/beliefs about climate change. I then introduce nationalist ideology and studies on ecofascist actors.

Research focusing on the left-right divide emphasised that right-wing parties are typically averse to state regulation and interventions, while left-wing parties generally support the expansion of state functions. Several clusters of ideas, including conservatism, support for the free market, anthropocentrism, low concern about climate change, high scepticism about climate science, and opposition to climate change mitigation policies, were strongly associated in surveys conducted in the UK (Poortinga et al., 2011; Whitmarsh, 2011), Canada (Y. Heath & Gifford, 2006), the US (Borick & Rabe, 2010; Dunlap et al., 2001), and Australia (Tranter, 2011, 2012). Van Rensburg and Head (2017) emphasised that the same tendency was found in surveys that asked participants to identify their political party. An Australian study conducted by Tranter (2011) found a high correlation between political party identity and beliefs about climate change, even in the midst of widespread popular concern about the environment in 2007. Supporters of the Labour Party and the Green Party were nearly three times as likely as conservative party supporters to think that human-caused global warming would constitute a severe threat in their lifetime (Tranter, 2011, p. 89). Tranter (2013, 2017) confirmed the party differences on the climate crisis in later surveys (see Reser et al., 2011 for a study on Australian public opinion on climate issues). Duijndam and Van Beukering (2021) found no strong direct relationship between the rise of right-wing populist parties that show climate obstruction and public concern about climate change on either a quantitative or individual level. However, staying on the individual as well as quantitative level, Jylhä et al. (2020) studied climate change denial among radical right-wing party supporters in Sweden and aimed to identify factors that could explain possible differences between far-right and mainstream parties regarding such obstruction. They conducted a regression analysis including a set of variables such as socioeconomic attitudes, exclusionary sociocultural attitudes (e.g. negative attitudes towards immigration and feminism), conservative ideologies, institutional distrust, and belief in conspiracies. According to their results, voters of the Sweden Democrats were more likely to disagree with the statement ‘Global warming that is caused by humans is happening’ than supporters of the mainstream right-wing (Conservative Party) and centre-left (Social Democrat) party (Jylhä et al., 2020, p. 5). Moreover, socioeconomic right-wing attitudes as well as socio-cultural antifeminism attitudes predicted climate obstruction. Stanley et al. (2023) have particularly addressed perceived threats in climate protection among adherents of conservative ideologies, outlining drivers of conservative denial of climate change and resistance to climate policy.

Environmental policy and, in particular, climate policy are often associated with government intervention in the market or with restrictions on property rights

(McCright & Dunlap, 2011b). Specifically, climate change policies such as decarbonising the global economy can be accompanied by particularly profound interventions into markets and also into peoples' lives (see e.g. Finon, 2013; Walters, 2022; Welton, 2018). Indeed, it is important to treat environmental issues and climate change issues differently: even though climate change and environmental issues seem to be, and are in part, close to each other because many interfaces exist, it is vital to recognise the differences, explain them, and identify connections and contrasts. For instance, while left-right ideology helps to explain the differences in the salience of climate change in party manifestos (left-wing parties revealing a higher salience), Farstad (2018) points out that in an identical analysis on environmental salience, ideology was not identified as an important explanatory factor. Therefore, I look at research on both topics, but with a focus on climate change. This is connected to the issue that ecological concerns are becoming more significant in the so-called risk societies, as described by Beck (1992). The destruction or pollution of the local terrain, rivers, or air were common types of earlier or traditional environmental concerns, which could be managed within a national framework. In contrast, new environmental risks such as climate change are transnational problems that transcend national boundaries (see e.g. Hall, 1996). This transfers agency from the nation state to international and, at the same time, contradicts fundamental tenets of the nationalism ideology and its idea of the nation as intrinsically 'limited and sovereign' (Anderson, 2006, p. 6).

While between 2009 and 2013 mainstream parties (see Introduction and for a definition of mainstream parties see Meguid, 2005; or Pop-Eleches, 2010) have not made climate change a salient issue in their party manifestos (Farstad, 2018), a study of Denmark and Ireland illustrated that traditional left-wing and right-wing ideologies play an important role in how parties adopt climate change policies. In particular, competition between mainstream parties can be a catalyst for 'greener' climate policies but can also act as a constraint on party preferences (Ladrech & Little, 2019). Quantitative cross-national studies that analyse various individual-level factors affecting climate change perceptions identified political orientation as one of several important predictors of climate change beliefs or concerns (Poortinga et al., 2019). However, the authors also admit that effects of the various factors vary greatly across countries and national contexts. For example, Hornsey et al. (2018, p. 614) suggest that 'there is a political culture in the US that offers particularly strong encouragement for citizens to appraise climate science through the lens of their worldviews', while the authors find weaker correlations between climate obstruction and ideology in other countries.

However, when political orientation and ideology are identified as an indicator for climate obstruction, conservative actors located on the right wing (or on the far right) of the political spectrum are more likely to express such obstruction than their left-wing counterparts (Dunlap et al., 2016; Hart & Nisbet, 2012; Leiserowitz et al., 2013; McCright et al., 2016; Myrick & Evans Comfort, 2019). This division can be found on the individual as well as on the institutional or elite level (Dunlap & McCright, 2010a; Fielding et al., 2012). For instance, many conservative foundations, think tanks, and political parties support climate research denial (Almiron et

al., 2022; Dunlap & McCright, 2010b, 2012; McCright & Dunlap, 2003; Moreno et al., 2022, 2023). The majority of ‘environmental sceptical’ commentaries, for instance, have been generated by conservative think tanks in the US (Jacques et al., 2008; Union of Concerned Scientists, 2013), and they have had a significant impact on the content of the printed media (Dunlap, 2009). A similar pattern was observed in Australia, where conservative front groups and think tanks have taken the lead in efforts that oppose climate change (Hodder, 2010; McKewon, 2012). The conservative Murdoch media supported such climate-sceptic views (Bacon, 2011; McKnight, 2010). Right-wing ideology can also attenuate a positive effect of education on climate change beliefs in countries with high levels of development (Human Development Index), as Czarnek et al. (2021) revealed in a quantitative study. In fact, several scholars already noted that knowledge can have diverging effects depending on the political orientation of individuals (Kahan et al., 2012; Lee et al., 2015; Malka et al., 2009).

From a more general overview of climate change communication in connection to left-right ideology, I now move on towards studies about far-right ideology. Concerning policy and, more concretely, policy support for environmental and climate issues, a report in 2019 by the adelphi think tank in Berlin found great support from some populist right-wing and far-right parties in the European Parliament regarding environmental policies, dealing with issues such as plastic- and air-pollution, and biodiversity. In fact, the voting behaviour of the Danish People’s Party, the Finns Party, the FPÖ in Austria, Golden Dawn, Flemish Interest, and National Rally showed support for such environmental legislation, while the Party for Freedom and the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) mainly rejected it. However, except for the Danish People’s Party, the Finns Party and the Sweden Democrats, far-right parties predominantly rejected policies dealing with climate change issues. Indeed, the AfD in Germany, Flemish Interest, the FPÖ, Golden Dawn, the League, National Rally, and the UKIP showed no support for climate-change policies (Schaller & Carius, 2019, pp. 63–74).

Forchtner and Lubarda (2022) showed in their content analysis of basic party stances at EU level towards anthropogenic climate change, that between 2004 and 2019 (EU parliamentary terms 6–8) the ‘far right has seemingly shifted towards “acceptance”’ (p. 14, especially regarding evidence scepticism), nonetheless climate change sceptic arguments dominate pro-climate arguments in particular via process/response scepticism (see Lubarda & Forchtner, 2023 for an analysis about the narrative structure of far-right climate change acceptance; see Van Rensburg, 2015). Indeed, De Nadal (2022) demonstrates, with the example of the French populist far-right Rassemblement National, that even among PFRPs, there has been an inclination towards acknowledging climate change and engaging in green politics, especially by advocating for a more localised development trajectory. Ten years earlier, Gemenis et al. (2012) analysed two dimensions, the electorate positions on environment based on cross-country mass survey data, and the positions of political parties based on national and European election programs of 13 far-right parties in Europe. The authors argue that the ‘environment is increasingly perceived as a positional issue’ (p. 1) rather than a valence issue, that is, a consensus issue,

meaning the entire electorate agrees on a desired outcome and all political parties would endorse a clear ideological position, differing only on the details and degree to which they would emphasise it (see also Stokes, 1963). Position issues, on the other hand, ‘involve trade-offs between two highly desirable but mutually exclusive outcomes’ (Gemenis et al., 2012, p. 2; see also A. F. Heath et al., 1985) and involve alternatives that parties can be in favour of or against. In contrast, other scholars argued that (at least traditional) environmental issues or protection can indeed be classified as a valence issue (Dunlap, 1995; Farstad, 2018; Jordan & Rayner, 2010; Mertig & Dunlap, 1995). However, concerning the party dimension, which is the focus of the present analysis, Gemenis et al. (2012, p. 3) find that far-right parties ‘have largely incorporated anti-environmentalism within the main ideological tenets of their party family’. Concerning climate change issues, they looked at party stances vis-à-vis the statement ‘Global warming is man-made’: four parties disagreed (the Belgian Flemish Interest, the British National Party, the Danish People’s Party, the Northern League in Italy (now League)), two showed inconclusive results (the National Democratic Party of Germany (NPD) and the Sweden Democrats), and one agreed (the Greek Popular Orthodox Rally).¹ Conducting a similar analysis, examining party documents, Voss (2014) identified the British National Party, the Dutch Party of Freedom and the Flemish Interest as sceptical of human-made climate change, and lists the Norwegian Progress Party as well as the Swiss People’s Party as ‘unclear’ (see Voss, 2014 in Forchtner, 2019b). Staying in Norway, one result of Båtstrand’s analysis of party manifestos of the election in Norway in 2009 is that the far-right Progress Party expressed doubts about human-made climate change (Båtstrand, 2014, p. 937). He lists the following as parties that accept anthropogenic climate change in their party documents: the Alliance for the Future of Austria, the Dutch Centre Party/Centre Party ‘86, the Danish People’s Party, the French Front National (now National Rally) and the National Front/National Democracy of Belgium, the FPÖ, the Northern League, the NPD, the True Finns/Finns Party, the German Republicans, the Swiss Democrats/National Action, and the Sweden Democrats (see also Forchtner, 2019b). Hungarian far-right parties, even if they sometimes talk very little about climate change (e.g. Jobbik), do not deny climate change (Kyriazi, 2020; Lubarda, 2019). Furthermore, Hess and Renner (2019) identified the AfD, the Dutch Party for Freedom, and the UKIP as rejecting climate science; the French National Front as having ambivalent stances; and the Spanish Vox as not rejecting it. Timofejevs (2020) studied the view on nature, the environment, and governance for sustainability of the Latvian populist far-right party National Alliance; in their overall communication, the party committed to sustainable development and briefly mentioned its support of energy independence and the achievement of climate goals. Kasekamp et al. (2019) noted briefly a citation of the young far-right Conservative People’s Party of Estonia about ‘pseudo-scientific climate change’ (p. 52).

Jeffries (2017) pointed out a difference between Anglophone and continental European far-right parties, arguing that in contrast to the US, European far-right actors do not reject climate science as such, but in order to keep issues such as immigration and border control more present on the political agenda, they rather aim to

marginalise the climate issue. This may have been the case around 2015 – when the so-called refugee crisis in Europe was framed – for parties such as the National Rally in France, the FPÖ, Hungary’s Fidesz and Jobbik, Norway’s Progress Party or Finland’s Finn Party (Lockwood, 2018, p. 717), but more recent studies indicate a relevant presence of climate change issues and also climate obstruction in European far-right communication (see e.g. Forchtner, 2019a; Hultman et al., 2019; Küppers, 2022). However, the study by Farstad (2018) described above also found no difference in the salience of climate change in party manifestos between Anglophone and continental European countries. A relevant difference to be noted, however, is that far-right climate change communication in the US might be ‘primarily rooted in long existing, strongly polarization debates over climate change’, while in the UK it might ‘be connected to Eurosceptic conversations’ (Forchtner, 2019b, p. 2). In the latter case, sovereignty questions may play a particularly important role, since climate change is often discussed at the EU level, where corresponding policies are elaborated.

Nationalism

In the spectrum of political orientation, nationalist ideologies and the understandings of nature embedded therein might also condition party attitudes towards environmental issues and discourses (Forchtner & Kølvråa, 2015). In fact, several scholars (see e.g. Boukala & Tountasaki, 2020; Bulli, 2020; Forchtner, 2020a; Tarant, 2020; Turner-Graham, 2020) studied relations between far-right party and non-party actors and the environment and some findings reveal strong support for environmental protection and such policies (see e.g. Bennett & Kwiatkowski, 2020; Forchtner & Özvatan, 2020; Voss, 2020). Here, nationalistic narratives often play a role, and the link between ‘the land’ or ‘nature’ and ‘the people’ or ‘the nation’ or the ‘nature-nation-purity nexus’ (Forchtner, 2019b, p. 2) is sometimes present in discussions on environmental protection and overpopulation as well as immigration (see e.g. Aufrecht, 2012; Bhatia, 2004; Dyett & Thomas, 2019; Forchtner, 2016; Forchtner & Gruber, forthcoming; Hultgren, 2015; Richardson, 2017; Taylor, 2020) (for refugee and immigration studies regarding climate change, see e.g. Ketola, 2015, 2017; T. Matthews & Potts, 2018). At the same time, I will explain in the following sections that these same actors often deny climate change and reject policies for climate protection (e.g. Hatakka & Välimäki, 2020; Hultman et al., 2020; Küppers, 2022).

Indeed, the boundless and uncontainable character of climate change that ignores geographics, class, and ethnonational boundaries ‘can hardly be comprehended within the limits of nationalist world vision’ (Conversi, 2020, p. 625). At the same time, it is hard ‘to imagine a world without nationalism’, as the nation has been ‘so central, and protean, a category of modern political and cultural thought, discourse, and practice’ (Brubaker, 1996, p. 10; for a contemporary analysis of nationalism in the EU, see Karolewski, 2020). Indeed, even though nationalism has been an obstacle in the development of multilateral climate negotiations (Christoff, 2010; Temko, 2018), nationalism studies show a lack of research on the

complex relationship between climate change and nationalism (Conversi & Friis Hau, 2021). The historian Hobsbawm (1990) emphasised the reactionary essence of nationalism and referred to an incapacity to confront contemporary environmental or social challenges (Conversi & Friis Hau, 2021). The acknowledgement of the primacy of domestic politics in the Paris Agreement has been seen as a progressive element, as it allowed countries to set their own levels of ambition for climate change mitigation (Falkner, 2016, p. 1107). This climate policy in the Paris Agreement also meant a new form of media debate ‘one in which national responses to climate change are discussed by comparing *our* responses to *their* responses and thus establishing othering, nationalistically loaded argumentations regarding “how responsible we are”’ (Ridanpää, 2022, p. 3).

However, nationalism is a vague concept and has multiple varieties and nuances; it can be found at the state as well as at sub-state levels, on the left or right of the political spectrum, and can be described as moderate, liberal, or pluralistic (A. D. Smith, 1995, 1998). Therefore, studies on the nexus climate change and nationalism can reveal important insights into the role of nationalist ideologies. Conversi (2020) suggests two ways in which nationalism can be related to or appear to be a reaction to climate change: resource nationalism and green nationalism. The first type often follows a narrative of climate obstruction (Washington & Cook, 2011a) and often overlaps with far-right nationalism and populism. However, according to Conversi (2020), resource nationalism has its roots in the way territorial resources (e.g. coal, gas) are controlled and used and is a form of rhetoric ‘that uplifts and sacralizes soil-rooted national resources as a common good even though only a tiny minority of the population actually benefits from their extraction and exploitation’ (p. 630). For instance, nationalism plays a central role in the debate about the use of coal and shale gas in Poland (Materka, 2012), where also the antifracking movement has been silenced by nationalism and a lack of debate (Jaspal et al., 2016). What Conversi (2020, p. 629) calls green nationalism is ‘centered around national sustainabilities’ (see e.g. Jones & Ross, 2016), but has not been fully theorised or conceptualised (for ‘sustainable nationalism’, see Conversi & Posocco, 2022). In particular nationalist parties in stateless nations in Europe (e.g. Scotland, Catalonia) ‘propose an environmentally focused agenda for advanced social transformation to radically address the issue of climate change’ (Conversi, 2020, p. 632), whereby the rhetoric focuses on ‘traditional nationalist tropes, such as territory, soil, and belonging, and fusing these with the progressive political stance of most contemporary autonomist and pro-independence movements’ (p. 632). Here, a romanticised countryside often plays a role, combining heritage and sustainability with nationalist aspirations (see e.g. C. Brown et al., 2012). In one of the few studies on left-leaning nationalist parties (the Scottish National Party and the Republican Left of Catalonia) and climate change, the authors identified ‘green nationalism’ as consistent over time ‘as [sub-state] nationalist actors construct rhetorical and ideological continuity between sub-state nationalism’s long-standing focus on the protection of territory and contemporary climate-friendly policies’ (Conversi & Friis Hau, 2021, pp. 1102–1103). Here, Conversi and Friis Hau (2021, p. 1102) refer to the distinction between *ethnic* and *civic* nationalism (A. D. Smith, 1998,

pp. 125–127, 210–212), whereby – in line with Hamilton (2002) – they regard Green politics as closer to civic nationalism and incompatible with ethnic nationalism. Hamilton (2002, p. 27) has also already identified the values of ethnic nationalism as ‘incompatible with those of Green political actors’. Diprose et al. (2016) illustrated how climate activists and campaigners in New Zealand strategically draw on eco-nationalist identity narratives to mobilise against oil drilling, referring especially to the value of non-human things (beaches) as part of national identity and to ultimately ‘contest government and oil companies’ pragmatic abstractions of “responsibly” managed drilling and “stewardship” of New Zealand’s natural resources’ (p. 169) (see also Loftus, 2015).

Relying on a different definition of resource nationalism put forward by Wilson (2015, p. 400), who considers it as ‘a strategy where governments use economic nationalist policies to improve local returns from resource industries’, Poberezhskaya and Danilova (2022, p. 445) show that the authoritarian regime in Kazakhstan uses climate change as a resource ‘which is used to deprioritise climate change policies whilst also strengthening the state’s economic ambitions’.

In a study of far-right media and its discourse on Greta Thunberg, Vowles and Hultman (2022) also made a connection to nationalism. Referring to Benedict Anderson’s (2016, p. 6) conceptualisation of the nation as an ‘imagined political community’ that is bounded and sovereign, where this imagined community of the far right is ‘a homogenous, patriarchal, and industrially prosperous one that needs to be defended at any cost’ (p. 422), the authors describe Thunberg and climate policy as being framed as a threat to the (fossil-fuelled) modern economy and thus to the well-being of the nation (Vowles & Hultman, 2022). In a study of how Finnish media approach the concept of carbon footprint as a socio-political discourse, the author argues that the Finnish newspaper ‘constructs and sustains logic of thinking in which carbon footprint responsibility is merged together with the state-centric perceptions and nationalistic ideologies’ (Ridanpää, 2022, pp. 430–431). The article shows ‘how banal nationalism functions as a contextual media framework’, whereby in this case nationalism is to be understood particularly in terms of national pride (see e.g. Antonsich, 2009; Ridanpää, 2022, p. 431). Conversi and Posocco (2022) also identified a new form of national pride as a response to the global climate crisis, which they describe as ‘pride based on achievements that can be shared across borders, even while the first beneficiaries are those living within the national boundaries’ (p. 12) and the nation state with the lowest carbon footprint gains the most prestige. Nevertheless, Braun (2021) argues that the countries in Europe in particular are not large enough for unilateral action to have a significant impact on the mitigation of global warming. Nationalism is considered by many scholars to be the dominant ideology in contemporary society (Conversi, 2010, 2012, 2014; Malešević, 2019); thus social sciences need to explore the relation between nationalism and climate change in greater detail and effort.

Especially in times of the rise of far-right actors, discursive contexts of the natural environment and issues of national identity or immigration that frame such parties and movements become also salient to mainstream actors (Lubarda, 2020). Indeed, framing nature such as the forest as a ‘national treasure’ and relating it to

issues such as immigration or religion (Isaev & Korovin, 2014) can also be seen among actors who do not view themselves as nationalists (Lubarda, 2020).

Ecofascism

In recent years, literature on the far right and environment is also concerned with the concept of ecofascism as an emergent ideology (see e.g. Biehl & Staudenmaier, 1995, 2011; Campion, 2021; Dyett & Thomas, 2019; Harris, 2023; Hughes et al., 2022; Lubarda, 2020; Macklin, 2022; Moore & Roberts, 2022; Olsen, 1999; Reid Ross & Bevensee, 2020; Szenes, 2021; Zimmerman, 1995). This literature can be divided into empirical research on the far-right and historical and contemporary approaches to ecology, and into work that theorises and defines these concepts (Hughes et al., 2022). Here, scholars underline the need to distinguish theoretical considerations of ideas, practices, and movements from other far-right ideologies, such as ‘far right ecologism’ (see Lubarda, 2020). For the first category, distinguishing the concepts of ‘ecology’ and ‘ecologism’ from ‘environmentalism’ is emphasised. According to Dobson (2007, 2012), environmentalism and ecologism are different political animals and ideologies: environmentalism does not necessarily require a rethinking of the economic system, can simply be appropriated by conservative actors, and ‘argues for a managerial approach to environmental problems’ (Dobson, 2000, p. 2). Ecologism, in contrast, requires radical change and demands the establishment of a new economic system. It can be defined as any ‘attempt to address the fundamental causes of environmental change through holistic, ideological or value-based underpinnings’ (Lubarda, 2020, p. 1). Or as Dobson (2000, p. 2) puts it, ‘ecologism holds that a sustainable and fulfilling existence presupposes radical changes in our relationship with the non-human natural world, and in our mode of social and political life’. While some authors used ecofascism and right-wing ecology interchangeably (Olsen, 1999; Staudenmaier, 2011), recent literature clearly distinguishes between ecofascism and these concepts of far-right ecologism (Lubarda, 2020). According to Hughes et al. (Hughes et al., 2022, pp. 6–7):

One might say that far-right ecologism emerges at the point where the ecofascist imaginary collides with the material realities of resource allocation and the far-right’s mode of gathering political power. At the very least, we can distinguish contemporary ecofascist tendencies from “actually existing” far-right ecologism by looking to ecofascism’s open preference for irrationalism and occultation. . . . Ecofascism exists most comfortably in the register of the imaginary, in the mystical, rather than in the practical.

Such differences have also been identified by Hughes et al. (2022) in their empirical work as they argue that ecofascism is mostly concerned ‘with imagining an ethno-national community’ (p. 19), while far-right ecologism tends ‘to be more practical and have actually coalesced in far-right movements proper’ (p. 19). In fact, Lubarda (2020) argues that the far-right’s attempts to influence environmental thought are very complex and go beyond mere ecofascism. The distinctive set of

values of far-right ecologism, including spirituality and mysticism, organicism, and naturalism, are far from being marginal and it ‘enhances the existing frameworks addressing far right values on the environment by pointing to a distinctive social imaginary’ (Lubarda, 2020, p. 19). Indeed, the key characteristics of ecofascism can be defined as ‘first and foremost an imaginary and cultural expression of mystical, anti-humanist Romanticism’ (Hughes et al., 2022, p. 2). Others also highlight characteristics such as irrationality, pseudoscience, or ‘mythology of racial salvation through return to the land’ (Biehl & Staudenmaier, 2011). Historically, modern ecofascism has evolved from Nazi ecofascism, but the combination of nationalism, authoritarianism, charismatic leaders, and a mystical and biologist view of nature is very similar to its historical counterparts. Ecofascism has been defined as ‘the preoccupation of authentically fascist movements with environmentalist concerns’ (Staudenmaier, 2011, p. 14) and as a concept that is ‘inextricably bound up with virulently xenophobic nationalism’ (Biehl & Staudenmaier, 1995, p. 6). In the words of Campion (2021, p. 1), ecofascism is a reactionary and revolutionary ideology, and ecofascists believe ‘that their chosen community has weakened because the connection to nature has been disrupted by the forces of modernity, spanning industrialisation, urbanisation, multiculturalism, materialism, and individualism’. Rueda (2020) and other scholars of the fascism studies field (e.g. Roger Griffin, Emilio Gentile, George I. Mosse, Zeev Sternhell, Stanley G. Payne, and Robert Paxton) pointed out the link between fascism and romanticism, which considers national identity, the nation, and its culture as natural creations rather than products of human activity (Olsen, 1999). Indeed, the ‘blood and soil’ thinking of Nazism (see also Macklin, 2022) is considered a clear ideological expression of ecofascism with nature as ‘the foundation of the social order’ (Flipo, 2018, p. 170; see also Hughes et al., 2022). Moreover, Szenes (2021, p. 150) underscores that ‘the idea that nature and land are one with the people and therefore, protecting the purity of the land and nature equals protecting national identity and racial purity originates from German Romanticism and anti-Enlightenment nationalism’ (see also Biehl & Staudenmaier, 1995; Olsen, 1999; Staudenmaier, 2011). The historical roots of ecofascism can even be traced back to the 19th-century German *völkisch* movement ‘that combined nationalism and white racial superiority with neo-pagan nature mysticism and nostalgia for a lost past’ (Staudenmaier, 2011; Szenes, 2021, p. 151). Ecofascists believe that their ecological harmony and society have been weakened by forces of modernity, such as individualism, materialism, industrialisation, urbanisation as well as immigration and multiculturalism (Campion, 2021, p. 2).

However, without going into details about the development of this ideology, I now want to give a short overview of the current research on ecofascism and its links to discourses about climate change. By analysing the Nordic Resistance Movement manifesto, Szenes (2021) illustrates how grievances of environmental degradation are linked to ‘old’ white supremacist grievances (e.g. ‘mass immigration’, multiculturalism, or ‘global Zionism’) and linguistically construct ecofascist ideology. In addition, she argues that such ecofascist discourses ‘have the potential to become part of more mainstream political discourses’ (Szenes, 2021, p. 149) and from an educational point of view, she claims that it will become increasingly

important to dissociate ecofascism and its disinformation campaigns (which might aim to reinforce white supremacist ideologies) from climate justice movements, in particular from the youth engaging in such movements.

An exploration of how contemporary extreme right groups reacted to climate change and phenomena such as population growth and migration claims ‘[e]xtreme right environmentalism and ecology has re-emerged as an ideological agent for de-humanising those perceived to threaten racial purity’ (Macklin, 2022, p. 13). Various authors refer to mass violence in Christchurch and El Paso in 2019, where the perpetrators identified themselves as ecofascists (e.g. Hughes et al., 2022; Lubarda, 2020), and where racial exclusion and violence was reframed as an ‘act of physical, spiritual and environmental salvation’ (Macklin, 2022, p. 13). In fact, like Szenes (2021), Macklin (2022) refers to the potential of climate change and associated environmental degradations as a source of far-right violence, but, most importantly, both point to the potential for the eco-fascist-propagated anti-human environmental views to influence the wider public in their understanding of and attitudes towards climate emergency. Indeed, climate change migrants are often described as a burden and a threat to the natural resources and internal stability of nations (Campion, 2021, p. 4). Measures such as family-planning programs raised in discussions to counteract overpopulation as a means of alleviating the climate crisis can be described as a ‘superficial, Western, capitalist-driven idea and discussion, laced with sexist and racist undertones’ that ignore historic power relations (Dyett & Thomas, 2019, p. 205). Indeed, by employing a critical decolonial and ecofeminist lens, historical roots around such family-planning movements (especially in the Global South) linked to overpopulation can be traced back to ecofascism or nationalism and anti-immigrant sentiments (Dyett & Thomas, 2019).

Climate change communication and populist far-right actors

In recent years, there has been an enormous increase in academic research on how populist far-right actors communicate climate change and include the topic in their political agenda. As this is also the research area of this study, the following part focuses on climate change communication by populist far-right actors. Far-right populism is ‘built around ethno-nationalism and authoritarianism’ (Forchtner, 2019b, p. 2; Holzer, 1994; Rydgren, 2018). Within the far right, the radical right ‘accepts the essence of democracy, but opposes fundamental elements of liberal democracy’ (Mudde, 2019, p. 7); the extreme right ‘rejects the essence of democracy, that is, popular sovereignty and majority rule’ (Mudde, 2019, p. 7); and the populist right ‘*considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, “the pure people” versus “the corrupt elite”*’ (original in italics Mudde, 2004, p. 543) (see populism as a thin ideology in Mudde, 2007, and detailed description and discussion is provided below).

As mentioned already, according to the current literature, many, though not all, populist far-right actors communicate obstruction of climate change mitigation in one way or another. In fact, the far right is still divided on climate change (Forchtner, 2019b, 2020b; Forchtner et al., 2018; Lubarda & Forchtner, 2023) and

it is worth mentioning that actors of the far right are increasingly engaging in environmental activism (see e.g. Forchtner & Tominc, 2017) by promoting cycling instead of driving, by collecting waste from public places, or by advocating a vegan or vegetarian diet (Szenes, 2021).

Analysing the arguments

More detailed and profound analyses of arguments confirmed the climate obstruction of many populist far-right actors in Europe. But before I go into detail about the arguments, it is worth repeating that scholars have also found some neglect of the issue of climate change (see above the example of the Hungarian far-right party Jobbik). Research that investigated far-right communication of environmental issues of German party and non-party actors illustrates that in comparison to other environmental issues such as biodiversity or material pollution, the salience of climate change in the far-right texts was low (Forchtner & Özvatan, 2020). Also in Austria, the FPÖ, a party that ‘has been pioneering with nature protection in Austria’ (Voss, 2014, 2020, p. 153), includes many different topics in its nature protection programme, such as agriculture, animals, conservation, economics, energy, fish and marine policy, human health and bio-ethics, immigration, individualism, consumption, international relations, science and technology, spatial planning, traditional culture, transportation, and waste management. However, climate change, if anything, is only a marginal topic (see also Vihma et al., 2021).

A recent examination of how the AfD communicated climate change and COVID-19, both paradigmatic translational crises, to legitimise itself ‘as the true representative of the nation vis-à-vis national (Germany) and supranational actors (the European Union, EU)’ revealed various topics and arguments that have also been found in many other studies (Forchtner & Özvatan, 2022, p. 209). Indeed, the authors identified irrationalism, left-wing dominance, incompetent elite, economy, and national sovereignty as main topics the AfD relates to climate change and argue that via these macro-topics, the populist far-right party delegitimises ‘the other’ or the elite, who allegedly harm the national sovereignty and economy (Forchtner & Özvatan, 2022).

Nationalist ideology and sovereignty

A current argument that has been found in several studies relates to a national issue. Hanson's (2023, p. 1) analysis of the Spanish populist far-right Vox argues that the party constructs a nationalist narrative on climate change, reterritorialising it at the national level, asserting national innocence against claims of global climate justice, and portraying mainstream climate action as part of a broader globalist imposition that jeopardises the integrity of national culture. Confirming the climate-change scepticism of the British National Party and the Danish People's Party, Forchtner and Kølvrå's (2015) findings suggest that climate, due to its abstract nature, as it ‘can hardly be depicted outside scientific models or satellite photos’ (p. 212) is less aesthetically comprehensible (than the natural environment). However, even

though popular sovereignty – a typical element for nationalist ideology – is far more central in discourses about the nation's countryside and landscape, where both parties emphasise the cultural and historical links between the land and the people, on the transnational level sovereignty is also present, in that above all independence in energy issues and, more specifically, renewable energies is called into question. Moreover, nationalist concerns seldom consider the climate itself but rather focus on conflicts or certain actors that populist far-right actors see emerging in and through climate change discussions and that they accuse 'of using climate change as an excuse for attacking national sovereignty' (Forchtner & Kølvrå, 2015, p. 213).

Similar to other far-right nationalist parties, environmental issues have been part of the Sweden Democrats' political agenda since the late 1980s. However, regarding climate change, Hultman et al. (2020) provide research showing how this party adopted a climate change sceptic agenda through anti-establishment rhetoric, marketing doubts about climate science, and promoting ethno-nationalism. In fact, Hultman et al. (2020) explain the shift of the Swedish political landscape in the past decade, illustrating how ideas from climate obstructionist groups merged with the far-right nationalist Sweden Democrats. The issue of sovereignty, or more specifically, the issue of a threat to national sovereignty, has also been identified in the climate change communication of the German AfD (Küppers, 2022). In this argumentation the EU is frequently mentioned, which is in line with the general Eurosceptic position of the party. Thus, policies around climate change provide another way for the AfD to attack the power of the EU. This is consistent with the postulated mechanism of Kulin et al. (2021), which connects nationalism and climate obstruction (see also Forchtner & Kølvrå, 2015). A study of right-wing populism in Switzerland also illustrated how 'conventional nationalistic and identitarian narratives' of far-right movements might mix with environmental concerns to attract support from people who have not often backed populist actors (Audiakana & Kaufmann, 2022, p. 137). Thus, the authors describe such actors as populist movements 'that elaborate and circulate pro-environmental arguments jointly with traditional identitarian and exclusionary narratives' (p. 152).

In contrast to Germany, Austria, and Sweden, environmental issues are rather new on the Polish political scene and the elite-level discourse is not coherent on topics such as climate change (Bennett & Kwiatkowski, 2020). The environment and its protection have widely been approached by non-political actors, including far-right groups. Indeed, the extreme right Ruch Naradowy party rejects climate change 'along cosmopolitan/trans-national grounds' (Bennett & Kwiatkowski, 2020, p. 249). Similarities are found in an analysis of the discourse of the climate policy rhetoric by Poland's populist far-right Law and Justice (PiS) party (including statements made by politicians, right-wing media (wPolityce.pl and Niezależna.pl both share personal, ideological, and financial ties with the PiS party and the government of Poland), and comments on the forums of right-wing portals) (Żuk & Szulecki, 2020). The study revealed that climate change scepticism addresses mainly nationally and sovereignty-oriented arguments and the defence of 'Polish coal' as the PiS and related media outlets criticise any calls for changes

in the national energy policy (see also Žuk, 2022; Žuk & Szulecki, 2020). In general, the ‘PiS’ narrative about climate change and energy has been shifted from the scientific-rational area to the sphere of ideology and unverifiable myths’ (Žuk & Szulecki, 2020, p. 25). Especially the EU is framed as a corrupt elite threatening the sovereignty of the national energy and economic policy (Žuk, 2022). Indeed, nationalist and sovereignty framings of climate issues are often connected to the energy independence of the nation (see also Forchtner & Kølvråa, 2015).

Similar to what other scholars have already found (see e.g. Hess & Renner, 2019; Stegemann & Ossewaarde, 2018), alternative energy sources such as renewables are framed as being anti-environmentalist and contradicting common sense. Sovereignty issues often play a role here, since the issue is about being energetically autarkic and independent as a nation. As such, depending on the national context, renewable energy sources are sometimes framed by the far right as a solution leading to more independence (e.g. Forchtner et al., 2018). Far-right actors also refer to environmentalist and animal-welfare arguments when they argue against renewable energies such as wind farms, which are allegedly responsible for the death of birds and bats (see Hatakka & Välimäki, 2020 and below).

Irrationalism

Alongside nationalist and sovereigntist arguments, scholars frequently found irrationalism in the climate change communication of populist far-right actors. Attacks on mainstream scientists and science, arguments based on religious irrationalism, claims that CO₂ is not causing climate change, or framing climate change policies as a threat for the economy and jobs were identified as themes in an analysis of three outlets (*Die Aula*, *Zur Zeit*, and *unzensuriert.at*) that are closely linked to the FPÖ and, according to the author, largely in line with the FPÖ stances (Forchtner, 2019a). In sum, the analysis displayed a quite straightforward climate-change sceptic communication in the documents, while at the same time the importance of environmental protections is present.

Religious metaphors are connected to irrationalism. Indeed, Atanasova and Koteyko (2017), who studied linguistic and conceptual metaphors in British newspapers, identified religious metaphors used to convey climate scepticism and downplay the urgent need to act on climate change (p. 452). Nerlich (2010) also illustrated the role of religious metaphors in climate obstruction. Moreover, a series of themes are highlighted in similar research, such as the belief in climate change as the ‘new secular religion’ (Forchtner & Kølvråa, 2015, p. 213) along with doubts about the connection between CO₂ emissions and global warming, accusing the IPCC of being driven by ‘vested interests’ rather than being a scientific organisation (Forchtner & Kølvråa, 2015, p. 214), or doubts about the human impact on climate change.

Gender masculinities

Worth mentioning is the connection identified between climate change scepticism and gender, as the world is being seen by far-right actors in Sweden from an

industrial masculinities viewpoint and climate change (policy) is perceived as a threat to industrial/breadwinner masculinities (Hultman et al., 2020). Indeed, the conceptualisation of industrial/breadwinner masculinities (see Hultman & Pulé, 2019) was used to study hostilities towards Greta Thunberg constructed in Swedish far-right digital media (Vowles & Hultman, 2022). The authors showed the connection between anti-environmentalism and antifeminism and how Thunberg ‘is portrayed and constructed as a threat to the imagined Swedish community of the far right’ (Vowles & Hultman, 2022, p. 415). The link between (toxic) masculinities and climate obstruction is also highlighted by Malm and the Zetkin Collective (2021) in their study of the far right and the climate crisis (see Hultman & Pulé, 2020, for more details about masculinities, the environment, and climate change in 2019). Furthermore, a Norwegian quantitative study found that conservative men in particular are more likely to show scepticism around climate change (Krange et al., 2019), and the findings of Jylhä et al. (2020) revealed similar correlations.

Secondary obstruction

According to Vihma et al. (2021), who explored the patterns of climate policy and authoritarian populism (see e.g. Norris & Inglehart, 2019), or, more concretely, populist argumentation in climate policy communication in Denmark, Finland, and Sweden, countries with an overall ‘green’ image, the populist parties – namely the New Right Party in Denmark, the Finns Party and Sweden Democrats – are moving away from denying the existence of climate change, because they regard the term ‘denialism’ as carrying negative connotations (p. 232). However, they still tolerate ‘the expression of doubt about climate change’ (Vihma et al., 2021, p. 232). Moreover, at the core of the climate change communication of the Finns Party and Sweden Democrats is the notion that they are not the ones who should act, as their domestic action will not matter globally. As mentioned before, Ekberg et al. (2022) call this secondary obstruction, and it was also found in the climate change communication of the Danish People’s Party (Kølvraa, 2020): while the party still displayed a hostile attitude towards climate change, the focus shifted from primary obstructionism, that is, denial of (human-induced) climate change (see Ekberg et al., 2022), to an ideological critique of policy responses and key authorities on climate change. Other studies also found that populist far-right parties communicated at least partial acceptance of anthropogenic climate change and corresponding measures that serve the goal ‘to protect the green and pleasant land’ (p. 68), criticising however climate change policies and actors engaging in it (see e.g. Küppers, 2022 for the German AfD; Turner-Graham, 2020 for the British National Party).

Economic arguments

As previously demonstrated by Supran and Oreskes (2017) and Franta (2022), economic interests aimed at preserving fossil capitalism often play a significant role in climate obstruction. Such economic arguments are often also raised by populist far-right parties. For instance, the Finns party did not question ‘the validity of

climate change as a natural phenomenon, but it has severely questioned whether international cooperative means to curb climate change are efficient and reasonable from the point of view of the Finnish people' (Hatakka & Välimäki, 2020, p. 141). In the party's programmes, they frame environmental protection as trade-off to economic growth (see also Gemenis et al., 2012).

However, economic arguments are also used in connection with climate obstruction, as the example of the AfD shows. The German AfD rejects the fact that humans are causing climate change (see 'attribution scepticism' conceptualised by Rahmstorf, 2005) and various arguments are response sceptic (i.e. they show hostility towards climate change mitigation policies) (Küppers, 2022). Accordingly, the AfD frames climate mitigation measures as being socialist, as an 'eco-dictatorship', or as a 'totalitarian system' (p. 11). Many arguments are of an economic nature (e.g. climate policies damage Germany industries), which reflects Germany's dependence on fossil fuels as well as the high number of employees in sectors such as the automotive industry that would be affected by a green transition. While neoliberal arguments are employed, the party referred to social justice, especially for arguments regarding the transition (which could be socially unjust). Remaining in Germany, Forchtner et al. (2018) identified various nuances of (human-made) climate obstruction and recognised general topics that have been outlined also in previous studies on far-right and contemporary conservative climate change scepticism (e.g. scepticism about the impact of human-made greenhouse gas emissions on climate change, or accusations towards the left/liberals of being anti-little guy, anti-freedom, hysterical, or religiously deluded).

Conspiracy beliefs

Conspiracy theories and beliefs are also found in the literature on far-right climate change communication. For instance, the mainstream media and the mainstream scientific community, as well as the United Nations (UN) and the US, are portrayed as actors who seek to manipulate the public (Forchtner et al., 2018). Kaiser (2020), who focused on investigating the connection between German climate sceptics and the US right-wing, in particular the far-right, suggested differentiating between mono-thematic sceptics and political climate sceptics in the German climate obstruction. The latter combine various conspiracy theories and frequently reject mainstream media and science sources. The former, mono-thematic sceptics, focus mainly on climate change and climate science. The Austrian FPÖ also actively use conspiracy theory arguments and employ populist rhetoric in their discourse about EU climate and energy policies, including their animosity towards the scientific consensus on anthropogenic climate change (Huber et al., 2021, p. 1005).

The ideational approach as an enlightening theoretical framework

Before discussing the role of populism in climate change communication and more concretely the obstruction of climate change mitigation and policies, I need to give a short overview of theoretical aspects of populism.

Already the term ‘populism’ is frequently used in different ways and hotly debated (Barr, 2009; Gidron & Bonikowski, 2013; Roberts, 2006). Some populist scholars highlight the importance of such discussions, because ‘populism does leave an imprint on important political phenomena’ (Hawkins, 2010, p. 49). Without going into detail about various discussions in this field, and without explaining different approaches and related debates such as populism as political logic or (post-foundational) discourse (Laclau, 2005), as a political or/and communication style or strategy (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007; Moffitt, 2016; Moffitt & Tormey, 2014), or as a media phenomenon (Pajnik & Sauer, 2017), I will only elaborate on populism as an ideology (Kriesi & Pappas, 2015; Mudde, 2004; Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017).

Thus, the ideational approach, which defines populism as a thin-centred ideology, does not limit itself to a specific type of leadership, communication, or mobilisation. Instead, it can encompass various political actors that can be considered both far right and populist. And more generally speaking, Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser (2017, p. 20) argue that this approach ‘allows us to take into account both the demand side and the supply side of populist politics’. Discourse researcher Wodak (2018) also emphasises that it is important not only to consider (right-wing) populism as a rhetorical style or a purely media performance phenomenon but that ideological content is crucial in communication. Moreover, sociologist and media expert Dick Pels (2012) claims that the combination of content and form of populism contributes fundamentally to its success.

But what is actually the ideational approach of populism? Mudde (2004, p. 543 original in italics), who is still one of the most significant proponents of this strand, considers populism as a thin-centred ideology ‘that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, “the pure people” versus “the corrupt elite”, and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people’. This minimal definition seeks to capture the traits that serve to identify the phenomena in all conceivable circumstances and can ‘represent the lowest common denominator among all manifestations of a given phenomenon’ (Katsambekis, 2020, p. 8; Rooduijn, 2014; Sartori, 1970).

Scholars widely agree that when populism is called an ideology, it is not a full or a thick ideology and is therefore referred to as a thin or thin-centred ideology (Fieschi, 2006; Mudde, 2004; Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017; B. Stanley, 2008). Freedden (1996, 1998), who coined the term ‘thin-centred ideologies’, described it as not being able to provide answers to a comprehensive range of social questions. Taggart (2004) previously highlighted that populism alone offers limited content or a clear political agenda and refers to the ‘empty heart’ of populism and its chameleonic nature, unlike full-fledged ideologies such as socialism, conservatism, fascism, or liberalism (Freedden, 1998). The thinness of populism is also one reason why some scholars propose to conceive populism as a transitory phenomenon: it either ‘transcends’ itself into something bigger or it fails (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017, p. 6). Therefore, populism is seldom found in its pure form but employs concepts from other ideologies, existing most often in combination with

other (thin or full) ideologies (Mudde, 2004, p. 544). The thin-centred nature of populism allows it to adapt to specific socioeconomic and socio-political characteristics where it merges, or in other words, it adopts distinctive features in different contexts (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017, p. 8).

However, according to Freedon (2017), populism is also different from other thin-centred ideologies (such as feminism, ecologism, and nationalism) that could ‘become full if they incorporate existing elements of other ideologie; whereas the truncated nature of populisms seldom evinces such aspirations or potential’ (Freedon, 2017, p. 3). Moreover, he argued that populism is more fragmented, thus less cohesive than other thin-centred ideologies and frequently lacks internal coherence outside of its broad-brush core beliefs (p. 7). Moffitt (2016, p. 20) also points out the criticism that ‘unlike other “thin ideologies”, [populism] has made no attempt to become “thicker”’. However, he also highlights the fruitfulness of Mudde's (2004) definition by enabling classifications for politicians and political parties in particular for comparative politics, allowing a break from heated theoretical debates and promoting cross-regional analysis.

In order to better define the concept of populism, elitism and pluralism often appear in the literature on populism (A. Akkerman et al., 2014; Mudde, 2004; Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017). The former is the ideological opposite of populism, because in elitism the sole rule of a moral, cultural, and intellectual superior elite is sought, whereby, as in populism, the antagonism between this elite and the people is central (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2013). In pluralism, on the other hand, society is heterogeneous and therefore consists of groups and individuals with many different ideas and views. Pluralism rejects the homogeneity of elitism and populism. Furthermore, Hawkins (2010) attributes a number of characteristics to pluralism, such as valuing human individuality as well as minority rights, respecting formal rights and freedoms, and treating political opponents with respect. According to Katsambekis (2020, p. 10), however, this implies that populism rejects these attitudes, which is particularly problematic since most populists of the political left would be excluded from the concept of populism because they define ‘the people’ inclusively.

In addition, populists mainly follow a Manichean view, where on one side the friends, the good and pure, are situated and on the other side the enemies, foes, or opponents that are fundamentally presented as evil, which makes compromises impossible. Elitism shares this view and sees ‘the people’ as evil, dishonest, or dangerous, while ‘the elite’ is morally, culturally, and intellectually superior (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017, p. 7). In populism, it is the other way round. The concept of the people in populism is often vaguely described, which for many scholars renders the use of ‘the people’ useless (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017). However, Laclau (2006), who is regarded as the radical other approach to Mudde in the literature, argues that the vagueness of ‘the people’ makes it an ‘empty signifier’, which leads to the powerfulness of populism. Indeed, the possibility to frame ‘the people’ somewhat independently facilitates the creation of a shared identity between various groups, which helps them to receive support for a joint cause (see also Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017, p. 9).

In an attempt to define populists' 'the people', Mudde (2004, p. 546) relies on Taggart's concept of the heartland. In his words, 'the people of the populists are an "imagined community", much like the nation of the nationalists' (for imagined communities, see Anderson, 1983), but at the same time he points out that the concept of the heartland can also be vague and different populists can create different heartlands even in the same national context. It can be easier to determine who or what populists are against. Taggart (2004, p. 274) argues that the 'commitment to the "people" is in fact a derivative consequence of the implicit or explicit commitment to a "heartland"' and to understand what populists mean by or how they construct 'the people', it is necessary to understand their understanding of their 'heartland'. For instance, he claims that the heartland for European populists is often an imaginary from past times, without complications of globalisation processes, immigration, or the encroachment of taxation. For Taggart, the heartland is something 'that is felt rather than reasoned, and something that is shrouded in imprecision' (p. 274). This can result in a certain ambiguity, as different positions can create a heartland that hides these differences behind the nature of the heartland. This way, the impression can be generated that populists are internally conflict-free and monolithic, whereas in reality populist parties are particularly prone to factionalism (Taggart, 2004, p. 274). Moreover, the lack of core values in populism emerges from the importance of the heartland in populism. There are populist movements and parties across the political spectrum, from far left to far right, from authoritarian to libertarian, from revolutionary to reactionary. He describes this as a weakness, but it also gives populism a certain ubiquity. It makes populism mutable, and while populism is fundamentally directed against elites and/or institutions, the nature of populism varies because elites and institutions can be very different. In Taggart's (2004, p. 275) own words, 'populism is *de facto* substantially contextually contingent' whereby it is the specific version of the heartland that determines a populist movement's own particular characteristics. Populists, in fact, do not mobilise when another heartland is in danger but only when they see their own heartland as threatened.

Current populists usually lean against the established parties and claim that only they are the true representatives of the 'oppressed people' and want to liberate them. Unlike early populist movements of the New Left that emerged in the late 1960s which wanted to improve the status of workers, populists of the early 21st century do not want to change the values or the way of life of the people (Mudde, 2004). In addition, while the New Left 'referred to an active, self-confident, well-educated, progressive people' (p. 557), the current populism 'is the rebellion of the "silent majority"' (p. 557). In fact, the basis of all good politics in populism is so-called common sense, which is supposed to refer to the consciousness of the people. To highlight such differences between the New Left and the current zeitgeist of populism, Mudde (2004) refers to the different heartlands. He names Berlusconi in Italy or Haider in Austria as examples of populism, whose heartlands can be described as conservative, hard-working, and law-abiding people with growing anger about progressives, criminals, and aliens who distort their world (p. 557). Notably, such populists are supporters of democracy but do not want to be constantly bothered

with politics (Mudde, 2004). Indeed, according to him, the people want leadership with a focus on output and not on the input of democracy. In other words, populist leadership should pursue policies that meet the wishes of the people without really involving them. This is where charismatic leadership, which Taggart has already mentioned, comes into play. In his words, populism ‘requires the most extraordinary individuals to lead the most ordinary of people’ (Taggart, 2000, p. 1). Mudde (2004) points out that it does not have to be the ‘true outsider’ or ‘the man of the streets’ (p. 559), a charismatic personality who is not the elite itself but who may already be associated with it is sufficient. The approach that considers populism as a political strategy relies first and foremost on such a strong and charismatic leadership figure who concentrates power but maintains direct contact with the masses (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017, p. 4). This approach is particularly popular among scholars of Latin American and non-Western societies (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017, p. 4). In sum, according to the ideological approach, the idealised people are both the addressee and the origin of political action (Poier et al., 2017).

In contrast to many theoretical attempts to define ‘the people’ in populism, less attention has been paid to the concept of ‘the elite’. Most often, populists refer to the political establishment as the corrupt homogenous elite but often also include economic, cultural, and media aspects in their criticism. According to Mudde (2004, p. 561), in ‘the populist mind, the elite are the henchmen of “special interest”’. While these formidable, dubious entities have historically been mostly associated with international financiers (often alleged to be Jewish), in today’s populism the ‘progressives’ and the ‘politically correct’ have often been labelled as the ‘new class’. As Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser (2017, p. 12) put it, ‘the elite are defined on the basis of power, i.e., they include most people who hold leading positions within politics, the economy, the media, and the arts’. When populists themselves are in power they could be seen as part of the establishment. However, examples have shown that in these cases, populists (re-)direct their anti-establishment rhetoric against ‘shadowy forces that continue to hold on to illegitimate powers to undermine the voice of the people’ that is, the populists (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017, p. 12). In fact, examples of left-wing populists who often point to the elite with economic power when their policies lack success can be found in Latin America as well as in Europe (e.g. Hugo Chávez in Venezuela or Alexis Tsipras in Greece).

Based on the definition of populism above (see Mudde, 2004, p. 543, and above), an explanation of the third core concept of the populist ideology, the general will (*volonté générale*), is needed. Mudde refers to Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778), who distinguished the general will (*volonté générale*) from the will of all (*volonté de tous*). The first ‘refers to the capacity of people to join together into a community and legislate to enforce their common interest’, while the latter ‘denotes the simple sum of particular interests at a specific moment in time’ (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017, p. 16). Moreover, this notion of the general will is relatively complex and the belief that there is a general will is strengthened by populists’ moral and monist distinction between the good people and the corrupt

elite. On the one hand, scholars refer here to the advocacy of direct democracy measures, which populists often call for or support; on the other hand, there is also a certain tendency towards authoritarianism. In the latter, the homogeneity of the people is central, which leads to the exclusion of those who do not correspond to this homogeneity. Hence, the general is seen as transparent but also absolute; it allows populists to be open to authoritarianism and illegal attacks against those who allegedly endanger the people or their homogeneity (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017, pp. 16–18).

In the ideational approach, political actors are thus primarily defined as populists when they divide society in terms of moral struggle between the corrupt elite and the virtuous people. According to Mudde (2017, p. 29), moralism is ‘the essence of the populist division’. The moralistic conception of politics presented by populists depends on some standard for differentiating the moral from the immoral, the pure from the corrupt (Müller, 2016, p. 18). Despite how technical something may be, Hawkins (2010, p. 33) claims that populism assigns a moral component to everything and understands it ‘as part of a cosmic struggle between Good and Evil’. Katsambekis (2020, p. 9) summarises that for these scholars, any actor who bases their strategy on appeals to ‘the people’, as opposed to an elite, cannot be characterised as a populist if the dimension of moralism is not salient; they may instead be anti-establishment or anti-systemic, but not populist. This moralistic character of the ideational approach is often criticised in the literature, ‘as it automatically equates populism with an anti-pluralist and illiberal form of politics’ (Katsambekis, 2020, p. 2). This critique sets a dividing line in populism studies to Laclau’s post-foundational discursive approach (Kim, 2021).

However, populism as a thin-centred ideology does not limit itself to a specific type of leadership, communication, or mobilisation, but it is able to include various political actors that can be considered both far right and populist. Indeed, the ideational approach has proved to be particularly valuable in combination with far-right ideology, where this work would also like to make a contribution. Indeed, the following sections outline in detail how scholars of the ideational approach work with far-right ideology and how it is relevant for the present research.

From populism to the far right

The combination of the far right and populism has been widely discussed in the literature and, similar to the conceptualisation of populism, the label or terminology ‘right-wing populism’ or ‘far-right populism’ seems contested. As early as the 1990s, Betz (1994) defined radical right-wing populism as a new party family in Western Europe and regional forms of populism such as Alpine populism (e.g. FPÖ, Swiss Peoples Party, Lega Nord) with specific transnational conditions were discussed (Caramani & Meny, 2005). In the German context in particular, Frank Decker (2000, 2015) and Michael Minkenberg (2018) contributed to the debate. Decker (2015, pp. 535–536) defined right-wing populism as ‘a collective term for a party family that has emerged since the 1970s . . . between the conservative or Christian Democratic or Christian Democratic centre-right parties and the

representatives of the extreme (fascist or neo-national socialist) right' (own translation from German). Minkenberg (2018) argues that Decker's conceptual discussion basically revolves around populism in general and sharply criticises attempts by other scholars (e.g. Priester, 2016) to make the concept of right-wing populism stronger than that of right-wing radicalism.

The concept of the far right is well established in political science and can be seen as a spectrum which includes various types of far-right actors. As mentioned in the introduction, it includes radical right parties and non-party actors that are anti-liberal and reformist but do not reject the essence of democracy, as well as extremist right parties that are anti-democratic, that is, reject the essence of democracy, and revolutionary. For '(populist) radical right collective actors'² – as Pirro (2023, p. 5) puts it – the conflict between natives and non-natives is purely political and despite their rejection of the established socio-political and sociocultural order, they do not take part in efforts to undermine the democratic system. The extreme right collective actors parties aim at subverting the democratic status quo and are 'prepared to elevate conflict beyond the political sphere and annihilate its enemies' (Ellinas, 2020; Pirro, 2023, p. 6). Pirro (2023) recently pled for a systematic use of the term 'far right' due to the growing links and the fluidity between illiberal-democratic radical right and anti-democratic extreme right collective actors. The ideological core of the far right is the combination of the radical exclusionary form of nationalism, that is, nativism and authoritarianism. In a dualistic worldview, the far right frames society as divided between a native in-group ('us') versus an alien out-group ('them') that poses a threat to the homogeneity of the nation state (Mudde, 2007). Indeed Miller-Idriss (2020, p. 8) claims that 'all far-right ideological beliefs share exclusionary, hierarchical, and dehumanising ideals that prioritise and seek to preserve the superiority and dominance of some groups over others'. The use of the concept far right does not take these actors' fundamental attitude towards democracy into account but focuses instead on nativism and authoritarianism or on 'what far-right collective actors actually do, on top of what they usually say or publicly claim to stand for' (Pirro, 2023, p. 7).

In fact, such categorisations changed and developed over time and can be seen as dynamic and not static. Klaus Von Beyme (1988) distinguished between conservatives who aim to maintain the status quo and right-wing extremists who try to restore the status quo ante. Then he described three waves of 'right-wing extremism' in postwar Europe. The first wave was in the first 15 years after World War II, where mainly neo-fascism was present but not successfully represented in party politics in most European countries. During the second wave, approximately between the 1960s and the 1980s, he described 'right-wing populist' parties and movements appearing in Europe, ranging from the NPD to the French *Poujadists* (see also Wondreys & Mudde, 2022). It was in the third wave, starting in 1980, that various parties that Von Beyme (1988) defined as 'right-wing extremist' increased their electoral and political success. Examples include the Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ) with Jörg Haider, and the French National Front (FN) with Jean-Marie Le Pen. According to Mudde (2019), the rise of electorally successful populist radical right parties in the third wave cannot be denied, but such parties were politically

marginalised. Indeed, the far right entered national parliaments, but mainstream parties excluded them from coalitions and thus from entering (national) governments (T. Akkerman & Rooduijn, 2015; Mudde, 2019; Wondreys & Mudde, 2022). Many collective actors of the far right considered themselves as outsiders and positioned themselves as not interested in a shared government position with ‘established’ parties (Wondreys & Mudde, 2022; Zaslove, 2012).

In this third ideological wave the most successful parties moved within the nexus of nativism, authoritarianism, and populism, which Mudde (2007) called the populist radical right. Nativism promotes the protection of the interests of the ‘natives’ over those of, for example, immigrants or, in general, ‘non-natives’ or ‘aliens’, who are considered a threat to the nation state. Nativism can be described as a xenophobic form of nationalism (Wondreys & Mudde, 2022). Authoritarianism is a form of government characterised by the idea that only a strong central power (e.g. strong state) can preserve the political status quo and the rule of law and can prevent chaos, relying on large police forces and prioritising discipline in education and upbringing (Mudde, 2007). Populism is defined as a thin-centred ideology (see above and Mudde, 2004).

According to Mudde (2019) the reduction of the far right to the political margins changed fundamentally during the fourth wave, which started around the beginning of the 21st century. In the wake of the terrorist attacks of 9/11 ‘the political context changed significantly, and so did the position of the far right’ (Wondreys & Mudde, 2022, p. 87). The political debate was increasingly characterised by sociocultural concerns and the political mainstream moved to the right, especially on security and immigration issues; thus, ‘radical right parties have become mainstreamed and increasingly normalized, not just in Europe, but across the world’ (Mudde, 2019, p. 3; Wodak, 2018). This means that far-right parties have been part of coalitions, part of (national) governments or were at least considered *koalitionsfähig* (acceptable for coalition formation) (Wondreys & Mudde, 2022, p. 87). In many countries they are no longer considered outsiders or challengers and have often become the political mainstream. Since World War II the European party system has been characterised mainly by the traditional party families – namely the conservatives, Christian democrats, social democrats, socialists, and liberals – and the only new party family to successfully establish themselves since then in all parts of Europe is the populist radical right-wing (Mudde, 2007). The next section will outline what Mudde (2019) calls the mainstreaming or normalisation of the far right, and I explain in greater detail the new role of such actors in the contemporary European context.

The mainstreaming and normalisation of far-right populism

The mainstreaming and normalisation of far-right parties in several European regions are extensively discussed in Mudde's (2019) book *The Far Right Today* (2019). However, he was undoubtedly not the first or the only scholar to note these changes in European party politics. Indeed, the move towards the mainstream by direct or indirect government participation (i.e. being part of coalition

governments or central supporters of minority governments) (see e.g. De Lange, 2008; Minkenberg, 2001) raised the question of whether the radical right had been sufficiently ‘tamed’, deradicalised, or mainstreamed already more than one decade ago (Minkenberg, 2001, 2009, 2013, p. 5). Minkenberg (2013, p. 6) argued that ‘the willingness of the mainstream right to collaborate with the radical right indicates a porosity between the two’. In fact, he asserts that established political figures have responded to the radical right scene’s growing organisational power not only by embracing and legitimising certain of its components but also, in some instances, by forming alliances or coalitions with them (Minkenberg, 2013, p. 20). Thereby, the contrasts between Western and Eastern European nations are pronounced: while in Western Europe, conservative parties’ attempts to harness the radical right’s electoral success and relative pragmatism increased these parties’ legitimacy, in many Eastern European countries a radicalisation of the mainstream has been observed rather than a mainstreaming of the radical right (Minkenberg, 2013, p. 5).

Before I go on to discuss further literature about the mainstreaming of the far right, the concept of the mainstream and mainstreaming needs to be clarified. Indeed, this aspect often remains vague (K. Brown et al., 2021). Of course, there are also some scholars who deal extensively with this concept and a variety of approaches, aspects, and perspectives could be discussed here (e.g. Kallis, 2013; Meguid, 2005; Pop-Eleches, 2010). Nevertheless, one problem remains that ‘its contingency is masked through the assumption that it is common sense to know what it signifies, thus contributing to its reification as something with a fixed identity’ (K. Brown et al., 2021, p. 5). Furthermore, according to Brown et al. (2021, p. 14), understanding mainstreaming necessitates the prior recognition that the mainstream is not only ‘constructed, contingent, and fluid’ but also that it is not intrinsically good, rational, and moderate in and of itself in order to avoid normative assumptions and conclusions. Without going into more detail here and for the present research, I refer to Mudde (2019, pp. 164–165), who argues that:

Mainstreaming takes places because populist radical right parties and mainstream parties address increasingly similar issues and because they offer increasingly similar issue positions. The change can come from movement by the populist radical right (moderation), the mainstream (radicalisation), or by both at the same time (convergence).

Mudde (2019) explicitly refers to the populist radical right, arguing that in the majority of Western democracies the extreme right remains primarily marginal and marginalised. In the 1980s or in the beginning of the third ideological wave, there were on one side the traditional mainstream parties (such as conservatives and liberals/libertarians or in other words, parties mainly on the right and left of the political centre) that mostly competed based on socioeconomic issues such as taxes and unemployment (for a definition of mainstream parties see Meguid, 2005; or Pop-Eleches, 2010). On the other side were the populist radical-right parties that focused on sociocultural issues such as immigration and crime. This division

changed at the beginning of the 21st century, with the fourth ideological wave. Increasingly, political discourse in many Western nations has focused on socio-cultural concerns or so-called identity politics, including a rather overt defence of white supremacy in the light of the escalating politicisation of ethnic and religious minorities (Mudde, 2019, p. 165). As a result of such prioritisation of sociocultural issues, at least in electoral campaigns by mainstream and populist radical right parties, socioeconomic issues have been marginalised or become niche.

Mudde (2019) also emphasises the aspect of issue positions of mainstream and populist radical right parties, which became more and more similar. Notably, this development is less due to populist radical right parties becoming more moderate but mainly because of the increasing radicalisation of mainstream parties (i.e. moving further towards the right, mainly in terms of immigration and integration, law and order, European integration, and international collaboration and populism). Indeed, even if there is no doubting that far-right parties and policies have contributed significantly to the current political climate in Europe, which can be seen, for example, in some outstanding election performances of populist far-right actors (K. Brown et al., 2021; Hainsworth, 2016), scholars highlight that ‘mainstreaming of the far right is a process which sees both the far right and the mainstream as agents and subjects’ (K. Brown et al., 2021, p. 3). Within this development, the radicalisation of mainstream parties and the increasing salience of sociocultural issues (e.g. immigration) can be related to political events, for example, jihadist terrorist attacks or the so-called refugee crisis. Furthermore, Mudde (2019, p. 166) argues that through the increasing adoption of populist radical right discourses and frames by mainstream parties, ‘populist radical right parties have increased not only their electoral support but also their political impact’. Indeed, various populist radical right politics have become ‘common sense’ in the fourth wave. In sum the boundaries between mainstream and populist radical right parties have become blurred, and the latter is becoming increasingly normalised (Bruno, 2022; Mudde, 2019).

Terminology

There is no academic consensus on the appropriate terminology for the overall movement and the many subgroups. In this study I adopt the term ‘populist far right’ over ‘populist radical right’. Before I justify this choice, I want to underline Mudde’s (2019, pp. 163–164) assertion that the far right is not a homogeneous entity but rather includes a variety of different actors in terms of ideology, mobilisation, type of organisation, relationships, age, electoral success, history, legacy, or political relevance. First, populist far right and populist radical right signify a populist form of the far right or the radical right respectively. Second, I prefer far right over radical right to include the broad variety of sub-groups of the far right – as described above – covering the full spectrum of different manifestations and combinations of features within the far-right ideology. What is considered radical in one national context or at one specific time could be perceived as reactionary or extremist in another national context or at another time (Mudde, 2007). Indeed, recognising the contingency of conceptual choices is crucial to studies on the subject because it is

obvious that political families and ideas do not become ossified but rather change with time and context (K. Brown et al., 2021, p. 4). In Mudde's (2019, p. 164) words 'even within the most relevant subcategory of the far right, that is, populist radical right parties, differences are at least as pronounced as similarities'. Focusing on the far right instead of only one-party family allows dynamic-, country-, and time-relevant factors to be considered in a national context and regards the comparison between countries as relevant but secondary. While all populist radical right parties are populist far-right, not all PFRPs are populist radical rightists. Indeed, while scholars sometimes disagree about the differences, overlapping, and common characteristics of populist radical-right parties and moderate as well as more extreme right-wing parties (also regarding their denomination), it is easier to find consensus that parties can be considered far right. Furthermore, parties on the right, which include populist ideology, are often characterised by different factions within the parties, one being 'moderate' and one being more 'extremist', fascist, or racist, therefore, party classification can be difficult and dissatisfying. Moreover, the focus on far right instead of right wing (e.g. see Zulianello, 2020) in general already excludes a broad range of moderate party families (mainstream right/conservative parties) and clearly locates itself more to the right of these parties. For instance, Minkenberg (2018) rejects the German term 'Rechtspopulismus' (in English right-wing populism), arguing that it lacks a clear ideological characteristic and only generates new analytical haziness. Henceforth, this study's focus lies on PFRPs, that is, political parties with a core ideology that includes nativism, authoritarianism, and populism (see Mudde, 2007, p. 26).

The populist far right and its communication

Many of the discussed approaches emphasise in different ways that the rhetoric of populist far-right actors or how they communicate is an important part of their appeal (Busby et al., 2019). The following paragraphs shall explain how populist far-right actors communicate and frame social phenomena. To do so, I rely on the literature that focuses on the rhetoric and communication of populist far-right actors and describe typical argumentation of such actors, identified by various scholars of CDS, populism, and party literature. I will discuss essential features such as ideological and political viewpoints of populist far-right actors relevant to this project.

Wodak (2018, pp. 329–330) describes performance in public and media politics as a defining characteristic of right-wing populist parties.³ In this context, right-wing populist actors resort to constant provocations in order to gain attention for their own political agendas or their own leadership personality (Wodak, 2016, pp. 38–40). This approach is loosely connected to Moffitt's political style approach and especially bad manners; that is, deliberate rudeness, mis/disinformation, insults, and intentional taboo-breaking can play a role (Moffitt, 2016; Moffitt & Tormey, 2014). Norms of political correctness are deliberately and obviously violated without apologising for it (Scheff, 2000), thus presenting an anti-elitist behaviour that 'the people' can identify with (Wodak, 2018). In this context, Wodak

(2018, p. 330) refers to the ‘conditions of sayability or opportunity that determine’ (*Sagbarkeits- bzw. Möglichkeitsbedingungen*) what can be said in a discourse without being held accountable for it (Bettinger, 2007, p. 77; Goffman, 1967; Grice, 1975). But provocations often contain extreme right-wing content, which has been frowned upon or even banned in many Western European countries since the end of World War II. Following Scheff’s (2000) theory on the relevance of shame as a social bond for group identities, Wodak (2018) claims that ‘the intentional shamelessness that accompanies the normalisation of previously taboo contents and behavioural patterns creates . . . a new *group cohesion*, i.e. consolidates the group identity of the voters of right-wing populist parties vis-à-vis (often moralising) elites’ (p. 330, own translation from German). Indeed, voters for right-wing populist parties feel taken seriously by this, as they often emphasise how important it is to them that these politicians finally say what they themselves have been thinking for a long time (Wodak, 2016, p. 141, 2018, p. 330).

As Wodak (2015, p. 1) argues, right-wing populism relates to the form of rhetoric and to specific contents (see also above) and ‘such parties successfully construct fear and – related to real or imagined dangers – propose scapegoats that are blamed for threatening or actually damaging our societies, in Europe and beyond’. Such scapegoats can be any kind of ethnic/religious/linguistic/political minority and are a threat to ‘us’ or to ‘our’ nation. She calls this phenomenon ‘politics of fear’ (Wodak, 2015). As outlined above, appeals to common sense and anti-intellectualism are popular characteristics of such parties and mark a return to pre-modernist or pre-Enlightenment thinking. Wodak (2015, p. 2) refers to this phenomenon as the ‘arrogance of ignorance’.

To deconstruct and explain populist far-right messages (and their electoral success), it is first necessary to understand that PFRPs combine and integrate form and content in their communication that targets a specific audience and can adapt to different contexts (Wodak, 2015, p. 3). Pels (2012) argued that socio-political challenges and different types of crises (e.g. financial, climate) concern voters and right-wing populists often offer simple and clear-cut answers to fears (often constructed or enhanced by such parties) by constructing scapegoats and enemies that can be blamed (Wodak, 2015).

In the literature several discursive features are proposed that seem common to many PFRPs (see e.g. Reisigl, 2013; Wodak, 2013). The following represents a selection:

- Dramatisation is accomplished through emotive language and frequent metaphor use. The actors create tension in order to increase support for themselves, either by reiterating what has already been accomplished (e.g. exaggerated celebrations of alleged ‘successes’ of the party) or by condemning the tragedies that would happen if the actor were to lose its defences (e.g. ‘emergency speaks’, hysteria) (Albertazzi, 2007, p. 335).
- Fictionalisation of boundaries is the ‘blurring of boundaries in politics between the real and the fictional, the informative and the entertaining’ (Wodak, 2011, p. 157). Accordingly, the reality appears simple, ordered, and manageable, and

the real complexity and the pluralism of contemporary societies and societal phenomena are not visible to the viewer.

- The symbolic dimension of ‘doing politics’ must be viewed as the foundation of all political performances in the media, at rallies, in parliament, at press conferences, and elsewhere (Alexander, 2006; Edelman, 1967; Goffman, 1959; Wodak, 2015, p. 12). Such symbolic performances must integrate into the traditions and culture, the narratives and myths of a respective society, and be attractive to the audience (Wodak, 2015, p. 12).
- Rhetoric of exclusion is based on the claim of populist far-right actors to represent the good, homogeneous people, whereby ‘we’ (i.e. the nation state, the Occident, or Christian Europe) have to be defended against ‘them’ (i.e. the immigrants, the ‘Orient’, Muslims, Jews, Roma, or other minorities). According to this claim, such Outsiders, being either up there (the elites) or ‘others’ would take away the jobs of ‘native’ people, do not want to integrate or adapt to ‘out culture’ (Wodak, 2015).

The literature has also identified different strategies that are considered typical for populist far-right actors. Concretely, referring to ethno-nationalist forms of populism, Wodak (2015, p. 54) mentions the appeal to national sameness, unity, and cohesion, which includes the *fallacy of sameness*, which ‘imagines the “own” nation as a culturally homogeneous community’, and the fallacy of *argumentum ad bacum*, which refers to ‘(alleged) dangers that threaten this so-called national homogeneity’. Other scholars mention the appeal to security legitimising exclusionary rhetoric via security measures (Van Leeuwen & Wodak, 1999; Matouschek et al., 1995). The fallacy of comparison is, according to Wodak (2015, p. 54), exaggeration of one’s own nation’s superiority to all other countries and ethnic minorities. Further typical strategies are a focus on homogenous demos, (nativism)/anti-elite discourse (Aslanidis, 2018), references to the heartland (or homeland) and the claim of the need to protect it from threats/them, appealing to protect the fatherland (revisionist histories) and the appeal to traditional, conservative values, a dissemination and promotion of conspiracies (some perpetrators are allegedly pulling the strings), the appeal to common sense and simplistic explanations and solutions as well as anti-intellectualism and motivated resistance to expert consensus (Merkley, 2021). In order to identify populist tendencies in a text, the shifting of blame/blame attribution/blame avoidance (Busby et al., 2019; Hansson, 2015), problem-denial, counterattack, negative other-presentation (*argumentum ad hominem*, *argumentum ad baculum*, *post hoc/ergo propter hoc fallacy* (alternative claim applied to shift blame) are also considered as further indicators.

In conclusion, at the beginning of the 21st century populist movements were described as a reactive phenomenon to social developments (Taggart, 2000). More recently, scholars claim that populism often emerges from crises and according to Lockwood (2017, pp. 9–10), this means that populism’s ‘main preoccupations should vary across time and space with the nature of those crises’. The so-called ‘migration crisis’ or ‘refugee crisis’⁴ in 2015 in Europe was in fact a major boost for many PFRPs in various European countries. Other topics such as climate change

have long been a peripheral issue for populist far-right movements and parties. And although the immigration issue is still present both in the public domain and in academic research in Europe, it has visibly begun to flatten out. Indeed, as social and political pressure to act on climate change and related environmental problems slowly increases in many regions, populist far-right parties are also positioning themselves more clearly on issues and policies concerning environmental matters such as climate change (Forchtner, 2020b; Forchtner et al., 2018).

For this project I am combining the ideational approach of populism and essential aspects of populist far-right communication on a topic (i.e. climate change), which for a long time was not found on the political agenda of such parties. Moreover, I emphasise the role of the national context in the empirical analysis, which could be connected to theoretical insights such as the role of the ‘heartland’ within populism. The characteristic of populism as a ‘thin-centred’ ideology (Mudde, 2004) and the associated conceptual obscurity of the concept makes it difficult to articulate the core values of this category. But according to Lubarda (2020, p. 12), ‘the ability to employ Manichean, binary representations in policy debates allows right-wing, national populists to engage with environmental topics’ (see e.g. Capstick & Pidgeon, 2014; Carvalho, 2007; Farstad, 2018; Forchtner et al., 2018; Fraune & Knodt, 2018), and not all right-wing or far-right populist actors are ‘anti-environmental’.

The role of populist ideology

Having presented the current empirical evidence to date and a current snapshot of the ideational approach of populism, I now turn to the role of the (populist) ideology of climate sceptic communication by the far right. Selk and Kemmerzell (2022, p. 755) consider populist climate politics to be ‘retrograde as well as context-relative’, whereas I contend that especially the latter introduces complexity, thereby posing challenges to formulating broad generalisations. However, some scholars emphasise in particular the need to focus on populist orientations in climate change communication and, more concretely, on its explanatory power for climate change scepticism (Huber, 2020; Lockwood, 2018). However, here I find contradictory views and results around a link between climate scepticism and populism, considered as a thin ideology, political or rhetoric style, or structuralist approach. I now discuss the wide range of empirical and conceptual studies that support the claim that populism and climate scepticism are connected on one side, and on the other side, examinations with contrasting findings.

According to Lockwood (2018, p. 713), there is a ‘congruence between RWP [right wing populism] and climate scepticism’ and he provides a theoretical assessment of the role of populism based on two kinds of explanations: structuralist and ideological. The structuralist approach draws on economic and political marginalisation as roots of populism, focusing on those ‘left behind’ mainly by globalisation processes or technological changes. For the ideological approach, Lockwood (2018) draws on populism as a thin ideology focussing on the antagonism between the ‘pure people’ and a ‘corrupt or cosmopolitan elite’. Indeed, he claims that ‘ideological explanations are more persuasive in drawing links between climate

scepticism and nationalism, authoritarianism, and anti-elitism, so that climate change features as a kind of “collateral damage” (Lockwood, 2018, p. 714). In other words, he combines populism with authoritarianism and nationalism (see Mudde's (2007) definition of populist radical right parties) and argues that because climate change policies would threaten national sovereignty, right-wing populists show hostility towards them. He regards the structuralist approach as limited for such explanations. Lockwood's (2018) study, however, is theoretical, and while it provided inspiration for other research, empirical investigations are needed to support such arguments. Indeed, empirical knowledge about the role of populism is steadily growing.

Hatakka and Välimäki (2020) analysed environmental communication of the populist radical Finns Party as thin-centred ideology (Mudde, 2007, p. 23) and as a political communication style (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007). The authors used the example of a campaign against wind power and illustrated how the Finns Party used many aspects that are at the ideological core of populism, in particular, anti-elitism and people-centrism, while simultaneously expressing the intention to ‘restore the people’s sovereignty’ (see also Ernst et al., 2017; Forchtner et al., 2018; Hatakka & Välimäki, 2020, p. 142). Moreover, various stylistic elements of populist communication such as the use of colloquial language and polarised black-and-white rhetoric that divided ‘us’ and ‘them’, as well as emotionalisation and dramatisation, were identified in the parties’ campaign (p. 143). In sum, Hatakka and Välimäki (2020, p. 146) demonstrate that even when environmental politics are addressed as one topic among others, such issues ‘provide fertile ground for populist radical right and identity struggles, and for creating conflict with pro-environmental actors’. Huber (2020) analysed the links between populist attitudes and climate change scepticism on the individual level in the UK. His quantitative study shows that those individuals who exhibit strong populist attitudes are more prone to be sceptical about climate change, claim that action to protect the environment has gone too far, and prioritise economic growth over environmental protection (p. 972). Hence, Huber (2020) suggests that populism – considered as a broader conceptualisation, including, for example, populist sentiments, anti-politics, or a lack of trust in the political establishment (Hay & Stoker, 2009) – ‘is an important explanation of climate skepticism for left- and right-wing individuals’ (p. 972). A large-scale, comparative, and systematic assessment dealing with the question of how populism in leadership positions can influence environmental politics comes to the conclusion that ‘populism lowers environmental performance’ (Böhmelt, 2021, p. 116). According to the author, populist leaders are prone to reject and restrain the implementation of ‘green’ policies, ‘as these are usually promoted by “corrupt elites”’ (p. 97). Furthermore, he argues that populism undermines democratic institutions, thereby undoing a number of mechanisms associated with better environmental outcomes (Böhmelt, 2021, p. 97).

Regarding climate change and populism, it has been noted that conspiracy theories play a role in both aspects. First, sceptic rhetoric around climate change can often be linked to conspiratorial thinking (Uscinski et al., 2017) and, second, populist (and in general far right) actors seem to be more prone to conspiracy theories

(Bergmann, 2018; Castanho Silva et al., 2017; for a study on politically extreme individual and their believe in conspiracy theories in Sweden consult Krouwel et al., 2018). Especially on the individual level, scholars argue that populist world-views (considered mainly as thin-centred ideology) foster conspiratorial thinking (Bergmann, 2018; Castanho Silva et al., 2017; Oliver & Rahn, 2016; Van Prooijen, 2018). In particular, studies on the COVID-19 pandemic regarding populism and conspiracy theories highlighted their connection (Ferreira, 2021; Stecula & Pickup, 2021). Indeed, Eberl et al. (2021) argued that the positive relationship of populist attitudes and conspiracy beliefs is independent from political ideology (p. 272). However, apart from populist attitudes, Van Prooijen et al. (2015) claimed that conspirator thinking is more common among political extremes on both sides of the political spectrum and while the extreme left ‘perceives conspiracies about issues concerning – for instance – capitalism (e.g. multinationals)’, the extreme right ‘particularly perceives conspiracies about topics such as science (e.g. evolution and climate change) or immigration’ (p. 576, see also Forchtner, 2019b). Studies linking conspiracy theories with climate change scepticism support this argument (Hornsey et al., 2016; Huber, 2020; Lewandowsky et al., 2013).

Castanho Silva et al. (2017, p. 423) claim that the relationship between conspiracy belief and populist attitudes builds on people-centrism and anti-elitism ‘confirming the common tendency of both discourses to see the masses as victims on elites’ hands’ (p. 423). Forchtner (2019b, p. 5) also argues that ‘it is in the area of climate change that the far right both warns against “fearmongering” (by the mainstream/left and the hysteria the latter supposedly spreads) and could be accused of inciting it when claiming that *they*, through *their* responses, screw *us*’. According to the author, it is in this context, where the homogeneous people are confronted by the climate change activities of the ‘corrupt elite’, ‘that climate change can become a vehicle for performing populism’ (Forchtner, 2019b, p. 5). Here, populist actors seem to side with the ‘little guy’ and his economic interests, which they claim to protect from an oppressive elite whose climate policies are associated with ‘cosmopolitanism’, ‘globalism’, or ‘liberal world government’. Indeed, this not only underscores the antagonist divide between the ordinary and blameless people and the corrupt and culpable elite (Hameleers & Van der Meer, 2021; e.g. Jagers & Walgrave, 2007; Mudde, 2004) but also attributes the blame to the establishment, which is central in populist communication (Busby et al., 2019; Hameleers et al., 2017; Vasilopoulou et al., 2013). Hameleers and van der Meer (2021, p. 4712) argue in their article on anti-science communication that ‘we can regard a conspiracist narrative as an aspect of science-related populism’ (see a more general conceptualisation of science-related populism in Mede & Schäfer, 2020). Studying the socio-political event Brexit in relation to energy issues, Batel and Devine-Wright (2018) described the denial of scientific knowledge in the name of defence of the people as ‘right wing post-truth logic’ (p. 42).

In contrast to the investigations arguing that populism plays an important role in climate obstruction in one way or another, I now turn to studies claiming that populism is not a major influence factor. In the aforementioned article where Küppers (2022) studied the framing of climate change by the German AfD, she also claims

that even though the populist radical right party frequently refers to the ‘core people’ and people-centrism is one element identified, populism (as a thin-centred ideology) does not play a prominent role in their climate change communication. The author argues that nationalism is a stronger predictor of climate change scepticism than traditional left-right ideology. Based on a quantitative investigation of individuals and their voting behaviour and views about climate change in a cross-national study, Kulin et al. (2021) claimed that nationalist ideology has more influence on policy attitudes about climate change than other factors such as left-right ideology, environmental values, or political trust. However, relevant for the present research, the authors found that ‘nationalist ideology is positively associated with climate change scepticism’ and is a more important predictor of such scepticism than right-wing populist voting behaviour (Kulin et al., 2021, p. 1121).

Huber et al. (2021) explored the policy discourses, positions, and actions of six European populist parties belonging to different types of populism and asserted that left-wing and left-leaning valence populists demand more ambitious energy and climate policy measures, relying on populist discourses. On the contrary, right-wing and right-leaning valence populist parties do not support ambitious energy and climate policies. Indeed, their study supports the notion that the key factor for a party’s stance on climate and energy policy is not populism itself but left-right host ideology. The authors also mentioned that the level of populism in discourse on energy and climate policy tends to decrease when parties move from opposition to government (p. 999). Results of an investigation of the effect of populism on people’s climate attitudes in the US suggested that ‘populist attitudes enhance the effects of partisanship, rather than creating an independent, orthogonal dimension’ (Huber et al., 2020, p. 373). (Find an overview about climate change and right-wing populism in the US in Fiorino (2022), and regarding national energy and climate politics and policy and populist radical right parties participation in government see Četković and Hagemann (2020)).

Combining survey analysis with computational social science methods, Yan et al. (2021) examined (among other aspects) the link between populism and climate change scepticism in various European countries and in the US. However, the authors found such a connection only for right-wing populist supporters but not for supporters of left-wing populist parties. Even though Yan et al. (2021) argue that their findings ‘lend support to Lockwood’s [(2018)] argument that ideological explanations are stronger than structuralist (economic) explanations in the link between climate sceptics and populism’ (p. 21), the fact that their study simply distinguishes between right-wing and left-wing populism makes it difficult to attribute the results to the role of populism rather than left-wing and right-wing ideologies. In fact, at the party level, Timofejevs (2020, p. 3) summarises the difference in the ideological facets of the far-right as when far-right parties stress populist (i.e. anti-establishment) positions in their communication, ‘they tend to be wary of supporting the “globalist” scientific climate change consensus’ (see also Kølvråa, 2020). On the other hand, when parties focus more on ethnonationalist ideology they primarily emphasise ‘the importance of homeland as part of their concept of the “pure” nation’ (Timofejevs, 2020, p. 3; see also Voss, 2020).

A study analysing correlations between climate obstruction and various variables associated with right-wing populism found no support for a notable link between populist anti-establishment attitudes and climate change denial (Jylhä & Hellmer, 2020, pp. 315–316). According to their calculations, the authors identified exclusionary and anti-egalitarian preferences (negative views on feminism or multiculturalism) as the strongest predictor of climate obstruction (p. 328). Lastly, Haas (2023) utilises critical political economy and cultural studies to deepen understanding of the ascent of populist far-right actors and their propensity for obstructing climate action, asserting that economic, political, and cultural factors are interlinked. Right-wing populists aim to reinforce existing power dynamics by discrediting climate science and associated policies (p. 11).

Chapter summary

In conclusion, while some studies on the US are included, the majority of academic literature and studies on climate change communication and populist far-right actors have a European focus. Scholars have already noted that Europe has a sizable number of populist far-right actors who have a lengthy history and, as a result, a similarly high volume of studies (Forchtner, 2019b). While this chapter revealed that many PFRPs show climate obstruction in one way or another and reveal great hostility towards climate protection policies, they often support environmental protection, linking it to national ideology and identity issues, landscape, and countryside.

In addition, I cited a wide range of academic works across a broad range of fields (political science, sociology, psychology, behavioural research, etc.) and was able to demonstrate how authors analysed a variety of different aspects of climate change communication and political actors, with a focus on political orientation and populist far-right actors. Although this research field is relatively young, it is currently experiencing an upswing in research. Yet, there is another aspect I would like to contribute with this research paper. It is striking that qualitative studies often neglect the comparative perspective. Quantitative studies, on the other hand, often work with different countries and compare them but place little emphasis on examining the role of the (national) context. Here, I want to emphasise how often national policy issues or the context of national climate change are overlooked. Emphasis is placed on characterising the national context in many qualitative investigations, particularly those with a critical discourse analysis. However, even there, it is essentially integrated with the body of literature in a descriptive manner without analysing the mainstream parties, the policy field, or the development of the field. The paucity of study is particularly intriguing because academics frequently stress how crucial it is to integrate the national context, yet only do so in passing. Additionally, it is uncommon in the literature to find the integration of the national context (which is primarily descriptive) with a comparative perspective. However, this pairing might offer unique insights into how the national context affects climate change communication, especially how it affects climate obstruction. With this book, I contribute to this literature by emphasising the empirical

analysis of the national context on the one hand and incorporating data from three different nations on the other to offer a comparison viewpoint.

After providing an overview of the ideational approach of populism, I outlined how PFRPs have developed over four waves in Europe. Especially with the third and fourth waves, many populist far-right actors gained attention and political relevance all over Europe. I elaborate on the communication of populist far-right actors (e.g. Wodak, 2015, 2018) and highlight some of the dominant features and themes of populist far-right messages. Based on that, I have demonstrated that there is research identifying populism as a crucial factor, and research that identifies other factors (such as nationalism) as being more significant than populism in climate obstruction. With the current study, I want to contribute to populism research by theoretically discussing populism and its role for climate change communication and to empirically examining climate change communication of various political actors.

The next chapter will focus on the research design, presenting the data and cases as well as describing the methods used to analyse climate change communication of major and populist far-right parties.

Notes

- 1 The remaining six radical right parties were not shown in their table (p. 16) for this dimension, and it is assumed that these parties did not integrate aspects on global warming into their election manifestos.
- 2 Even though not all contemporary radical-right collective actors are populist, the majority can be considered as such (Mudde, 2007), glorifying ‘the people’ and criticising ‘the elite’, therefore Pirro uses the term (populist) radical right, but putting populist in brackets.
- 3 Wodak uses the term ‘right-wing populist parties’, but given explanations and examples, she first and foremost speaks of what I refer to on populist far right actors.
- 4 I chose to put these terms in quotes, based on critical academic literature that argues that to frame that development as a crisis was rather a personal judgment than an objective observation (see Mudde, 2019). Even though the number of refugees and asylum seekers arriving in Europe was extraordinarily high, the European Union had the financial resources to deal with such numbers. Furthermore, Mudde (2019, p. 4) argues that ‘mainstream media and politicians *chose* to frame the influx of asylum seekers as a “crisis,” thereby providing ammunition to the already mobilized far right’.

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