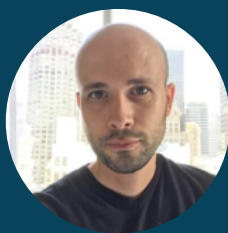


Policy Brief 6: Far-right populism and decarbonization



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SUMMARY

Carbon-intensive industries are concentrated in a few carbon-intensive regions in Europe. Fossil Fuel phaseout, referred to as decarbonization, actions will affect those regions particularly strongly. Correspondingly, carbon-intensive regions often exert significant political influence on decarbonization policies and actions both at the national and regional levels. Populist far-right parties remain potent players delaying rapid energy transition in the carbon-intensive regions of Europe.

This policy brief focuses on three countries, namely Estonia, Germany and Poland, and the populist far-right parties' discursive-institutional influence on the regional decarbonization strategies. Scientists at CET present evidence of how populist far-right parties in these countries politicize decarbonization by infusing disinformation and attacking institutions that could accelerate regional decarbonization. This policy brief emphasizes the importance of understanding populist far-right discursive tactics to prevent politicization of decarbonization and climate change at the regional level and ensure effective policy implementation of national and international climate policies.

KEY FINDINGS

The Conservative People's Party of Estonia (EKRE), the Alternative for Germany (AfD), and Law and Justice (PiS) in Poland have constructed regional decarbonization as a direct threat to national sovereignty, and the elements of regional identity, such as unique family and cultural traditions. These themes increase tensions between regional and national policies and undermine efforts to create a unified approach towards decarbonization in the carbon-intensive regions of Ida-Virumaa, North Rhine-Westphalia, and Upper Silesia.

The populist backlashes against the EU-driven progressive public policies and anti-democratic rhetoric, including xenophobia and national sovereignty discourses are commonly used by these three populist far-right parties to mobilize counternarratives against climate change and regional decarbonization. EKRE and PiS typically portray themselves as the protectors of family values, social insurance and safety for mine workers affected by regional decarbonization. PiS and AfD harness regional identity to mobilize civic engagement against decarbonization. All three parties work to dismantle key decarbonization institutions, either by holding key ministries to delay policies or by collaborating with climate denial organizations for disinformation targeted at key national institutions.

Overall, carbon-intensive regions in Europe are particularly susceptible to the discursive tactics and institutional work of populist far-right parties, and may therefore provide opportunities for these parties to constrain decarbonization more broadly.



Scientists at the Centre for Climate and Energy Transformation at the University of Bergen identify three discursive-institutional tactics used by populist far-right actors to delay decarbonization: (1) politicizing decarbonization, (2) reframing cultural values to form alliances with anti-decarbonization movements, and (3) dismantling key decarbonization institutions.

Photo: CET

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICY-MAKERS

- Policymakers must develop clear communication strategies emphasizing the longer-term benefits of decarbonization on improved environmental and health conditions and creating new labour skills in the increasing job market for clean-energy sectors
- To counter disinformation, policymakers must ensure transparency and public participation in the carbon-intensive regions and share energy transformation planning processes with the public to increase trust and visibility of the potential long-term benefits of the energy transformation.
- Significant investments in public education campaigns are essential to raising awareness about climate change, renewable energy, sustainability, public health, and the importance of learning new skills for the highly competitive European job market.
- The legal and institutional frameworks must be strengthened to support regional decarbonization efforts. EU funding agencies must navigate ways to directly fund and support regional institutions promoting decarbonization, such as research centers, innovation hubs, or training programs for green jobs, to ease the burden of transition.
- International cooperation and knowledge sharing must be fostered among regions leading the way in decarbonization efforts to create a sense of solidarity and shared responsibility in creating a sustainable, prosperous future for all.

RELATED ARTICLE

Yazar, M., & Haarstad, H. (2023). Populist far right discursive-institutional tactics in European regional decarbonization. *Political Geography*, 105, 102936.

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