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## **PiS in Unpeaceful Times: Exploring Right-Wing Populist Climate Action Amidst a Geopolitical Crisis**

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**PiS in Unpeaceful Times: Exploring Right-Wing Populist Climate Action  
Amidst a Geopolitical Crisis**

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## ABSTRACT

Efforts to tackle the global climate crisis are increasingly complicated by the rise of right-wing populism (RWP) and persistent geopolitical crises. This paper investigates the understudied intersection of these challenges by analyzing *how do right-wing populists use nationalist rhetoric to influence climate change action in times of geopolitical crisis?* The question is explored with a focus on the Law and Justice (*Prawo i Sprawiedliwość*, PiS) party of Poland, in particular its discourse in parliamentary committee sessions amidst the Russian war against Ukraine and subsequent energy crisis. Through a discourse analysis, it was found that the war served as a justification for PiS to concentrate on short-term solutions prioritizing fossil-fuel based energy security. Polish RWP capitalized on the war-induced crisis by using nationalist rhetoric to undermine the energy transition away from coal and EU climate measures. These findings underscore how geopolitical crises and political ideologies can create significant barriers to effective global climate action.

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## INTRODUCTION

The worsening state of climate change necessitates immediate and ambitious policy interventions aimed at climate mitigation, notably the transition to carbon neutrality (Steffen & Patt, 2022, p. 1). This imperative underscores the pressing need for sustained investments in low-carbon energy sources, such as renewable energy source (RES), coupled with the phase-out from fossil fuels (Geels et al., 2017).

As energy transition is not only predicted upon financial constraints but also political and societal factors (Sheikh, Kocaoglu & Lutzenhiser, 2016), these efforts face significant hindrances from the rise of right-wing populism (RWP), which have gained momentum in the recent decades (Greven, 2016). Theoretical and empirical evidence suggests a troubling association between RWP and skepticism toward climate science and mitigation measures (Lockwood, 2018; Żuk & Szulecki, 2020; Fiorino, 2022). Central to this resistance is RWP's inherent nationalist ideology and prioritization of national interests, often constructed as incompatible with global cooperation in addressing climate change (Kulin et al., 2021, p. 1117).

Nevertheless, the rise of RWP movements represents just one facet of the interconnected crises inhibiting effective climate action on the global scale. The confluence of geopolitical events such as the 2008 financial crisis or the COVID-19 pandemic has diverted attention and resources away from long-term climate policies, redirecting focus toward immediate needs (Skoygarrd, 2014; Hoag et al., 2021). The latest geopolitical crisis triggered by the Russian invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, and the ensuing energy ramifications is of particular relevance for the climate change regime, as it has directly forced nations to reassess their climate and energy strategies (Siddi, 2023). Indeed, nations face a choice between accelerating their energy transition and abandoning fossil fuel imports or returning to secure and cheap coal (Żuk & Żuk, 2022). As leaders tend to frame their energy policies in terms of national security and interests (Żuk & Szulecki, 2020, p. 8), a research question emerges: *How do right-wing populists use nationalist rhetoric to influence climate change action in times of geopolitical crisis?*

The question is explored with a focus on the Law and Justice (*Prawo i Sprawiedliwość*, henceforth PiS) party of Poland during the crisis triggered by the Russian invasion of Ukraine and its spillover consequences (henceforth war or invasion). The case of Poland is particularly relevant in this

context due to its unique combination of strong RWP rule (Greven, 2016, p. 1), historical nationalism, attachment to coal and geopolitical proximity to the war (Černoč, Lehotský & Konvalinová, 2024, p. 2).

While climate change mitigation measures encompass a spectrum of policy areas, within the confines of this research the focus primarily rests on energy policies. This emphasis is based on the significance of energy security in the aftermath of the invasion, wherein disruptions to energy supplies have emerged as paramount concerns, overriding climate change concerns (Siddi, 2023, p. 88). Consequently, this research underscores the pivotal role of energy policies as integral components of climate change mitigation action.

In what follows, a background is established for the case of Poland and the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Existing literature on climate policies and discourse in times of crisis is reviewed before presenting a theoretical framework to understand the interrelationships between RWP, climate change action and geopolitical crises. Through a discourse analysis on PiS members of parliament's rhetoric employed during parliamentary committee sessions, it is concluded that Polish RWP capitalize on the war-induced crisis by using nationalist rhetoric to undermine the energy transition away from fossil fuels and the climate measures of the European Union (EU).

By exploring the impact of the Russian invasion on climate and energy discourse in Poland, this research contributes to the scarce literature on climate action amidst geopolitical crises. This work demonstrates how a geopolitical crisis can be instrumentalized to stall climate measures and the crucial role of political ideologies, such as right-wing populism and nationalism, in this process. Understanding how geopolitical turmoil impacts global climate action, and energy transition as its main component, is greatly significant for academics and policymakers in the development of adaptive approaches to tackling climate issues in an increasingly uncertain geopolitical landscape.

## **CASE BACKGROUND**

### **Poland: Right-wing populism and climate efforts**

PiS stands out prominently among European RWP parties due to its status as the ruling party with an outright majority in government (Selk & Kemmerzel, 2022, p. 767). PiS' successful electoral campaign in 2015 exploited perceived economic and ideological tensions attributed to EU

integration and globalization (Owczarek, 2017 p. 41), building a narrative of “Poland in ruins” (p. 40). To ‘rebuild’ the country, PiS has capitalized on historically strong nationalist sentiments (Porter, 2000, p. 16), and pursued initiatives aligned with nationalist and conservative ideologies, often prioritizing national interests over global cooperation (Zięba, 2022, p. S13).

Poland’s opposition to climate policies is rooted in both structuralist and ideological factors, centering around the protection of coal. Albeit steadily declining, in 2022 coal fuelled 70% of total electricity in the country, positioning Poland as second in terms of coal in energy supply and first in coal production in Europe (International Energy Agency). However, unlike other main coal producers in the EU, Poland has not committed to ending coal mining (Bauers & Oei, 2020, p. 2). On the contrary, under PiS’s rule, Poland was one of the main countries vetoing ambitious EU climate policies and actively protecting its coal industry and its workers (p. 2).

Ideologically, coal has become intertwined with notions of national identity and sovereignty, particularly within right-wing circles, as environmentalism is perceived as a conscious manipulation – by the left, the West, the EU – to weaken the interests and significance of Poland (Żuk & Szulecki, 2020, p. 8). According to Selk and Kemmerzell (2022, p. 767), coal therefore became an issue of identity politics wherein PiS effectively saw itself as the defender of national energy sovereignty, responsible for protecting domestic coal, the cornerstone of its energy supply, and decreasing dependence on Russian gas.

### **The Russian war against Ukraine: A geopolitical crisis**

Amidst the backdrop of 21<sup>st</sup> century turmoil, the Russian invasion against Ukraine emerges as a crucial event. Its implications extend beyond the borders of the two nations involved and affect geopolitical, economic, societal and energy stability on a global scale (Żuk, 2023, pp. 343-344). This conflict is pertinent to the context of this research as the war’s disruption of energy supplies prompted states to reevaluate their climate and, more specifically, energy policies (Siddi, 2023).

The crisis has been especially impactful in Europe and particularly the EU which had long been reliant on Russian fossil fuels, with Russia providing nearly 25% of EU’s energy supply (Yanatma, 2023). This dependency became starkly evident when Russia leveraged it as a geopolitical tool following its invasion of Ukraine, forcing the EU to diversify its supplies and reduce the dependence on Russia (Schreurs, 2023, p. 91). These circumstances revealed two trajectories for

further energy policy development (Žuk & Žuk, 2022). One pathway sees the crisis as an opportunity to break free from fossil fuel dependency and align with long-term climate goals through the acceleration of the transition to RES and enhanced energy efficiency (p. 710). Conversely, the heightened sense of energy and economic insecurity could incentivize protecting domestic supplies, maintaining reliance on traditional fossil fuels, and rejecting global climate goals (p. 711).

Because nationalist ideologies often prioritize domestic fossil fuel resources and interests over international agreements and climate change action, RWP is expected to follow the latter trajectory (Žuk & Žuk, 2022, p. 10). In fact, the authors stipulate that these actors may use nationalist appeals and the slogan of ‘energy security’ to defend domestic fossil fuels, and particularly the energy sovereignty of coal, to the detriment of investment into RES (p. 710).

In light of this reality, this case of the Russian invasion of Ukraine serves as a pertinent focal point for this research on the dynamics of energy policy responses to geopolitical crises. By analyzing RWP rhetoric in Poland, this study aims to examine these theoretical assumptions and explore how political ideologies guide the energy discourse amidst this crisis.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Research on the interrelationships between geopolitical tensions and climate change action is predominantly focused on policy analyses that retrospectively assess the impact of geopolitical crises on the adoption of climate and energy policies. Their results are contentious, even when examining the same context. Zakeri et al. (2022, p. 15), analyzing the impacts of the pandemic and war on the energy system, found that despite, the crises providing opportunities for energy transition, policymaking worldwide has concentrated on short-term solutions prioritizing fossil fuel-based energy security. However, Tosun (2022, p. 8) claims that in light of the war in Ukraine the European Commission prioritized energy policies promoting RES for energy security, and also advanced policy action targeting environmental protection and climate change; nonetheless, the author remains dubious however about the effectiveness of the implementation of these policies (p. 8). Finally, in relation to the impact of geopolitical tensions on energy transition, Hille (2023) found that geopolitical risks (that is, occurrences or threats of negative events related to wars,



terrorism or conflict between political entities) in energy supplier countries tend to promote the adoption of renewable energy, especially in the context of high energy prices and import dependence.

The body of research denouncing positive effects of geopolitical turmoil argues that such crises lead to a reprioritization of national agendas, often sidelining climate action. For instance, the 2008 financial crisis saw many governments prioritizing economic recovery over environmental policies (Skoygarrd, 2014; Slominski, 2018). Similarly, the COVID-19 pandemic led to a temporary reduction of greenhouse gas emissions but also diverted attention and resources away from long-term climate commitments (Vo et al., 2023, p. 5). Both the financial and health crises prompted experts to scrutinize energy policies for their cost-effectiveness and appropriateness in such a volatile environment (Hoag et al., 2021, p. 2).

Policy analysis informs on tangible policy priorities and decision-making processes; however, such research does not unveil the underlying narratives and power dynamics that shape policy responses, especially in times of crisis. Thus, the investigation into climate and energy-related discourse is equally crucial (Wiertz, Kuhn & Matissek, 2023, p. 2). In the context of the recent health crisis, Stoddart et al. (2023) demonstrated that the pandemic did not overshadow climate change but rather presented “an opportunity for climate change action through a green recovery” (p. 287). Moreover, Zang et al. (2020) review scholarly discourse on climate change during COVID-19 finding that the pandemic provided opportunities for climate change action by raising awareness, prompting behavioral changes, spurring policy responses and encouraging reflection on the interconnectedness of the crisis.

Due to the recency of the crisis and large focus on policy analysis, only a handful of studies analyzing the discourse on climate and energy policies amidst Russia’s war against Ukraine have been published so far. Although none have explored the topic through a lens of political ideology, two important articles stand out.

Wiertz et al. (2023) explore the effects of the war and its energy crisis on Germany’s *Energiewende* (energy transition) discourse within four weeks of the invasion (p. 1). The authors reveal two overarching shifts in discourse around the transition. Firstly, the novel geopolitical rationality of *Energiewende* (p. 4) expanded its framing from purely environmental and economic concerns to

encompass geopolitical competition. Secondly, the context of the war led to contentious debates concerning the overall desirability of *Energiewende*, which had hitherto been positively characterized by widespread consensus (p. 7). The research thus demonstrated how the war complicates the discourse surrounding energy transition, even in a country considered as its frontrunner (Szulecki & Kuszniir, 2018, p. 117). Through this research, Wiertz et al. (2023) discovered that the invasion of Ukraine prompted a shift in discourse and geopolitical rationality of *Energiewende*, contributing to our knowledge on the implications of geopolitical events on energy transition. However, by limiting their data collection to four weeks after the invasion, the authors were unable to demonstrate how the energy-related discourse has evolved amidst the consequences of war, and especially which rationalities dominated the discourse and policy agendas in the long term.

The recently published article by Černoch et al. (2024) takes on a coal-centric approach to explore the impact of the invasion on Poland's energy sector and transition. Through a qualitative analysis of Polish media, the authors investigated the discourse on coal and energy among various stakeholders in the coal community: miners, unionists, energy companies, government officials and the public (p. 4). Contrary to initial assumptions based on Poland's entrenched dependence on coal, their analysis revealed that the war-induced energy crisis did not lead to a "coal renaissance" in the Polish landscape (p. 8). Instead, it exposed the country's reliance on coal imports, particularly from Russia, and the inefficiency of national mines, thereby contradicting the image of domestic coal security (p. 6). An agreement therefore emerged in the public discourse on coal's diminishing role in future energy mix (p. 8). The research of Černoch et al. (2024) demonstrates that the war has acted as a catalyst for rethinking energy policies toward a more diversified and sustainable energy system, even in the coal-dependent Poland. These findings do not corroborate pre-wartime assumptions on Poland's future energy trajectory (Gawlik, 2017), suggesting significant positive effects of the crisis on climate change action.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

### **Right-wing populism**

The central ideology of populism revolves around dividing society into two homogenous and antagonistic groups: the ‘ordinary people’ versus the ‘corrupt elite’ (Mudde, 2004, p. 543). Populism, as defined by Mudde (2004, p. 544), is a “thin-centered ideology” characterized by a core, the people, which is often attached to a narrower set of political ideologies, such as left- or right-wing views, ecologism, nationalism or socialism. Populists therefore define the antagonistic elites depending on the ‘thick’ ideology around which the populist discourse is employed (p. 544). Notable examples of contemporary populists are (radical) right parties concerned with the nation and nationalism, who equate the concept of ‘the people’ with ‘the nation’ (p. 549).

In right-wing populism (RWP), anti-elitism is deeply connected to the process of othering, leading to an “us versus them” mentality, where elites are portrayed as a corrupt and detached out-group opposed to the virtuous in-group (Fielder & Catalano, 2017, p. 209). This dynamic leverages other characteristics of RWP, such as nationalism, anti-globalism and social conservatism (Lockwood, 2018, p. 723). Through the process of othering, RWP vilifies cultural adversaries, such as minorities, immigrants and cosmopolitans, portraying them as threats to national identity and interests (Wodak et al., 2013, p. 8). This emphasis on national interests serves as a foundational element in shaping RWP attitudes toward climate change mitigation action, which is viewed as an increasingly salient threat due to its global nature conflicting with RWP economic and ideological priorities (Lockwood, 2018, p. 713).

### **Right-wing populism and climate action**

Scholarly consensus holds that conservative values, (radical) right-wing ideology and populism are strongly associated with anti-environmental attitudes, behaviors and policies (Neumayer, 2004; McCright, Dunlap & Marquart-Pyatt, 2016; Lockwood, 2018; Hess & Renner, 2019; Huber, 2020). This link is prevalent among both political parties and individual supporters.

The rise of RWP in Europe and beyond (Greven, 2016, p. 1) has sparked the interest of scholars to research the direct relationship between RWP actors and environmental attitudes, fearing the negative impact of the changing political landscape on climate mitigation action (Lockwood, 2018,

p. 713). To explain the RWP skepticism to climate science and mitigation efforts, Lockwood (2018, p. 718) advances two approaches related to the economic marginalization of the “left behind” on the one hand (structural argument), and the tensions between nationalist and climate priorities on the other (ideological argument).

The structuralist approach centers around interest-based explanations that draw upon the roots of populism in the marginalization of those ‘left behind’ by the neoliberal transformation, namely workers in manufacturing and carbon-intensive industries (p. 719). As climate and decarbonization policies appear to materially threaten traditional jobs and standards of living of their constituency, RWP is incentivized to resist climate measures (p. 719), particularly carbon taxes (p. 720). The ideological approach is embedded in the content of RWP, particularly nationalism, anti-elitism and authoritarianism (p. 726). Climate science and policies are perceived as liberal, cosmopolitan, elite agenda that undermines traditional and national values (p. 723), consequently fostering RWP skepticism towards climate scientists and mitigation measures. Moreover, climate governance, involving international agencies and treaties, is seen as incompatible with national sovereignty and the populist desire for closeness between the people and politicians (p. 723). Lockwood highlights that these ideological underpinnings of RWP hostility to climate policies correspond with empirical RWP environmental rhetoric (p. 726). However, critiques of Lockwood’s work find his ideological reading of RWP climate skepticism too simplistic as it does not disentangle populism from its ‘thick’ host-ideologies (Huber, 2020, p. 964), such as the prominent nationalism (Kulin et al., 2021, p. 1116).

### **Nationalism and climate action**

Because nationalism has been called the “master concept” of right-wing populism (Bar-On, 2018, p. 17), Kulin et al. (2021, p. 1117) argue that RWP hostility to climate science and policies can be mainly attributed to the prevalence of nationalist ideology among RWP. Research agrees on a correlation between national identification and the denial of environmental issues (Feygina, Jost & Goldsmith, 2010). Nonetheless, Cislak et al. (2023) argue that not all forms of national identity produce homogenous effects on the support for climate mitigation policies. The authors distinguish between secure national identification, based on a sense of solidarity with an in-group, and defensive national narcissism characterized by a “belief in the superiority of one’s group over

others” (p. 3). Their research indicates that support for pro-environmental policies, such as the promotion of renewable energy, is inversely related to national narcissism but positively linked to national identification (p. 12).

The mechanism underlying this association lies in the nationalist ideal of sovereignty which is undermined by the transnational character of climate change action, thereby pushing nationalists away from recognizing the threat of climate change or the need for mitigation policies (Kulin et al., 2021, p. 1117). The rhetoric of nationalism converges RWP and climate skeptics by articulating resistance to climate policies in terms of “the defense of national sovereignty, opposition to international elites and the maintaining economic and energy autarchy” (Žuk & Szulecki, 2020, p. 3). RWP therefore shifts the discourse on climate change from the scientific level to an ideological conflict against international cooperation and globalist climate elites who threaten the sovereignty of the nation (Forchtner & Kølvråa, 2015, p. 213).

Moreover, the negative relationship between nationalism and global climate action may be particularly prominent in contexts where national identity is linked to reliance on sources of energy that are domestically produced (Lockwood, 2018, p. 720) or form the traditional national imaginary (Cislak et al., 2023, p. 2).

However, Selk and Kemmerzell (2022) argue that populists can utilize nationalist sentiments for both critical and supportive climate claims, more precisely related to energy transition. On the one hand, populists can view “popular sovereignty as national energy sovereignty”, thereby prioritizing energy security over transitions to less reliable, risky renewable technologies (p. 760). On the other hand, they can perceive “popular sovereignty as green energy sovereignty” which can lead to reinforcing sovereignty by using national energy sources and/or achieving energy independence through renewables (p. 761). Moreover, they can appeal to the national interests to support local small-scale business and preserve national landscapes through climate mitigations (p. 761). Nationalist framing of climate action manifests in their paradoxical support of domestic environmental protection while at the same time rejecting the global climate regime (Selk & Kemmerzell, 2022, p. 761; Forchtner, 2019, p. 3).

## **Geopolitical crises, nationalism and climate action**

As Hoyden and Lindseth (2004, p. 64) analyze the discourse around climate change can be summarized as a dichotomy between ‘thinking globally’ and ‘national action’ – or national interest, per Kulin et al. (2021, p.1117). However, the dynamics of this dichotomy can change significantly in the context of a geopolitical crisis – understood here as a war, pandemic, major economic crisis or even climate change itself – as it can constitute a critical juncture (Bieber, 2022, p. 15). A critical juncture refers to a rare, pivotal moment characterized by a significant change or uncertainty within a system or society (Woods et al., 2020, p. 808). During critical junctures, there is an opportunity for new policies or norms to emerge as societies grapple with the challenges presented by the crisis (Bieber, 2022, p. 15).

Nevertheless, the potential positive impact of geopolitical crises on climate action is further complicated by nationalism, which heightens in times of crisis (Cercas, 2020; Bieber, 2022). Scholars have highlighted that events such as the Wall Street crash in 1929, the global financial crisis in 2008 (Cercas, 2020; Rantanen, 2012, p. 133) and the recent COVID-19 pandemic (Bieber, 2022) led to a solidification of nationalism, as states enacted nationalist policies prioritizing national interests over global solidarity. The literature on crisis and nationalism frequently draws upon the social identity theory to explain this relationship: the uncertainty brought about by crises often prompts individuals to strongly identify with their respective groups, i.e. their nation (Hogg, 2000, p. 224). Nationalist sentiments, disproportionately instrumentalized by RWP, can thus lead to undermine global climate efforts, seemingly incompatible with national interests.

## **METHODOLOGY**

To examine how Polish right-wing populists employ nationalist rhetoric to guide their stance on climate action, this research makes use of discourse analysis to analyze statements and speeches made by MPs from the PiS party. According to Gee & Handford, (2013), discourse analysis is “the study of language in use” (p. 1); more specifically it examines the manner in which sentences are combined to “create meaning, coherence, and accomplish purposes”. This work will scrutinize the discourse produced by PiS, drawing focus to its nationalist narratives, to shape policies, recommendations and resolutions related to energy.

This qualitative method allows one to systematically examine textual materials, including the relationship of the material to a particular context, gaining a better understanding of the underlying RWP messages and ideologies at play (Halperin & Heath, 2020, p. 365); indeed, discourse analysis emphasizes the examination of language within its specific context (p. 368). This is crucial for understanding how nationalist rhetoric operates within the broader context of the geopolitical crisis and climate change regime. This method therefore permits to explore what kind of reality the PiS nationalist discourse creates in Polish politics and how it translates to climate action, or lack thereof.

Specifically, this study analyzes PiS's discourse during sessions of a permanent parliamentary committee – an organ of the lower house (*Sejm*). One committee will be primarily studied, namely the Committee on Energy, Climate and State Assets, chaired by Marek Suski from PiS. Committee sessions provide a structured environment where elected representatives engage in discussions, debates and decision-making processes on relevant topics (Sejm of the Republic of Poland, 1992, Art. 17). Often limited in other forms of official political communication, the deliberative nature of these sessions invites deliberations, negotiations and expression of honest opinions of the MPs, offering the ideal setting to study discourse and its underpinnings.

The committee's set objectives, mode of operation and well documented proceedings of its meetings facilitate the identification of relevant speeches and contexts. The analysis is therefore conducted on the transcripts of committee meetings available on Sejm's official website. The selection of pertinent committee sessions was based on the issues they addressed: sessions are selected if they touch upon climate change action, energy, coal, nationalism and the crisis, as expressed by the PiS MPs in their speeches, questions and/or responses. In total, 27 sessions met these criteria (Appendix A).

This study employed inductive coding to analyze discourse data collected from the committee sessions transcripts. The data was thoroughly read in its entirety and noted for recurring arguments and narratives. Relevant quotes were coded and translated from Polish to English by the author. The codes were generated without predefined categories evolving iteratively to capture emerging themes, which were then derived from grouped codes, revealing discursive constructions of the research topic.

The timeframe of the analysis spans from January 2021 to October 2023, during which PiS held an outright majority in parliament, granting it significant legislative power. The timeframe precedes and encompasses the Russian invasion of Ukraine to investigate discourse surrounding climate action before, at the outbreak, and in the progress of the war and the subsequent energy crisis. The before period encompasses committee sessions from January 2021 until February 24<sup>th</sup>, 2022, the outbreak period continues until the end of 2022, lastly the in-progress period focuses on the year 2023.

## ANALYSIS

### 1. Before the war

A prevalent narrative in the analyzed committee sessions is a strong reluctance toward the transition away from Poland's coal-dominated system of energy production and consumption. PiS MPs consistently undermine the need for and importance of phasing out of coal, with their arguments manifesting in different ways, all centered around the imperative to protect national interests.

#### *1.1. Using the circumstances to maintain coal status quo*

PiS's reluctance towards energy transition and decarbonization is rooted in a will of innocence (Loftin, 2023) and victimhood narrative, which manifests in MPs repeatedly stressing that is not their fault that Poland has such a coal-intensive energy system:

It was not we who chose the energy system, because it was chosen by the Soviet Russians, and such was imposed on us. Hungary got a nuclear power plant; the Czechs got a nuclear power plant, and we didn't get one [...] Because we have such a large coal powered energy system, we need to have more time [...] to deal with [decarbonization] (Energy, Climate and State Assets committee Session No. 28 [ECS\_28], Tchorzewski, p. 18).

Frequent mentions of the Soviet Union's legacy in Poland's society and energy system are used to strengthen nationalist appeals as well as to emphasize the victimhood narrative, thereby shifting responsibility for excessive fossil fuel mining and consumption. Moreover, PiS continually



attempted to downplay Poland's role in global carbon emissions: "Poland is only a small contributor to CO<sub>2</sub> emissions. Including our absorption by Polish forests, we really have nothing to blame ourselves for" (ECS\_80, Suski, p. 13).

These historical circumstances are also exploited in economic arguments with claims that Poland's economic lag behind the West simply cannot yet afford it to transition to gas or RES; as such, due to its particular situation, Poland must continue to rely on its domestic, cheap energy source – coal – and work on its own, just transition (ECS\_35, Suski, p. 33). PiS's path to the transition does entail working towards lower emissions; however, their plan merely entails modernizing its coal plans to improve efficiency.

Moreover, PiS strategically uses prevailing circumstances to reinforce skepticism toward RES, continually downplaying their reliability, cost-effectiveness and ecological advantages. By undermining the perception of RES, they cast doubt over their viability as alternatives to traditional energy sources and maintain a narrative that favors coal:

It's also not so hurrah-optimistic how we will switch to renewable technologies for everything [...] For the time being, the technologies that are out there today do not guarantee that we will have constant electricity, so some of the coal plants probably will have to stay (ECS\_34, Suski, p. 7).

## ***1.2. Defense of national interests***

PiS representatives exhibit a pronounced reluctance towards the energy transition viewing it as a potential threat to national interests, and primarily *national* security and sovereignty which they equate with *energy* security and sovereignty. Since coal is a cheap, stable, domestically-produced energy source, PiS officials argue that any move away from coal jeopardizes national energy security and undermines the nation's sovereignty by subjecting it to external energy dependencies. The distrust of gas, a transition fuel, is rooted in concerns about becoming overly reliant on imports from Russia (ECS\_88, Kowalski, p. 8). Thus, in addition to employing nationalist appeals to promote self-reliance, on coal, in energy production, they instrumentalize nationalism to rally against external pressures.

The defense of national economic interests served as PiS's justification for its slow energy transition as the coal industry provides a significant number of jobs and revenue: "we are implementing a staggered energy transition program, and accelerating this process is not good for our economy, [nor] our labor market" (ECS\_35, Górska, p. 34). As such, structuralist arguments, as per Lockwood (2018), are present against energy transition are present in PiS's discourse and are focused on Poland's economic dependence on coal. For instance, PiS resisted decarbonization by highlighting the importance of the mining region Silesia and its workers for Poland's economy. PiS MPs repeatedly advocated against the closure of coal mines, especially in Turów "for the sake of 80,000 jobs, but also for the sake of Turów residents" (ECS\_25, Zalewska, p. 29). Additionally, PiS was particularly critical of the EU's Emission Trading System (ETS), which, they argue, failed to encourage them to invest into RES, given that it results in more costs than profits (ECS\_80, Kozik, p. 11). PiS further complained that EU climate policies are choking the Polish economy and energy security: "[EU's ETS] is a completely anti-social, anti-development mechanism, which causes a permanent loss of competitiveness of the Polish economy and will cause gigantic energy poverty. Heat and electricity in Poland will become a luxury" (ECS\_80, Kowalski, p. 4); by the end of 2021, PiS strongly blamed ETS for the growing energy crisis.

The defense of national interests as justification for modest energy transition efforts is also framed in ideological terms. As advanced in by Lockwood (2018), climate skepticism is ideologically linked to the opposition of globalism and international agreements. Anti-globalism is prevalent in the rhetoric and opposition to RES, seen as "international, global" (ECS\_34, Suski, p. 16) sources of energy and juxtaposed with frames of coal as a national resource. Moreover, PiS heavily criticized climate and energy policies passed as EU directives, viewing them as threats to the Poland's strategic position and autonomy:

The point is that we should buy virtual electricity from modern energy sources because the European Union knows that we can't eliminate all the coal power on which our energy industry is based in just a few years. They are suffocating us – it's simply about money (EECS\_59, Suski, p. 5).

PiS' quest to safeguard national interests is intricately intertwined with their 'us versus them' rhetoric illustrated by continuously painting foreign entities, primarily the EU, Germany, Russia or even Czechia, as threats. By characterizing EU directives as "harmful" or even "irrational"

(ECS\_66, Kowalski, p. 14), PiS reinforces a narrative that pits Poland against external forces, appealing to national sentiments and rallying support for their coal-based energy projects.

Furthermore, the ‘us versus them’ mentality is also recreated in the context of domestic politics by portraying the opposition – which favors global climate measures of decarbonization and RES – as unpatriotic or disloyal, acting against the Poland’s interest. Nonetheless, several PiS MPs call out for Polish unity in blocking these harmful foreign energy policies for the good of Polish citizens, economy and sovereignty, thereby combining structuralist and ideological arguments.

## **2. Outbreak of the war**

The environmental discourse in the period following the outbreak of the war is succinctly summarized in a quote by PiS MP Małecki (ECS\_98, p.7): “a hundred times more dangerous than the carbon footprint is the Russian footprint in the economy, especially in the energy sector”.

### ***2.1. Using the war to maintain coal status quo***

In this period, PiS continued to justify its reliance on coal and its reluctance toward the energy transition based on Poland’s historical circumstances which led to its coal-based energy system. The war and energy crisis added yet another excuse to delay Polish decarbonization efforts: “in this wartime, transitional period, we have to unfortunately use our fossil resources, we have to use coal and even increase its production in order to replace energy production from the resources supplied from Russia” (ECS\_99, Suski, p. 8). Whether PiS truly perceived this return to coal as unfortunate is doubtful as the same politician has later claimed that: “reality has verified all these [anti-coal] energy crazes, which today are a kind of new religion in the EU” (ECS\_104, Suski, p. 9). Polish energy transition now must not only adapt to the national context but also to the circumstances created by the war.

Russia’s war and weaponization of energy have further entrenched PiS’ unwillingness to switch from coal to gas – a less carbon intensive fuel (ECS\_99, Tchórzewski, p. 11). Nonetheless, its position changed with the inauguration of the Baltic pipe, as an alternative to the Yamal pipeline originating in Russia. Consequently, gas is increasingly perceived as a means of maintaining “independence, security and sovereignty” (ECS\_109, Moskwa, p. 20).

Nevertheless, PiS' attitude toward RES did not change. As the war underscored the need for energy security, PiS opposed the energy transition, claiming that renewables are not secure, stable or cost-efficient sources of energy. For PiS, the only solution to the rising energy crisis and need for independence from Russian fossil fuels was to rely on its national energy source and thus to enhance coal mining. As such, the outbreak of the war legitimized the strengthening of Poland's energy-based nationalism.

## ***2.2. Defense of national interests: aggravated national narcissism***

The outbreak of the war reshaped the definition of the “left-behind” from those disadvantaged by neoliberal transformation (Lockwood, 2018, p. 713) to those economically hurt by the energy crisis. Economic arguments are dominated PiS's narrative to delay and abandon the coal phase-out citing the need for cheap, domestic coal. For instance, PiS officials capitalize on the war to underline the economic costs of the energy transition, which are especially dangerous for security in time of crisis:

While it is necessary to improve the removal of emissions, it is very important to ensure energy security, so that we can economically withstand this period of war without negative economic consequences for us – otherwise, even the European part of NATO will become much weaker compared to Russia (ECS\_99, Tchórzewski, p. 11).

PiS continuously opposes EU's ETS, going as far as to declare it the second cause, besides the war, of the energy crisis. Its critiques of the carbon taxes are based on its detrimental effects on Poland's economy, which further impedes the country's transition: “there is less money for transforming the economy towards renewables after the introduction of the ETS than there would have been without it. The ETS system is simply inefficient” (ECS\_99, Suski, p. 8).

The opposition to ETS and energy transition measures stems not only from their economic implications but also from the perception that these initiatives represent an overreach by the EU, acting contrary to Polish interests. PiS accused the EU of various grievances, ranging from funding the war to causing the energy crisis and continuing to impose what it perceives as misguided energy policies. Additionally, PiS criticized the international institution for undermining Poland's national interests by attempting to make Poland dependent on Russian gas and withholding its funds. PiS derided the EU as “stupid” and “naïve” for failing to anticipate Russia's weaponization of energy:

To date, we have taken in about three million Ukrainian citizens, war refugees, and have not received a single eurocent from the EU for this. Meanwhile, we are being fined and denied money to rebuild our economy after COVID-19. For our part, we perceive this as a denunciation of energy solidarity and humanitarian solidarity by the [EU] to Poland (ECS\_99, Suski, p. 8).

Do not say that the EU has nothing to do with the fact that there is a crisis today. The stupid EU simply allowed itself to be swayed by Russia and submit to the dictates of the Russian energy industry [...] Today, the EU is already apologizing for not believing Poland, that Poland was right. And you [the opposition] are still dragging this stupidity (ECS\_104, Suski, p. 9).

These attacks on the EU are starkly contrasted with PiS's self-appraisals of its efforts to reduce dependence on Russia and allegedly maintaining solid domestic energy reserves, thereby portraying Poland as a resilient and independent nation: "it can be said that we have secured the interests of Poles and the Polish economy. Therefore, I don't see room for any criticism here" (ECS\_149, Rabenda, p. 7) This narrative of being right can foster self-assurance while also potentially leading to greater national narcissism (Cislak et al., 2023), where Poland perceives itself as superior to its European counterparts. This dichotomy between attacking the EU and celebrating national resistance contributes to PiS's "us versus them" framing that divides the good, solidary, helpful Poland from the bad, egoistic, guilty EU, which further complicates the necessarily-required joined climate action.

Unfortunately, other EU countries did not follow the Polish lead, did not listen to Polish warnings, and gas storage facilities shone empty. This allowed Putin to engage in gas blackmail, which we – as the Polish government – warned the entire European community against (ECS\_99, Małecki, p. 10).

The turbulent environment has not only amplified PiS's negative attitude toward the EU, Russia and Germany, but also its domestic political opposition who remained in favor of the energy transition away from coal. Thus, this geopolitical crisis did not lead national unity between the political camps but led instead to the greater othering of the opposition, alongside figures like Angela Merkel and Vladimir Putin (ECS\_109, Suski, p. 7).

### 3. War in-progress

The stabilization of the energy crisis and the sinking in of the new reality complicates PiS's justifications for continuing to delay decarbonization efforts. This has prompted more, contentious, discussions within the committee on energy transition and alternative measures, including diffusion of RES, biofuels, and carbon capture and storage (CCS). Nevertheless, PiS still pushes for the primacy of coal in the energy mix.

#### *3.1. Attempting to use the circumstances to maintain coal status quo*

Although the committee allowed more room for discussions on the phasing out of coal and the incorporation of RES into the energy mix, PiS still attempted to use turbulent wartime circumstances as well as Poland's 'unique' circumstances to both delay decarbonization and excuse its modest transition efforts : "It is great that we are talking about all these issues today, but given the war situation, just this [RES] industry, thank God, does not require some extraordinary attention from the government" (ECS\_141, Tchórzewski, p. 24).

The increasing presence of alternative energy sources on the agenda reveals PiS' paradoxical stance: PiS MPs pass bills and boast in their achievements of increasing RES share in the energy mix while simultaneously undermining the value of renewables and need for energy transition:

Wind turbines are not a cure for all evils and energy problems (ECS\_142, Suski, p. 21).

We are in a period of unprecedented development and growth of RES in Poland. We have achieved a historic success (ECS\_171, Zyska, p. 5).

What will we replace the decommissioned coal mix with? In this geopolitical situation, isn't it nevertheless worth fighting in Europe for coal, for the extension of all this (ECS\_182, Mateusiak-Pielucha, p. 10).

Additionally, PiS instrumentalizes its exaggerated achievements to avoid making greater efforts with further energy transition. This suggests that decarbonization efforts by PiS are mostly performative, to satisfy international pressures and commitments.

Importantly, PiS's RES skepticism is accompanied by a continuous defense of coal as a traditional energy source, which they argue plays a pivotal role in Poland's energy transition and must still be relied on in the times of geopolitical crisis: "Do not make such far-fetched excursions that coal,

this raw material of ours, is supposedly such a great evil. This Polish resource will still allow us to transform ourselves for years to come in the direction you mentioned” (ECS\_142, Wesoły, p. 39).

Attempts to maintain a coal-based energy system sparked discussions about CCS, which would allow Poland to continue to decarbonize while using coal without damaging the environment nor the economy. Nonetheless, the novel and risky nature of CCS led to debates within PiS, citing concern for the environment and Polish inhabitants (ECS\_180, Mateusiak-Pielucha, p. 9).

### ***3.2. Defense of national interests***

In addition to technical arguments present in their energy transition discussions, PiS officials continued to utilize ideological arguments to both undercut the transition away from coal and to advocate for specific energy alternatives, particularly favoring biofuels over wind power.

Discussions on biofuels are presented as potential trailblazers for Poland’s energy transition, mimicking framings of coal: “biomethane, as purified biogas, can play a key role in the future in enhancing Poland's energy security and sovereignty” (ECS\_171, Zyska, p. 6). Moreover, narratives surrounding biofuels identify them as a reliable, national energy source, in contrast with the framing of wind power, which is believed by PiS to be a foreign, unreliable source challenging national energy security. This was also succinctly summarized by Kowalski (ECS\_146, p. 7) as “yes to good biomass and biogas energy, no to expensive German windmills.” As wind farms are perceived to be particularly disturbing for residents and animals, PiS opposed them using populist framing to protect its citizens (ECS\_142, Suski, p. 10).

Moreover, despite the growing acceptance of coal phase-out within the RWP circle, PiS still wished to pursue it in a manner aligned with national interests and adapted to Poland’s special circumstances: “Poland's energy transition also needs to be based on facts, not on ideas or books that someone wrote based on a completely different reality than the one we live in Poland” (ECS\_142, Wesoły, p. 39).

PiS continued to portray Poland as unique in its historical and current challenges, necessitating tailored approaches to energy policy that do not align with EU’s directives. This in turn fueled ideological anti-globalist and anti-EU sentiments within the party and moreover led to increased denunciations of the opposition for supporting harmful EU policies and thus acting against Polish citizens. Under a victimhood narrative, EU’s ‘utopian’ climate and energy policies, with the

economically damaging ETS at the front, continue to be criticized by PiS as attempts to undermine Poland's national interests and sovereignty.

This is how the history of Poland turned out, that we, being under Soviet occupation, did not have permission to build nuclear power and were left with such coal-based power [...] However, the EU is not an organization like the Soviet Union. It is a little better, but nevertheless it also wants to finish us off with its various inventions. We have to defend ourselves somehow (ECS\_182, Suski, p. 12).

As such nationalist and anti-globalist appeals continued to underlie energy policies. Nonetheless, as the crisis has stabilized, structuralist and ideological arguments have become less dominant to accommodate pragmatic and long-term considerations.

## **CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION**

This research sought to answer the question: *how do right-wing populists use nationalist rhetoric to influence climate change action in times of geopolitical crisis?* The answer was reached by conducting a discourse analysis on PiS speeches during parliamentary committee sessions before and after the outbreak of the war in Ukraine. The findings revealed how in times of geopolitical crisis, RWP strategically utilized nationalist rhetoric to undermine the energy transition from coal and EU climate directives. By employing a combination of historical narratives, nationalist appeals and defense of national interests, PiS has effectively justified and maintained the coal status quo, resisting pressures for decarbonization, as anticipated by Żuk & Żuk (2023).

The war and manipulation of energy resources in Europe, has reinforced Poland's reliance on coal as a perceived source of energy security and independence. PiS has exploited the crisis to justify the continued prioritization of coal, framing it as a domestic resource that protects Poland from external vulnerabilities and arguing that the urgent need for economic stability and energy security overrides concerns about environmental sustainability.

Nonetheless, the crisis has shaped a new reality prompting some gradual shifts in Poland's energy policy to ensure long-term energy security that will also meet global climate goals. The inauguration of the Baltic Pipe for gas supply reflects a cautious diversification away from both



Russian dominance and domestic coal. Additionally, discussions around biofuels, RES and CCS have gained traction, albeit amidst open skepticism from PiS. Despite ideological underpinnings, these discussions evolved to encompass more technical considerations than before the crisis, balancing pragmatism with broader environmental and geopolitical imperatives.

The crisis has furthermore fueled nationalist and anti-EU sentiments within Poland, with PiS positioning itself as defender of not only energy security but also Polish sovereignty against EU policies. By framing EU directives as irrational and harmful to Poland's national interests, PiS has tapped into deeply ingrained nationalist sentiments as well as populist anti-elitism and anti-globalism. This "us versus them" mentality was further underscored by national exceptionalism narratives, with PiS's repeated boasting in being right over the EU and successfully ensuring energy security for its citizens. In addition to intensifying tensions with the EU, PiS's rhetoric amid the crisis has exacerbated divisions between political factions in Poland.

These results correspond with the shifts in discourse on energy transition in Germany as highlighted by Wiertz et al. (2023). In both Poland and Germany, the war exacerbated the framing of energy transition as a matter of geopolitics and security. Moreover, the outbreak of the war contributed to a greater controversy around the viability of the energy transition. The resemblance of discourse both in coal-locked Poland and transition-frontrunner Germany holds profound significance for understanding the impact of this geopolitical crisis on energy transition as well as for the future of EU climate strategy.

Interestingly, the findings of this analysis do not corroborate the only other study on the impact of the war on Polish energy discourse conducted by Černoch et al. (2024). As the two analyses focused on different actors (RWP politicians versus coal stakeholders), the divergence underlines the different lenses through which energy policy can be viewed. This analysis indicates that coal remains central to arguments about Poland's energy security and transition. Such ideological commitment to coal, rooted in notions of national security and sovereignty, contrasts with the coal community's recognition of coal's volatility and the need for a green transition, as shown by Černoch et al. (2024). Furthermore, both findings demonstrate that the war intensified the debate on energy independence. PiS politicians however use coal to resist Russian and EU influences, aligning with their political narratives, while industry insiders address practical issues prompting

a push for a diversified and sustainable energy mix (Černoch et al., 2024, p. 8). This reveals how PiS bends the reality on coal's true cost to advance its political agenda and resist decarbonization.

This discrepancy therefore emphasizes how political ideologies can create significant barriers to effective climate action, complementing growing research on its impact on energy transition (Clulow et al., 2021; Thonig et al., 2020). These insights thus demonstrate the significant impact of political ideology on climate and energy discourse, highlighting the need for an approach that balances ideological and pragmatic considerations in navigating the climate action amidst geopolitical crises. The results also stress the need for enhanced collaboration between policymakers, industry representatives, academics and other stakeholders in the development of resilient and sustainable energy policies (Sanderink & Nasiritousi, 2020).

Nonetheless, several limitations should be considered to understand the study's scope and guide future research. First, the qualitative nature of this single case study complicates the generalizability of these results. The unique geopolitical and socio-economic factors in Poland may not align with other contexts. Nonetheless, it opens doors for future comparative research on how different RWP actors, especially those with lower economic and ideological dependence on coal, reacted to the crisis and how it influenced their approach to climate and energy. Second, while discourse allows subjects to make sense of reality and justify political decisions (Reyes, 2011, p. 783), it does not always translate into tangible action. Political rhetoric can be strategic, aiming to indicate intentions without resulting in concrete efforts. As there can be a significant gap between what is said in discourse and what is executed in practice, future research can complement insights on the impact of geopolitical crises on climate action by examining policy efforts, alongside discourse.

In conclusion, this work provided new insights on the consequences of geopolitical crises on climate change action, revealing how these crises serve as a justification for right-wing populist to continue prioritizing short-term nationalist agendas over global imperatives. Therefore, in an increasingly turbulent geopolitical environment, transcending nationalist rhetoric and embracing collective responsibility is paramount for tackling the challenge of climate change.

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## APPENDIX

### Appendix A. List of Committee on Energy, Climate and State Assets sessions analyzed

Retrieved from <https://www.sejm.gov.pl/sejm9.nsf/biuletyny.xsp?view=2&komisja=ESK>

<b>Official session number</b>	<b>Date of the session</b>	<b>Topic of the Committee session</b>
28	2021-02-10	Presentation on the implementation of the agreement reached between Government representatives and the Inter-Union Protest and Strike Committee of the Silesia-Dabrowa Region.
34	2021-03-29	First reading of the government's bill to amend the law on the greenhouse gas emission trading scheme and certain other laws.
35	2021-03-30	Presentation on the decision taken by the Government of the Czech Republic to file an infringement lawsuit with the CJEU in connection with the negative effects of the Turów mine.
48	2021-06-22	Presentation on the functioning of the fuel and energy sector, in particular the state of social dialogue and compliance with labor rights.
55	2021-07-20	First reading of the parliamentary bill on amending the Law on Renewable Energy Sources and certain other laws.
59	2021-09-10	Presentation on the government's position regarding the Summary for Policymakers (SPM) adopted at the 54th IPCC session.
66	2021-10-12	Information from the Minister of State Assets on projected increases in electricity prices in 2022.
80	2021-12-08	First reading of the parliamentary draft resolution on calling on European Union countries to suspend the EU Emissions Trading Scheme (EU ETS) and work towards reform.
83	2021-12-14	First reading of the parliamentary bill to amend the Law on the Operation of Coal Mining.
88	2022-01-12	The first reading of the government's urgent bill on special solutions for the protection of consumers of gaseous fuels in connection with the situation in the gas market.
96	2022-02-09	Information from the Minister of State Assets on the sources of gas fuel price increases in 2022.
98	2022-04-07	First reading of the parliamentary bill on amending the law on investments in the field of liquefied natural gas regasification terminal in Świnoujście and certain other laws.
99	2022-04-26	Information from European Union Commissioner for Energy Kadri Simson on the energy security of the European Union and legislative work to strengthen EU energy security in the wake of Russia's aggression against Ukraine.
104	2022-06-10	Presentation on the progress of work on a law guaranteeing compensation of damages for the introduction of a ban on the import of coal from the Russian Federation and Belarus.
109	2022-07-20	First reading of the government's draft law on amending certain laws to strengthen the state's gas security in view of the gas market situation.



118	2022-09-13	First reading of the government draft law on amending the law on bio-components and liquid biofuels and the law on the system of monitoring and controlling fuel quality.
124	2022-10-19	First reading of the government's urgent bill on emergency measures to curb the amount of electricity prices and support certain consumers in 2023.
126	2022-10-27	Discussions on the state of energy security and preparations of the Polish energy sector for the autumn-winter period; availability of electricity, gas and coal necessary for households and the economy during the heating period.
129	2022-11-14	The government draft law amending the law on the preparation and implementation of investments in nuclear power facilities and accompanying investments and certain other laws.
141	2023-01-12	Presentation by the Minister of Climate and Environment on the dire financial situation of RES businesses in connection with the consequences of the adoption of the law on emergency measures to curb electricity prices and support certain consumers in 2023, as well as the decree of the council of ministers of November 8, 2022.
142	2023-01-24	First reading of the parliamentary bill on amending the law on investments in wind power plants and certain other laws.
146	2023-02-07	Amendments submitted during the second reading to the draft law on amending the law on investments in wind power plants and certain other laws.
149	2023-02-10	Providing information and explanations on the overpricing of fuel in 2022 through above-standard wholesale margins applied by PKN Orlen S.A.
171	2023-06-15	First reading of the government's draft law on amending the Law on Renewable Energy Sources and certain other laws.
177	2023-07-12	An urgent government bill to amend the Law on Special Solutions for the Protection of Electricity Consumers in 2023 in connection with the situation in the electricity market and amendments to certain other laws.
181	2023-07-27	Consideration of the Senate's resolution on the law on amendments to the energy law and certain other laws.
182	2023-07-28	The first reading of the government draft law on the principles of granting guarantees by the Treasury for the obligations of the National Energy Security Agency.