

**306**  
MAY  
2024

## NATIONALIST ENVIRONMENTALISM: can nationalism fuel climate action?

**Javier Carbonell**, PhD Candidate, University of Edinburgh; Junior Visiting Fellow, CIDOB

Junior Visiting Fellow, CIDOB (September 2023–February 2024), winner of the “Junior Visiting Fellowship”, launched by CIDOB and the Banco Sabadell Foundation, in the framework of the 3rd edition of the “Programa Talent Global”.



While nationalism and environmentalism have traditionally been viewed as conflicting ideologies, an increasing number of Western politicians and parties across the political spectrum are putting forward a discourse that justifies the green energy transition by emphasising its benefits in terms of the national interest, national security and the country's economy.

The discourse of “nationalist environmentalism” is one of the main ways European political leaders have advocated green policies since Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and it is the result of a growing concern for climate change in an increasingly conflictive international context.

However, although it can be a powerful rhetorical tool, this discourse has important limitations when it comes to addressing climate change, and it may prove unable to prevent the anti-environmental backlash that is expected at the European elections.

“locomotive of the green revolution”. He underscored how the “extraordinary opportunity for the country” presented by green energy would “benefit the pockets of Spaniards” and “attract the entire value chain, thereby reindustrialising our country”. Sánchez also explained how addressing this “national priority” meant “designing energy security policies in response to the crisis unleashed after the invasion of Ukraine”. This discourse champions the green transition not only as a means to protect the environment but primarily because it brings benefits to the nation, protects national security and is a source of national pride due to the country's global leadership. Such a seamless integration of national and environmental elements seems paradoxical if one considers that, traditionally, nationalism and environmentalism have been viewed as conflicting ideologies (Conversi 2020).

Until recently, environmentalists argued that because climate change is a global problem that demands global solutions, nation-states – and national interests – are an obstacle to international cooperation on climate action. In contrast, **far-right forces have strongly criticised environmental regulations** as foreign impositions, designed by out-of-touch elites aiming to restrict personal freedoms and hinder the country's economic growth and national interest. The two positions seemed irreconcilable.

However, an increasing number of Western politicians and parties across the political spectrum are joining Sánchez in putting forward a discourse that justifies environmental policies and green energy transition by

**W**hen Spanish President Pedro Sánchez inaugurated the International Energy and Environment Fair in Madrid in February 2024, he argued that Spain was “**becoming a**

emphasising their benefits to the national interest, national security and the country's economy. This discourse, which I describe as "nationalist environmentalism", has gained traction since Russia's invasion of Ukraine and it now stands as one of the main methods political leaders employ to advocate environmental policies. This article explores why there is a growing trend among parties and political leaders to merge nationalist and environmental rhetoric. It also examines whether this discourse will be able to overcome the obstacles and garner enough support for the green transition.

### What is nationalist environmentalism?

While many parties and leaders still work under the framework of "fuel nationalism *vs* green cosmopolitanism" (Conversi 2023) and set national interests against climate policies, there is a growing tendency across the political landscape to combine

**This discourse champions the green transition not only as a means to protect the environment but primarily because it brings benefits to the nation, protects national security and is a source of national pride due to the country's global leadership.**

national interest and environmental action. Therefore, it is not accurate to describe the new political divisions in environmental politics as "environmentalism *vs* nationalism", rather the difference is between blends of national interests *and* environmental action.

The combination of nationalism and environmentalism is coordinated in various ways because different actors understand nationalism and environmentalism differently. Nevertheless, most can be placed on a single spectrum. At one end, we can find "green nationalism" discourses that emphasise the national element and involve a greening of nationalism, that is, they use green arguments to justify closed-border policies (Hamilton 2002; Kulin, Johansson Sevä, and Dunlap 2021). Often, this new discourse stokes fears that immigration will deplete national ecological resources and has been taken up by some European far-right parties such as Vlaams Belang in Belgium, which advocates limiting immigration on the grounds that it is needed to "curb overpopulation, which is the greatest environmental killer" (Turner and Bailey 2022).

At the opposite end of the spectrum, there are discourses that take the green transition seriously and employ nationalist arguments to garner support for it. I use the term "nationalist environmentalism" to refer to this discourse, which justifies environmental policies

by underlining their benefits to the national interest through protecting national security, promoting the country's economy or safeguarding the national landscape. Nationalist environmentalism is mainly adopted by Western mainstream parties, which need to sell their increasingly pro-environmental positions to their domestic audiences. This discourse promotes a form of nationalism that is neither ethnically focused nor questioning of the capitalist framework, or inherently against internationalism or interstate collaboration. In fact, this approach will consider international cooperation on climate matters beneficial if it bolsters national security or the economy. Indeed, the European Union (EU) is one of the main proponents of nationalist environmentalism, as it justifies the green transition to secure Europe's strategic autonomy and a global leadership position.

Thus, nationalist environmentalism primarily focuses on how green policies will provide security, economic growth and identity. While the relationship of these issues with environmentalism has been explored in isolation through the concepts of "war ecology", "green growth narratives" and "national landscape protection", the following paragraphs will employ the framework of nationalist environmentalism to examine how most mainstream parties integrate them into a coherent discourse.

National security is a key rationale behind energy transition policies. This discourse has gained significant momentum due to Vladimir Putin's invasion of Ukraine, in what Pierre Charbonnier has dubbed "**war ecology**", which consists of the acceleration of the green transition to achieve energy independence from Russia. Former British Secretary of State for Energy Kwasi Kwarteng, for instance, stated that the "**net zero**" strategy and **climate policies were integrated into national security concerns**. Similarly, French President Emmanuel Macron advocated an "**écologie à la française**" to attain "environmental sovereignty". The European Commission defends renewable energy investments on the grounds that they are "**good for the EU's energy independence and good for the security of supply**" and Frans Timmermans, the former commission vice-president for the European Green Deal, stated that "**we must realise that Europe must be sovereign when it comes to energy and that our sovereignty can only be built on renewable energy**". The European Green Deal, REPowerEU or the Critical Raw Materials Act are all examples of policies aimed at securing Europe's autonomy and minimising the impact of external shocks. Therefore, the green transition is largely being framed as a goal to achieve national or European security.

Environmental policies are also often justified because they are beneficial to the country's economy, in line with green capitalism discourses or the progressive green growth narratives proposed by scholars such as Mariana Mazzucato. For example, in its 2019 manifesto, the UK Labour Party recast Britain's role in the Industrial Revolution as a positive model for the country's future, stating, "just as the original Industrial Revolution brought industry, jobs and pride to our towns, Labour's world-leading Green Industrial Revolution will rebuild them". Labour argued that this would be achieved by "creating an innovation nation" that will lead to "at least one million well-paid, unionised jobs in the UK". Similarly, the Spanish party *Sumar* also claimed that their "Spanish Green Industrial Power Strategy" would "generate prosperity, social cohesion and competitiveness of the Spanish economy, making Spain an international power in green industry". Recently, numerous countries have launched national strategies for decarbonising their economies, leveraging their comparative advantages. Spain capitalises on its abundant solar resources, France continues to prioritise nuclear energy and Germany's focus on green hydrogen is partially explained by the fact that it is home to one of the largest producers of electrolysers (Thyssen) and of ammonia (BASF) (Pérez Rodríguez 2023:234). Beyond Europe, the US Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) is aimed at "setting forth a new era of American innovation and ingenuity".

At the EU level, the European Green Deal is marketed as having the capacity to "transform the EU into a modern, resource-efficient and competitive economy" and "strengthen the EU's industrial competitiveness". Recently, Maroš Šefčovič, the current commission vice-president for the European Green Deal, justified the adoption of the Industrial Carbon Management Communication as "helping us meet our climate ambitions, while enhancing the competitiveness of our industry, especially in times of significant geopolitical shift". Thus, environmental measures are presented not only as beneficial for the environment, but also for "our" companies, workers and national economies.

Moreover, both individual states and the EU promote these policies as a means to establish global leadership. French conservative presidential candidate Valérie Pécresse argued that "the Green Deal policy is the great ambition of our time, and Europe and France must be at the forefront!". At the EU level, Ursula von der Leyen said that the EU should "secure its industrial lead in the fast-growing net-zero technology sector. Europe is determined to lead the clean tech revolution". Hence, the push for the green transition is also driven by the aspiration to secure a leadership role, promising both economic advantages and national pride.

Lastly, some parties have also returned to the traditional discourse of national identity and land, seeking to justify environmental protection as a means of preserving not the environment at large, but their national landscape in particular. Macron, for instance, justified his environmental plans by arguing that "[we must] work to protect our nature and our landscapes, [...] which are the very identity of France". In a similar fashion, Boris Johnson's "Ten Point Plan for a Green Industrial Revolution" included the protection of nature because "Britain's iconic landscapes are part of the fabric of our national identity".

Hence, although certain parties may highlight different facets of the national interest (security, economy, identity), nationalist environmentalism constitutes a burgeoning and cross-cutting discourse.

**It is not accurate to describe the new divisions in environmental politics as "environmentalism vs nationalism", rather the difference is between different blends of national interests and environmental action.**

### **Why has it emerged? The role of the "green race"**

Nationalist environmentalism is the offspring of two conflicting forces that move in opposite directions. The first is the worsening climate crisis and the growing relevance of this issue for voters (Obs'COP 2023). Addressing climate change demands decisive political action in the form of investments, regulations and technological advancements. Effective climate action also hinges on robust international cooperation. This includes financing for climate mitigation and adaptation, spreading technological innovation and exerting regulatory pressure on entities – be they companies or states – that significantly contribute to carbon emissions.

Conversely, the second trend is propelling the world towards heightened state competition and potential conflict. The ongoing security race, driven by the strategic competition between the US and China, the vulnerabilities exposed by the COVID-19 crisis, the conflict in Gaza, the regionalisation of supply chains and the escalating conflicts in the West (e.g. the war in Ukraine), has intensified global security concerns. This, in turn, has led to a surge in defence and military budgets. The trend poses challenges to technological cooperation, international funding and regulatory pressure – precisely the opposite of what addressing the climate crisis demands.

The two trends, however, are occurring simultaneously. Globally, more countries are investing significantly in environmental initiatives while also allocating resources to bolster security. Some scholars have dubbed this situation a “green race” scenario (Burguete 2023; WEF 2023). In such a situation, states increasingly plough significant investments into energy transition and climate action to outcompete one another.

Although state competition can provide governments with incentives for investment in the green transition (e.g. the EU accelerating the Green New Deal following Russia’s invasion of Ukraine), it also has significant negative consequences. In a green race scenario, green technological diffusion among countries will slow as

## States increasingly plough significant investments into energy transition and climate action to out-compete one another.

states look to protect their technologies. Additionally, a shift away from collaboration may leave climate mitigation and adaptation facilities for developing countries underfunded and limit the international community’s ability to exert pressure on carbon emitters. Lastly, a green race scenario could strain existing alliances, exemplified by the tensions between the EU and the US over **the impact of policies like the IRA and REPowerEU**.

Nationalist environmentalism is a great fit for such a scenario, as it champions climate measures while doing so to protect the nation. This approach dovetails with global trends of increased green investment and rising state competition. While these trends have a longer history, Putin’s invasion of Ukraine has clearly served as a catalyst for both the “green race” and nationalist environmentalism.

However, while the emergence of nationalist environmentalism follows the rise of the green race scenario, it has not spread evenly worldwide. Some countries heavily reliant on fossil fuels still operate within the traditional framework of “fuel nationalism *vs* green cosmopolitanism” because they have yet to find an optimal balance between the national interest and environmentalism. Russia serves as a prime example of this paradigm, with an economy heavily reliant on other nations purchasing its gas. The country would face challenges if all its clients transitioned to renewable energies, as Europe is currently doing.

Hence, nationalist environmentalism is evolving first in regions and countries where the energy transition is a viable proposition. Europe’s **reliance on imported fossil fuels** means it stands to gain significantly from the

energy transition. A shift to green energy could benefit Europe by reducing its reliance on external sources and enhancing its prospects of reindustrialisation.

This is also why Spain serves as a prime example of nationalist environmentalism. The country boasts significant potential in solar and wind energy, with aspirations to become a green hydrogen exporter. Such a shift could potentially transform Spain from an energy importer to one of Europe’s leading energy exporters (Pérez Rodríguez 2023). In a world reliant on renewable energy there are winners and losers, and those countries with the greatest potential are spearheading both the energy transition and the corresponding discourse of nationalist environmentalism. As more nations grapple with the impacts of climate change and feel the pressure to transition, we can anticipate climate policies being increasingly framed in the language of national interest.

Moreover, the dissemination of this rhetoric is influenced by internal political competition. Over the past 15 years, a profound economic and political crisis has ignited widespread concerns about security and national identity, as epitomised by the example of Brexit. This has subsequently led to the rise of far-right nationalist parties. These parties expound exclusivist and conservative visions of the nation that have proven to be attractive to large swathes of the population. Thus, as mainstream parties, particularly left-wing parties, struggle to find an inclusive national narrative that can provide security and reassurance to citizens, they are incentivised to combine it with Green New Deal discourses. Both narratives offer positive and inclusive visions of the future. Consequently, it is generally mainstream parties, predominantly those on the left, that are most inclined to adopt nationalist environmentalism.

## Will nationalist environmentalism foster climate action after the European elections?

Nationalist environmentalism has emerged as one of the main ways to justify the Green Agenda championed by European leaders in recent years. There are three main reasons for this. First, nationalist environmentalism helps provide more concrete and material grounds for supporting environmental action. The main justification has shifted from abstract threats and the impersonal notion of environmental protection to tangible benefits such as material gains (national security and economic growth) as well as symbolic elements (national identity and pride). Presenting environmental action as providing immediate and concrete gains for “us” helps engage broader segments of the population in the green transition.

Second, nationalist environmentalism can help bridge social divisions that have been accentuated by the climate crisis. Rather than uniting people against a common threat, the climate crisis has **deepened traditional social and territorial cleavages**. The crisis has ignited new disputes, from the placement of renewable energy installations, exemplified by the NIMBY (“not in my back yard”) movement, to disputes over scarce resources and tensions between green and fossil fuel industries. In this context, nationalism could emerge as the quintessential discourse of unity, aiming to heal divisions and defend common interests. Amidst profound polarisation, nationalist environmentalism could furnish an inclusive and civic national narrative highlighting a common threat and a collective way to tackle it.

Third, nationalist environmentalism presents a powerful rhetoric as it repurposes its stress on national identity and national interest to promote the environmental agenda. It shows that nationalism and environmentalism can be complementary, not contradictory, and that a focus on the national interest is compatible with green policies.

Nevertheless, while it offers some advantages, this discourse also has significant limitations. First, the approach fails to question the current mode of production. In economic terms, it presents an optimistic vision of the future where fossil capitalism will be substituted by green capitalism. While this lack of criticism of the status quo might be useful in the short term to make it palatable to citizens, its lack of radical action might set too slow a pace to mitigate the climate crisis. This also implies that it does not take sufficient account of the redistributive effects of the green transition. Consequently, it might not be able to resolve the conflicts that have arisen between different sectors of society regarding the costs of both the climate crisis and of environmental policies.

Second, nationalism and national interest can, of course, be used against environmental action. It can justify a slowdown in climate policies as represented by Macron’s “*écologie à la française*”, which discarded using punitive measures and strong regulations, and included a “**regulatory pause**” on environmental matters. Nationalism can also be used to justify a reversal of climate action, as exemplified by UK Prime Minister Rishi Sunak’s U-turn on the climate pledges previously endorsed by his own Conservative Party. Sunak justified his stance by stating he aimed to avoid “unacceptable costs on hard-pressed British families” and to “**protect British farmers**”. The then home secretary, Suella Braverman, added, “**we’re not going to save the planet by bankrupting the British people**”.

Economic burdens were combined with nationalist language to justify a halt in climate action.

Third, the stress on national interest might erode the international solidarity that a global threat like the climate crisis requires. The stress on national interest is positive insofar as it is understood as a positive-sum game with regards to the interests of other nations to fight the climate crisis. However, it will freeze climate action if national interest is framed as a zero-sum game between states. Caring about the fate of foreign people is crucial to garner support for strong international cooperation between the Global North and the Global South and nationalist environmentalism has the potential to weaken international solidarity.

These limitations might mean this discourse proves insufficient to stop the current slowdown in green policies produced by the pushback against environmental regulations **spearheaded by the farmers’ protests**. They also call into question whether nationalist environmentalism will be able to provide a satisfactory answer to the worsening climate crisis.

It is still too soon to return a verdict on the benefits of nationalist environmentalism. Recent years have seen a significant boost to green action in the West and this discourse has played a crucial role in the progress. Nonetheless, 2024 and the European elections mark

## **Nationalist environmentalism is here to stay. It appears inevitable that parties will adopt a stance that combines national and environmental elements.**

a halt in green efforts, and it is still unclear whether nationalist environmentalism will be able to further the push for more climate action.

Regardless of its benefits and limitations, what seems clear is that nationalist environmentalism is here to stay. It appears inevitable that parties will adopt a stance that combines national and environmental elements. The worsening climate crisis, rising geopolitical tensions and the race for green technology are major drivers. Additionally, the growth of far-right and green parties across Europe has made environmental issues and national identity increasingly important to voters. With many parties already merging nationalist and environmentalist themes, there is pressure for others to do the same.

Therefore, given that nationalism can help justify both climate action and inaction, the question political actors should be asking is how to use it to support the green transition. The direction that the national interest takes is not predefined, rather it is a site of political struggle. Whether nationalist environmentalism drives the

country towards robust climate action or not, whether national interest aligns with increased international cooperation or competition, and whether it prioritises the majority or the interests of a few national companies remains undecided. Consequently, environmentalist forces should explore how to integrate local, national, European and global interests to garner broad support, convincing large majorities that robust climate action and international cooperation are in the nation's best interest.

While until recently nationalism and environmentalism were seen as opposites, today the environmentalist movement may need to consider nationalism as a tool – a necessary tool that, if used properly, can help mobilise towards a greener future.

## References

Burguete, Víctor. "Prospectiva energética: factores geopolíticos con impacto en el ámbito metropolitano". *CIDOB briefings*, no. 48 (2023). Barcelona: CIDOB.

Conversi, Daniele. "The Ultimate Challenge: Nationalism and Climate Change". *Nationalities Papers*, vol. 48, no. 4 (2020), p. 625-36.

Conversi, Daniele. "State of Nationalism (SoN): Nationalism and Climate Change". *Studies on National Movements*, no. 11 (2023), p. 204-29.

Hamilton, P. "The Greening of Nationalism: Nationalising Nature in Europe". *Environmental Politics*, vol. 11, no. 2 (2002), p. 27-48.

Kulin, Joakim, Ingemar Johansson Sevä, and Riley E. Dunlap. "Nationalist Ideology, Rightwing Populism, and Public Views about Climate Change in Europe". *Environmental Politics*, vol. 30, no. 7 (2021), p. 1111-34. 1

Obs'COP. *A Divided Planet? World Opinion on Climate Change*. Climate and Public Opinions International Observatory, 2023.

Pérez Rodríguez, Daniel. *La Superpotencia Renovable: Por Qué La Energía Renovable Será Un Factor de Riqueza Extraordinario Para La Península Ibérica*. Barcelona: Arpa & Alfíl Editores, 2023.

Turner, Joe, and Dan Bailey. "'Ecobordering': Casting Immigration Control as Environmental Protection". *Environmental Politics*, vol. 31, no. 1 (2022), p. 110-31.

WEF. *The Global Risks Report 2023. Insight Report*. 18. Cologny: World Economic Forum, 2023.