



Framing Energy Sovereignty: A Snapshot of Populist Narratives and Climate Politics in the Morawiecki Government (2021–2023)

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Abstract

This article examines the intersection of populism and energy and climate policy in Poland, focusing on how government narratives shape public discourse and influence policymaking. Using a qualitative case study design supported by keyword frequency analysis, the study analyses political speeches and official communications by Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki between 2021 and 2023, including parliamentary speeches and 300 posts from his official Facebook page. Drawing on Ernesto Laclau's theory of populism, the analysis explores how the Polish government constructs the identities of 'the people' and 'the elite' within energy and climate policy discourse. The findings indicate that government communication frames 'the people' as a unified national community associated with energy security, economic stability, and sovereignty, while portraying the European Union and other external actors as antagonistic elites advancing policies presented as unsuitable for Poland. Key concepts such as the European Union, climate, and sustainable development, function as empty signifiers whose meanings are articulated within government discourse

in ways consistent with broader political narratives. The author suggests that these narratives align with a policy approach prioritising energy independence, particularly through continued reliance on coal, while climate-related discourse receives comparatively less emphasis within the analysed communications. By linking populism theory with climate and energy policy, this article contributes to the growing literature on the political dynamics of the energy transition in Central and Eastern Europe. It highlights how populist framing can shape policy trajectories and complicate the implementation of European climate objectives, including the European Green Deal, in contexts where national sovereignty and identity are politically salient.

Keywords: populism, energy policy, Poland, climate politics, the European Union

1. Introduction

Poland's energy sector has become a focal point in European discussions, reflecting broader shifts in global energy dynamics and domestic politics. Historically reliant on coal – dating back to the establishment of its first coal mine in Szczakowa, Małopolska region, in 1767 (Cieślak et al., 2013, p. 433) – Poland now faces mounting pressure, particularly from the EU, to transition to sustainable energy sources and phase out coal by 2049 (European Commission, 2023, n.p.).

The decision to commit to a late coal phase-out just before the 2050 deadline, was largely driven by EU conditionality, which compelled compliance. Without this pressure, Poland would most likely have refused to agree to a coal phase-out altogether (Fabianowicz, 2023, p. 100). In the event of non-compliance, the EU threatened to cut 50% of the promised Just Transition funds. Additionally, the coal phase-out is viewed negatively by traditional industries and certain segments of the population, making the delayed timeline a strategic move by the government to preserve its public image (Fabianowicz, 2023, p. 100).

Most European countries aim to phase out coal much earlier. This transition has not only reshaped national energy policies but has also influenced public perception. This article draws on research on populism to examine how this transformation was perceived during the final legislative term of the right-wing populist party PiS. The author focused on the final phase of Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki's government, particularly the period 2021–2023, in which the Law and Justice (PiS) party held a dominant position. The analysis deliberately excluded the newly elected government under Prime Minister Donald Tusk, who took office on December 13, 2023. By concentrating solely on the previous administration, the article provides a more precise understanding of the interplay between populism and energy policy transitions in Poland before the political shift.

The discourse surrounding climate and energy policy in Poland, shaped by its populist political landscape, presents a compelling subject for analysis. This article examines how energy transitions are framed within national narratives, engaging with broader questions of Polish identity and political strategy. By analysing government

communications, it also seeks to examine the role of populism in shaping energy policy discourse. Accordingly, the following research question was posed: In the context of Poland's climate and energy policy narratives, how does the government construct identities and oppositions between 'the people' and 'the elite'?

Building on the established research, particularly that of Ernesto Laclau, this article examines how government energy policy narratives describe the people as a unified group associated with common energy interests and challenges, while depicting the elite as an external force linked to climate and energy policies presented as unsuitable for Poland. The analysis explored how these oppositions are articulated within government communications and how they relate to broader debates surrounding energy transition and sovereignty.

From a scholarly perspective, this article contributes to broader theoretical discussions on populism and its influence on policy discourse, particularly in Central and Eastern European states. It highlights emerging themes of populism that have evolved alongside growing illiberalism in the region, and politically it is crucial for understanding the challenges and opportunities in implementing the European Green Deal, both within Poland and in other contexts where populist politics play a significant role in shaping policy outcomes.

2. Literature Review

Researchers have been particularly interested in studying how populism and democracy are connected. According to certain scholars, populist movements pose a threat to democratic institutions. Müller (2016, p. 101) described populism as a reflection of representative politics, highlighting its anti-elitist and anti-pluralist nature. According to his analysis (Müller, 2016, p. 102), populists make false claims about representing the people's will. His assessment is that they represent a risk to democracy (Müller, 2016, p. 103), and that populism does not address the issues of liberal democracy. The study pays special attention to Western democracies, which are undergoing a shift towards populism despite already having strong democratic foundations.

By redirecting attention to Europe, one can observe issues similar to those in the United States with their distinct causes and manifestations. Berman (2019, p. 404) noted that the influence of populist parties is a cause for concern, as they have taken control in Western and Eastern Europe, and emphasized that the rise of populism in Western Europe has been ongoing for decades, but it was not until 2008 that these parties became central to political debate.

Mudde (2019, n.p.) stated that the primary objective of populist radical right groups in Central and Eastern Europe is to advance illiberalism. This often involves undermining judicial and media independence, weakening minority rights protections, and diluting the separation of powers. The extent of their influence and control largely depends on the strength of the populist radical right party and the structural complexities of the political system.

Riedel (2019, p. 24) further explored populism research based on the case study of Poland. The signs of growth and stability in Poland suggested a promising future of progress and prosperity, reflecting a reliance on stable democratisation, while as in Hungary, the country has changed course from being pro-democratic and oriented towards Western liberalism to adopting an authoritarian direction.

As European mainstream politics has evolved significantly with the rise of populism, this shift has coincided with the growing prominence of climate politics and the energy transition. This intersection reflects a deeper, more complex relationship in which populist movements and parties – often critical of political elites and international agreements – engage with pressing issues such as climate change and energy policy. For example, Radtke and Drewing (2020, p. 164) found that the energy transition was initially perceived as an elite-driven initiative, led by political parties and interest groups that overlooked the concerns of ordinary citizens. According to this line of research, populists argue that so-called experts exert excessive influence over policymaking, while politicians fail to genuinely represent the people. They also claim that policymakers are out of touch with local communities and that energy transition plans are both condescending and impractical.

The way in which populist actors engage with climate change and environmentalism has evolved, with many increasingly incorporating these issues into their political narratives. Hoerber, Kurze, and Kuenzer (2021, p. 2) showed that right-wing populist parties do not necessarily reject environmental protection outright. Instead, they reframe and prioritise environmental issues in ways that may challenge the EU's sustainability transition – a strategy they term *Ego-Ecology*.

Other studies highlighted an even more nuanced approach, where far-right parties promote concepts such as *green patriotism* and environmental conservation, particularly in relation to protecting their so-called homelands (Buzogány & Mohammad-Klotzbach, 2021, p. 156). Rather than dismissing climate change as politically irrelevant, populist actors increasingly use it as a tool to advance their own ideological and political objectives.

In general, research provides valuable insights into populism's influence on democracy and its role in shaping European politics, including climate and energy policy. However, as stressed by Kurze, Hoerber, and Kuenzer (2021, p. 3), a significant research gap remains in understanding the intersection between populism and sustainability.

This research puzzle suggests that Laclau's theory can enhance in particular the analysis of the previously mentioned nexus, emphasising the role of rhetoric in constructing political identities and the populist divide between the people and the elite. This perspective also resonates with emerging work on populist regionalism, which highlights how populist actors frame supranational institutions as external elites (e.g. Söderbaum, Spandler, Pacciardi, Greskovits). Using this theoretical framework is highly relevant for studying the evolution of populism's stance on climate politics and environmental policy in Poland. Laclau's focus on the changing nature of populist demands offers a nuanced perspective on the shifting narrative regarding climate change and energy transition.

The existing research provides a foundation for understanding how populism influences democracy and policymaking. However, Laclau's theory offers a more specific framework for analysing the techniques used to construct and deploy populist narratives, particularly in environmental debates, and helps explain how populist strategies adapt and evolve in response to shifting climate politics.

In the case of Poland, Laclau's theory is particularly useful for examining how climate and energy policy narratives are framed. It sheds light on how the government, especially through the communications of Mateusz Morawiecki, constructs the identities of *the people* and *the elite*, positioning them in opposition to each other. This perspective helps clarify how populist rhetoric influences Poland's approach to climate policy and the broader energy transition.

Laclau offered a profound insight into populism in political discourse, focusing specifically on the construction of political identities, a central concept in his framework. His study (2005, p. 86) explored the process by which populism forms a collective identity of the people in opposition to an elite or establishment through the use of political rhetoric. He stressed the role of empty signifiers (Laclau, 2001, p. 412), t.e. broad and flexible terms that bring together diverse groups despite their differing viewpoints, and emphasized the importance of antagonistic connections in populist movements, a crucial aspect of uniting these collectives against a common adversary. This point was also highlighted by Mouffe (2022, n.p.).

According to Laclau (2005, p. 73), populist movements typically start with particular social grievances and evolve into a wider set of demands. Another crucial element of his theory is the role of populist leadership, in which leaders embody the hopes of the masses and oppose the privileged class. Laclau (2005, p. 130) underlined the adaptability of populist movements across different ideologies, highlighting their fluidity and heterogeneity. The ability of populism to adapt makes it a powerful political force. His analysis, from a post-structuralist perspective, pointed out how populist narratives influence the formation of political realities and perceptions.

3. Methodological Approach

This study employed a qualitative discourse-analytical approach based on Laclau's theory of populism in order to examine how the Morawiecki government framed energy and climate policy between 2021 and 2023. The research focused on two interconnected case studies: (1) Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki's 2021 speech in the European Parliament and (2) 300 posts published on his official Facebook page during the 2022–2023 pre-election period. The parliamentary speech enabled a close examination of rhetorical identity construction and antagonistic framing, while the Facebook material provided insights into recurring communicative patterns in the government discourse. Posts were retrieved from Morawiecki's official public profile and screened for references to climate, sustainable development, and the European Union. Keyword frequency counts relating to these themes guided the selection of posts for deeper

qualitative interpretation. The author then examined how these materials reflected Laclau's concepts of antagonism, empty signifiers, and the construction of political identities.

The article is positioned within Laclau's discourse-theoretical understanding of populism, particularly his concepts of antagonism, empty signifiers, and the construction of *the people* through opposition to *the elite*. These concepts guided both case studies: the parliamentary speech was analysed to identify rhetorical constructions of political identity and antagonism, while the Facebook posts were examined to trace how selected terms acquire recurring meanings in government communication. Keyword frequency counts were therefore not treated as a standalone quantitative measurement, but as a supporting tool for identifying patterns subsequently interpreted qualitatively.

4. Context of Analysis. Key Characteristics of Poland's Climate and Energy Policy

Poland's reliance on coal is significant. The year of 2021 saw a notable rise in the demand for coal as coal-based electricity generation made a strong comeback, accounting for 80% of the total electricity generation in Poland (International Energy Agency, 2022a, n.p.), yet coal usage is not merely an economic issue but deeply embedded within national, social, and political narratives (Broughel, 2024, n.p.). Scientific consensus strongly advocates for the urgent phase-out of coal to mitigate climate change by reducing CO₂ emissions (IPCC, 2019, n.p.). This transition is crucial for replacing coal with cleaner energy sources, such as solar, wind, hydroelectric, and nuclear power. However, the latter remains contested due to its environmental impact, as it is not entirely carbon-free.

In Poland, the city of Katowice – one of the country's most prominent coal mining regions – serves as a powerful symbol of both energy independence and historical industrial strength. The coal industry is not only a key provider of domestic energy but also a major employer, deeply intertwined with local economies and social structures. Consequently, coal policies extend beyond energy considerations; they are closely linked to national identity, cultural heritage, and socio-economic stability (Broughel, 2024, n.p.).

The above explains why Poland hosted the 24th Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (COP24) in Katowice. At the time, Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki referred to coal as Poland's 'black gold' (Tutton, 2018, n.p.). The government framed COP24 in a way that suggested Poland's heavy reliance on coal could even be an advantage in its path toward climate neutrality, as stated by President Andrzej Duda (2018, n.p.). In this context, Poland positioned itself as a supposedly honest broker, capable of representing the EU's modern ecological ambitions while appealing to emerging economies like Brazil, which remain heavily dependent on fossil fuels. Poland was presented as a potential role model for transitioning towards climate neutrality (Worland, 2018, n.p.).

Prior to 2022, Poland also pursued diversification strategies to reduce dependency on external suppliers, including the expansion of LNG import capacity through the Świnoujście terminal and regional cooperation within the Three Seas Initiative. These efforts complemented the broader emphasis on energy security and sovereignty within government narratives (International Energy Agency, 2022b, n.p.).

The Russian war of aggression in Ukraine has given coal an additional strategic dimension. The Polish government has emphasised a narrative of greater energy independence from Russian supplies compared to countries like Germany, which began phasing out coal and nuclear energy early, investing heavily in renewables, yet it also had to secure short and mid-term energy solutions, leading to increased reliance on Russian gas (Eberly et al., 2023, n.p.).

In contrast, Poland has maintained relatively low dependence on energy imports and has fully eliminated coal imports from Russia (Maj, 2023, p. 3). Other EU member states, including Germany, have also taken steps to reduce reliance on Russian energy, whereas Poland, along with other Eastern European states, had already warned Germany in 2016 about the geopolitical risks of Nord Stream 2, urging its cancellation to prevent strategic vulnerabilities for Europe (Sziklai et al., 2020, p. 2).

While Poland is more independent in terms of domestic energy supply and security, its energy policies have often been framed within a narrative of independence and resistance to external (particularly Russian) influence. The country still lacks sufficient domestic energy supply, which is now compensated for by imports, for example, from Colombia, Indonesia, and South Africa (Maj, 2023, p. 3). Despite environmental concerns, the government has also invested in developing the Baltic Pipe Project (intended to transport natural gas from Norway to Poland), primarily to reduce dependency on Russian gas (Sandford, 2022, n.p.). In conclusion, Poland is not energy self-sufficient, which challenges the populist claims.

Poland positions itself as a protective barrier against what it perceives as economically harmful climate policies. For instance, in EU negotiations Poland has sought exemptions and extensions for several climate targets, citing the economic, social, and political ramifications of swift transitions away from coal. This was most evident in the lawsuit of the most recent PiS government against the Fit for 55 legislations initiated by the EU (Elissaoui et al., 2023, n.p.).

5. Analysis. Laclau's Theory on the Populist Approach in the Context of Poland's Energy Narrative

The Polish government frequently shapes its energy narrative in a manner consistent with Laclau's theory, presenting the people as a unified entity in pursuit (Laclau, 2005, p. 86) of energy security, economic stability, and national sovereignty (Polish Government, 2023a, n.p.). This narrative underslines the importance of energy independence and the protection of domestic energy sources, particularly coal (Morawiecki, 2024, n.p.), and putting it in this way, the government cultivates a shared national

identity centred on a strong, self-reliant Poland, resistant to external pressures – especially those related to EU energy and environmental regulations (Morawiecki, 2024, n.p.).

According to Laclau's theory (2001, p. 412), Morawiecki employed terms such as European Union and European Green Deal as empty signifiers, portraying them as external forces that threaten Poland's sovereignty and economic stability. In contrast, the government stated that Poland can achieve energy independence through traditional energy sources. Supporting this claim, the Ministry of State Assets collaborated on a report emphasising Poland's energy self-sufficiency, citing an estimated 32 billion tons of untapped hard coal reserves – an amount the government deemed sufficient to secure the country's domestic coal supply for the foreseeable future (Śniegocki et al., 2022, p. 12).

Conversely, *the elite* in Poland's energy narrative consists of external actors, including the European Union, environmental non-governmental organizations, and, at times, foreign energy market players, often perceived by the average Polish citizen as disconnected from their everyday needs and realities and frequently described as promoting energy policies that endanger Poland's economic stability and energy security (Riedel, 2021, pp. 207–216, 221). By constructing this sense of external threat, the government reinforces the division between *the people* and these external forces, further legitimising its stance on energy independence. The President of Poland openly opposed EU regulation, implying that only immature and irresponsible countries would take risks with their citizens' interests: "Which country wants to give up resources which it owns and which are a guarantee of its economic sovereignty and energy independence?" (Oroschakoff & Gurzu, 2015, n.p.).

As already mentioned, this study analysed two interconnected case studies to examine Poland's energy policy. While the overall research covered the period 2021–2023, the analysis of Facebook communication focused specifically on the pre-election period of 2022–2023.

The first case study addressed Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki's 2021 speech in the European Parliament, specifically the construction of antagonistic identities within energy and climate policy discourse. The speech reflected Morawiecki's broader rhetorical approach during this period, particularly in its emphasis on sovereignty, energy security, and criticism of EU policy. It was selected because it brings together debates on European integration, national sovereignty, and energy policy, making it particularly relevant for examining the construction of antagonistic identities within Laclau's framework. The qualitative analysis focused on how rhetorical distinctions between the people and external actors were articulated, as well as on the way themes such as sovereignty, European integration, and energy security contributed to processes of political identity construction. The second case study examined official communications from the former Polish Prime Minister's office in the buildup of the government elections, with 300 posts from 2022 to 2023 from the official Facebook page of Mateusz Morawiecki systematically reviewed. The study analysed the posts in greater depth when keywords such as energy, climate change, and sustainable development were present.

This approach drew on Laclau's concept of empty signifiers, examining how recurring political terms acquire specific meanings within government communications and how these meanings contribute to the construction of political identities and oppositions.

By combining qualitative analysis of speeches with keyword frequency analysis of Facebook posts, these case studies provided insights into recurring populist patterns within the Polish government's energy and climate policy narratives.

a) Case Study: Parliamentary Speech

There was a noticeable change in focus and discourse in Prime Minister Morawiecki's speeches. His address to the Polish Parliament in 2019 mainly focused on domestic matters, highlighting the rivalry between PiS and PO (Jaskółka, 2019, n.p.), during the time when the government was concentrating on securing power in domestic issues.

In 2020 there was a clear change in the PM's major speeches, addressing more international matters. This change was clear in his speech at the European Parliament, where he ardently defended Poland's stance on the rule of law debate (OKO.press, 2020, n.p.)

The year 2021 marked a further intensification in Morawiecki's approach, broadening his critique to include the EU's stance on energy and climate policy (Government of Poland, 2021, n.p.). Throughout 2022, during the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, Morawiecki maintained a critical stance against Russia and supported the EU's handling of the war, such as the energy sanctions of the EU against Russia (Platform of European Memory and Conscience, 2022, n.p.).

Ahead of the 2023 parliamentary elections, Morawiecki delivered an impassioned speech at Heidelberg University, a historically significant venue. The Polish Government's assessment of the European continent's failures in 2023 stressed the rising importance of national sovereignty, with their anti-EU rhetoric reaching a climax (Government of Poland, 2023, n.p.). These speeches collectively illustrated a visible shift in emphasis, moving from domestic political concerns toward broader debates surrounding European policy, sovereignty, and energy issues.

The 2021 speech was particularly relevant for this case study because it reflects an intensification of Morawiecki's criticism toward the EU, while simultaneously addressing themes related to energy and climate policy. Its content is a valuable resource for examining the use of populist framing in Laclau's theory, particularly in its portrayal of the people versus the elite and the persuasive techniques used to tackle urgent global problems.

Morawiecki presented a vision of Poland as a united and resilient nation, with a focus on energy independence and security, depicting it as a country that brings together millions of Poles through its strong opposition to the EU. The EU's Recovery Fund, presented as a Polish endeavour, was described as a shield for Poles against globalisation and foreign influences, implying that the EU bears responsibility for economic and social challenges (Kość, 2021, n.p.).

"It was Poland that promoted an ambitious Recovery Fund ensuring that today's response to the challenges of energy, climate change and post-pandemic transformation was adequate to the needs, and that economic growth would be strong, giving hope and guarantee that millions of children, women and men would not be left alone and vulnerable to globalisation" (Government of Poland, 2021, n.p.).

To ensure that there was no ambiguity, another part of the speech clearly established the EU as a perceived threat to the Polish people.

"I reject the language of threats, hazing and coercion. I do not agree to politicians blackmailing and threatening Poland. I do not agree to blackmail becoming a method of conducting policy towards a Member State. That's not how democracies do things" (Government of Poland, 2021, n.p.).

Morawiecki not only positioned Poland in opposition to EU institutions but also broadened the scope of representation beyond national level. By referring to wider European challenges and presenting Poland's proposals as solutions relevant for the continent as a whole, he constructed a broader political community extending beyond domestic audiences. In Laclau's terms, this rhetorical move reinforced the construct of the people through their shared concerns, whilst simultaneously defining the elite as actors unable or unwilling to address these challenges effectively.

Morawiecki stated that the EU experienced a major gas and energy crisis because of strategic manoeuvres resulting in unprecedented price increases. From his perspective, countless European companies faced a dilemma: either decrease production or transfer the increased costs to consumers (Government of Poland, 2023c, n.p.). He warned that this crisis could destabilise Europe, putting it at risk of widespread bankruptcies. Morawiecki voiced worries about the possibility of millions of households and tens of millions of individuals being pushed into poverty and hardship because of uncontrollable cost increases throughout the continent. He warned of the risk of a domino effect, where one crisis could set off a sequence of subsequent collapses (Government of Poland, 2023c, n.p.).

By referring to Europe at a crossroads, he attempted to ensure that Poland had a more promising future with two paths to choose from, i.e. Europe and what an alternative path might be. His rhetoric provoked strong reactions among participants of the debate: "I can see the agitation on your faces. I understand that you disagree with it, at least in part, in this chamber. But I do not understand why" (Government of Poland, 2021, n.p.). This exchange illustrates another rhetorical strategy within Morawiecki's discourse. By emphasising disagreement within the Chamber while questioning opposing reactions, he reinforced a distinction between those who recognise the seriousness of the challenges facing Europe and those portrayed as failing to respond adequately. In Laclau's terms, this contributed to the construction of antagonistic identities between the people and the political elites.

Morawiecki underlined how Poland's government chose the right path, while the EU just looked away: "This is what Poland proposes (...) How to fairly and effectively finance the energy and climate transformation? How to make our decision-making

process more effective? What can we do to prevent our citizens from feeling increasingly alienated in the EU?" (Government of Poland, 2021, n.p.).

The analysis indicated that Morawiecki's speech defined energy policy through themes associated with sovereignty, energy independence, and relations with the European Union. Within this discourse the EU was frequently presented as an external actor linked to policies portrayed as constraining Poland's energy autonomy. The response in Poland to Morawiecki's speech in the European Parliament was a mix of opinions, showing a significant political divide. Members of the ruling party supported his stance, highlighting Poland's sovereignty and equality within the EU. Radosław Fogiel, from the PiS party, underlined Poland's equal standing in the community, while Beata Kempa, former State Secretary for Justice, emphasised the limited participation and the importance of discussing more pertinent matters. Krystyna Pawłowicz, a judge on the Constitutional Tribunal, summed up the PM's speech, demanding that Poland be respected and firmly rejecting any attempts to use threats or financial blackmail to obtain concessions (Polsat News, 2021, n.p.).

Opposition politicians, including Magdalena Adamowicz, criticised Morawiecki for sidestepping the main issue and delivering the most anti-EU speech ever heard in the European Parliament. In addition, Marek Belka voiced disapproval towards Morawiecki for neglecting the core subject of the discussion that Poland uses populist tactics by attacking the EU (Polsat News, 2021, n.p.).

An interesting development was the handing of a wooden Pinocchio figurine to Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki by MEP Łukasz Kohut, intended to highlight what critics described as his misleading statements. The figurine was quickly taken away by Konrad Szymański, Minister for European Union Affairs in the PiS government. Kohut's gesture provoked strong reactions, as he accused those in power of damaging Poland's international reputation (Polsat News, 2021, n.p.).

b) Case Study: Climate Narratives (2022–2023)

In the second case study, the sub-concept of empty signifiers in Laclau's theory is exemplified by the correlation between the frequency of posts with specific keywords on climate policy and their perceived importance. This highlights how selective emphasis in government communication shapes public perception. An empty signifier refers to a term or symbol that is deliberately made vague and inclusive so that it can represent a wide range of meanings and identities. In practical terms, 'climate', or 'sustainable development' and 'European Union' can function as empty signifiers. While each of these concepts has a broad, universal appeal, their specific content and implications can vary significantly across different contexts and ideologies (Laclau, 2001, p. 412).

To identify the specific meaning of the empty signifiers, the analysis was based on keyword frequency counts to identify posts engaging with topics related to European energy and climate policy – when a keyword appeared in a post, a more detailed

qualitative analysis was conducted. The selected posts were interpreted in the context of Laclau's theory of populism, examining how the concepts were reflected in government communication.

Keyword: Climate

The keyword climate appeared 60 times and was the least frequent among the observed terms. During the pre-election period of 2022–2023, references to climate were comparatively limited and most commonly associated with formal titles or institutional contexts, such as climate ministers, conferences, and summits. Within the analysed posts, climate policy was less frequently articulated through broader strategic narratives or detailed policy initiatives than themes related to energy security and sovereignty. In Laclau's terms, the concept therefore remains only weakly articulated within the examined communication (Laclau, 2001, p. 412).

According to the extant literature, e.g. Riedel (2021, n.p.), it is argued that populist rhetoric is employed to align with green conservatism. However, at least in this analysis, there was no evidence that the government sought to convince the wider public of green conservatism. A similar theory of green patriotism (cf. Buzogány & Mohammad-Klotzbach, 2021, p. 156) or ego-ecology (cf. Hoerber & Kurze Kuenzer, 2021, n.p.) showed that some governments try to gain political weight on the topic of climate change, yet within the analysed material, references associated with green conservatism, green patriotism, and ego-ecology remained limited. Therefore the findings suggest that climate-related communication was less central to the government's public messaging than themes linked to energy security, sovereignty, and EU relations.

From the perspective of Laclau's theory, the analysed communication placed Brussels as an external actor associated with policies portrayed as disconnected from the needs of ordinary citizens. This antagonistic framing was illustrated through statements such as: "We will do anything to protect Polish families against another pseudo-green idea by rich countries and bureaucrats from Brussels" (Morawiecki, n.d., n.p.). Within this discourse, Brussels was positioned as an elite actor, while the government presented itself as defending national interests and Polish families against policies presented as externally imposed.

Keyword: European Union

The term *European Union* appeared 296 times, signalling a strong message to the public, in line with the concept of the *empty signifier* in Laclau's theory. One of the central issues within this discourse was coal mining, particularly the controversy surrounding the Turow coal plant. Several court rulings, including decisions by the European Court of Justice and a Warsaw court, mandated a halt to Turow's expansion. Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki strongly criticised these rulings, arguing that they were detrimental and unjust to Polish citizens, workers, and families. He interpreted such verdicts as

destabilising for Poland's energy sector and even declared them *illegal* (Government of Poland, 2023, n.p.).

This portrayal of judicial institutions as a threat to Poland's energy security and sovereignty aligns with a broader populist narrative. Following Laclau's framework, Morawiecki built an antagonism between *the people* – represented by the national government – and *the elite*, which in this case included European judicial authorities and policymakers. The EU was thus presented as an external force undermining Poland's right to self-determination in energy policy.

From Laclau's perspective, Morawiecki further burdens the term *European Union* with negative connotations such as pursuing dangerous policies on migration, security, and sovereignty, portraying it as an elite institution that disregards the will of the people. In his rhetoric, the EU's actions are depicted as a violation of Poland's constitution and national interests, underlining what he describes as the *fundamental right* of Europeans – particularly Polish citizens – to sovereignty over their own territory (Government of Poland, 2023, n.p.).

A dominant theme in Morawiecki's discourse is the EU's perceived failure in managing migration. He argues that the uncontrolled influx of thousands of unauthorised migrants has led to instability, particularly in Southern Europe. According to him, Poland has long advocated for stronger action against illegal migration, positioning itself as a defender of European security. The Polish government, under his leadership, passed a resolution rejecting the EU's migration redistribution policies and calling for immediate reforms to the bloc's migration strategy. Morawiecki presented these measures as necessary steps to protect both Poland and Europe as a whole.

Keyword: Sustainable Development

The term sustainable development appeared 72 times, predominantly between March and September 2023, indicating greater visibility during the latter part of the electoral period. Within the analysed communication, sustainable development was frequently associated with infrastructure and national development projects. The qualitative analysis indicated that government communication linked sustainable development to investments such as monuments, highways, and schools. While these themes correspond to Sustainable Development Goal 9, they represent only one dimension of the broader framework of the 17 United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (Hoerber, 2013, p. 161; United Nations, n.d.). Thus sustainable development was primarily articulated through infrastructure and development-oriented narratives rather than through climate-centred framing associated with SDG 13. The selective emphasis on SDG 9 can be interpreted through Laclau's concept of the empty signifier, in which the term was articulated primarily through infrastructure and development-oriented narratives within the analysed communication.

The analysed communication aligns with Laclau's framework, particularly in the construct of *the people* (Polish citizens and their interests) and *the elite* (the EU and

other external actors). Within this discourse, climate-related themes were articulated through oppositions between national interests and external institutions, reflecting broader patterns of populist identity construction.

c) Comparison of the Case Studies

The comparison of both case studies indicated how themes associated with populist rhetoric appear across different forms of government communication on energy and climate policy. Both cases highlight concepts of *the people* and *the elite*, central to Laclau's framework, while differing in their communicative format and emphasis.

Case Study I examined Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki's public speeches and identified a shift from predominantly domestic political concerns towards broader debate surrounding European policy, sovereignty, and energy issues. Within those, Poland was frequently positioned in contrast to external actors, particularly the European Union, through references to sovereignty and energy autonomy. Case Study II focused on digital communication through the Prime Minister's official Facebook page. The analysis indicated that government communications placed differing levels of emphasis on selected themes, with climate-related issues receiving comparatively less attention than energy security and national sovereignty. The selective use of the keywords and portrayal of the EU and other actors as *elites* illustrates how populist narratives are communicated through digital platforms during periods of electoral competition.

Comparing these case studies revealed recurring patterns in how the government addressed energy and climate policy across different communicative settings. While Case Study I focused on speeches directed at political audiences, Case Study II examined digital communication directed to a broader public. In both cases, themes of sovereignty, energy security, and relations with external actors remained central.

The analysis highlighted how energy and climate-related communications were articulated through oppositions associated with Laclau's framework, particularly the distinction between *the people* and the external *elites*. Across both traditional and digital forms of communication, selective emphasis and recurring political themes contributed to broader debate surrounding climate policy, sustainable development, and national sovereignty.

6. Conclusion

These case studies addressed the research question of how the people and the elite were portrayed within the Polish government's energy and climate narratives. The analysis indicated that the government communications, particularly through Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki's speeches and digital messages, described the people as a collective associated with common energy interests and challenges. This collective was contrasted with external actors, particularly the European Union, frequently linked to policies presented as unsuitable for Poland.

Applying Laclau's framework to the analysed material suggests that government communications articulated a distinction between *the people* and the external *elites* through themes of sovereignty, energy independence, and national interest. These patterns appear both in Morawiecki's public speeches and in the government's digital communications, reflecting recurring forms of antagonistic identity construction within the examined material. Particularly in relation to sustainable development and climate change, the analysed material illustrates how empty signifiers operated within Laclau's framework. Certain themes received greater emphasis than others, contributing to representations of national interests in contrast to external actors and institutions. Within this discourse, selective articulation of political demands and priorities reflected broader processes of antagonistic identity construction.

The transition to Prime Minister Donald Tusk's coalition government after autumn 2023 introduced a new political context for Poland's climate and energy policy. Following eight years of PiS government, questions remain regarding how the new administration will balance EU climate commitments, energy security concerns, and domestic political expectations. Future research may assess whether the patterns identified in this study persist, evolve, or diminish under changing political leadership and institutional conditions.

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