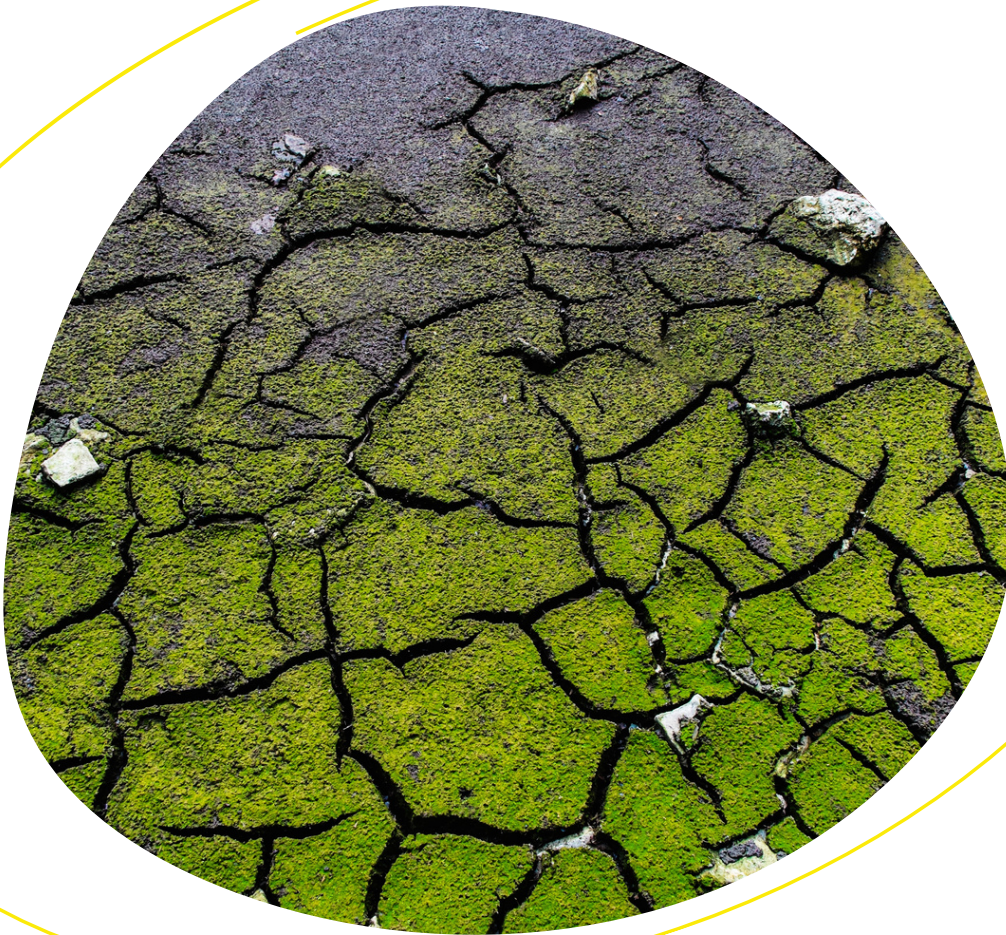


Climate Champions vs Sceptics: Comparative Study on Climate Policy and Discourse in the V4



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“Bruised but not broken: reviving the appeal of the EU in the minds of V4 citizens.”

This project reacts to the upcoming 2024 European Parliament elections and focuses on researching and addressing the most contentious topics within the European Union, mainly focusing on its newer member states – V4 countries. These countries have been experiencing some forms of democratic backsliding, such as low participation in elections, tendencies towards Euroscepticism, high levels of distrust in authorities, or a resurgence of populism. Overall, these signals suggest a detachment from the European project.

Therefore, understanding the needs, concerns, and fears of V4 citizens is essential. It is also timely – Europe now stands on the verge of numerous transitions – chief among which is the green transformation intended to combat climate change.

The goal of the project is to gauge citizens’ attitudes and preferences towards four broad policy domains that played a pivotal role in the European Union’s quest to adapt to a new policy environment in the recent past: decarbonisation policies, migration, the COVID-19 pandemic, and debates over the rule of law.

During the project’s first phase, we have conducted qualitative and quantitative research into citizens’ attitudes to the four core topics of the project. Furthermore, we have looked into the V4 governments’ approaches to the topics via analyses of policy and discourse in the V4 countries. The project’s second phase will build on the realised research and engage with various stakeholders and policy-makers to share the findings and prepare communication- and engagement strategies before the 2024 European Parliament elections. Finally, we will disseminate the results and knowledge via public discussions, workshops, podcasts, and media outputs to the public.

The project is carried out by leading think-tank and research institutions in each of the V4 countries: EUROPEUM Institute for European Policy in Czechia; Bratislava Policy Institute in Slovakia; 21 Research Center in Hungary; The Projekt: Polska Foundation in Poland; and is supported by the European Union.



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An introduction to climate policy in the V4

In recent years, climate action has come high on the political agenda of the European Union. In 2019, the EU leaders committed the EU to become the first climate-neutral continent by 2050. To meet the ambitious targets, significant investment in the restructuring and decarbonization of member states' economies will be necessary in the coming years.

This analysis examines how Czechia, Slovakia, Poland, and Hungary positioned themselves in the EU climate debate and analyzes the **similarities and differences** in the policies and discourse. It summarizes and compares national reports on policy and discourse in the V4 countries, which were published separately within the RevivEU project.

The national reports on discourse analysis cover a period from June to December 2019, encompassing two crucial European Council meetings where the EU committed itself to achieve carbon neutrality by 2050. The national reports on policy analysis cover a larger timeframe ranging from 2015 until the present, allowing to identify the evolution of policies over a longer period.

Shared history

Before looking into the discourse and policy positions of the V4, it is crucial to address the shared history of communism and post-communism, which has undoubtedly shaped these states' economic structure, energy mix, and subsequent policy preferences. All V4 countries met the 2020 targets for greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions. However, rather than a result of conscious government climate policies, this decrease in emissions can in large part be attributed to a decline of heavy industry during the post-communist transition, which led to the closing of energy-heavy industries and a sharp decrease in emissions between approximately 30 to 40% (36% in Czechia¹, 41% in Slovakia², 36% in Poland³ and 32% in Hungary⁴ in 2020 compared to 1990).

¹ (UNFCCC 2022a)

² (UNFCCC 2022d)

³ (UNFCCC 2022c)

⁴ (UNFCCC 2022b)

Despite the economic restructuring after 1990, the added value from manufacturing is still above the EU average for all V4 countries, having a clear impact on the energy intensity of the local economy (Vienna Institute for International economic Studies 2022).

Energy mix

While the structure of the V4 economies is comparable, significant differences can be found concerning their energy mix. The table below gives an overview of the countries’ reliance on coal, renewables, and nuclear energy for electricity generation (“IEA – International Energy Agency” n.d.).

Table 1: energy mix for electricity generation

Country	coal	renewables	nuclear
Czechia	46%	13%	37.5%
Slovakia	Closing last coal mine this year	25%	58,5%
Poland	68 %	20%	No nuclear power plants
Hungary	11%	10%	46%

To see how these historical and material realities translate into the political arena, the next part of this analysis will give a summary of V4 policy and discourse positions.

1. Summary of V4 policy and discourse positions

In the investigated period, climate policy was a relatively marginal topic in most V4 countries. With the exception of the Czech Republic, discussions on the subject were left mainly to minority groups of party experts or opposition parties.

Slovakia presented itself as the V4 country most in favor of climate policies. The country was the only of the V4 to agree to the EU neutrality commitment already in June 2019, introduced additional legislation at the national level,⁵ and adopted a text to tighten Slovak climate goals after a public petition was submitted to the Parliament (although the content of the text was watered down in later versions). The public debate in 2019 focused mainly on the investigation

⁵ including the introduction of carbon tariffs to lower emissions

of corruption scandals and the murder of investigative journalist Ján Kuciak and his fiancée Martina Kušnírová. Therefore, the topic of climate neutrality remained largely non-politicized. If it was addressed, Slovak politicians, especially former PM Peter Pellegrini (SMER), tried to place Slovakia in a group of states that have no problem with the EU's climate policies. However, at the same time, economic growth and security considerations took precedence over climate commitments.

In **Hungary**, climate regulation was equally a marginal topic. While having a damaged image internationally, the country recently took action on the climate front by introducing a rather ambitious national climate law in 2021 that aligns with the EU and UN targets. While some regard the law as a sign of Hungary's resolve to transition, others have questioned the government's willingness to reach the targets, characterizing the move as a "political gimmick rather than a sincere commitment"⁶. The climate discussions in Hungary in 2019 were also non-politicized. PM Viktor Orbán rarely addressed the topic, leaving it to the then President János Áder, who tried to depict himself as a green president and Hungary as a climate leader.

Of the V4, the issue of climate neutrality was discursively the most contentious in **Czechia**. In 2019, the country was critical of the EU's climate policy, which would not sufficiently consider the Czech context, and many influential actors even challenged the existence of anthropogenic global warming. Despite the strong rhetoric of both the then government of Andrej Babiš (ANO) and most of the right-wing opposition, Czechia remained open to compromises in its policies as long as Czech interests were served and the role of member states was respected. With the change of the government in December 2021, the harsh rhetoric relented somewhat, as the new ODS-led right-wing government adopted a more constructive approach. However, the policy positions, as represented in the framework positions⁷, remained largely the same as those defined by the Babiš administration.

While climate neutrality is more salient in Czechia, practical opposition to an ambitious EU climate policy is undoubtedly the hardest in **Poland**, which has so far not factually committed to climate neutrality by 2050. This is because the transition to a climate-neutral economy will have particularly severe consequences for the Polish economy. Due to its heavy reliance on coal,

⁶ See Hungarian Discourse chapter published under the RevivEU project: [Research \(reviveu.net\)](https://reviveu.net)

⁷ Framework positions outline the Czech government's official position towards individual EU policies and guide the country's negotiating positions.

climate policies would require major structural changes and incur great social costs. Unsurprisingly, Poland has a long-standing opposition to EU-level climate initiatives dating back far before the adoption of the European Green Deal. While attitudes are slightly evolving, there are questions about the feasibility of the EU's ambitious plans. Therefore, the Polish approach remains to “hinder, moderate, and delay” initiatives against climate change.

2. A comparative analysis

In what follows, a comparative analysis of the climate discourses and policies will be made. Seven relevant themes have been identified and will serve as a basis for the comparison.

1. Avoiding controversy and highlighting achievements

The general absence of polemic and politicization of climate policy in most V4 countries is the first finding that stands out. Interestingly, the dominant rhetoric in the V4 throughout the analyzed period **recognized the threat posed by manmade climate change and overall agreed that there is a need to act** (although to different degrees). While not always reflected in their policies, countries generally did **not seek controversy** on the topic and instead tried to **highlight their achievements** in the field of climate action.

For example, Slovakia emphasized that it was the first V4 country to subscribe to the climate neutrality goal. Similarly, Hungary promoted itself as a “climate champion” and highlighted its achievements at the UN summit in 2019 as an international selling point. Even Poland, the only EU country that refused to join the climate neutrality commitment, even during the December 2019 European Council summit, generally

focused on the government's accomplishments in the field of climate change. When criticized, the Polish government tried not to enter into polemics with climate activists but instead resorted to pro-climate rhetoric by emphasizing that they are “on the same side”⁸.

A possible explanation for the absence of controversy at the time is that climate policy was a **topic in the margins of the political discussions** of most V4 countries. Therefore, government

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⁸ See Polish Discourse chapter published under the RevivEU project: [Research \(reviveu.net\)](https://reviveu.net)

parties chose not to politicize the issue and instead focused on themes that are more central to them, like migration and the rule of law. When governments received criticism for opposing EU climate policies, their resistance was usually not framed as opposition towards the principle of climate mitigation but justified by (financial) feasibility concerns over the new ambitious measures. They further reinforced this argument by referring to the structure of their economy, a legacy from the communist period, or to their relative economic backwardness compared to Western Europe.

Czechia was the only exception from this non-politicized discourse in 2019. The dominant discourse (of the ODS and SPD parties and the then president Miloš Zeman) perceived climate **neutrality as a threat**, arguing that manmade climate change is a myth, blaming climate activists for creating hysteria, and arguing that the focus on climate distorts the attention from real problems such as migration and Islamization. However, despite this skeptical discourse, both the current and the former Czech governments remained open to compromises in their policies.

2. Under pressure: a V4 perspective

Secondly, the analysis points out that the V4 members, Czechia and Poland in particular, feel under **pressure** by the EU's ambitious policy. In the Czech context, emphasis is put on the increasingly strict measures imposed by the EU. Also in Poland, initiatives such as the increase of ETS prices put considerable financial strain on the Polish industry.

The V4 members, Czechia and Poland in particular, feel under pressure by the EU's ambitious policy.

In addition, it is felt that the **national context and specificity are not sufficiently taken into account** in the EU approach. The Czech position is that it is especially hard for its industry-reliant economy to make the transition to climate neutrality. Similarly, Poland points out that its industry structure, and especially its reliance on coal, limits the country's ability to engage in ambitious policies. It is, therefore, argued that the EU should consider the states' different starting points and transformation costs.

Thirdly, the two countries emphasize that **the current policy favors other, non-industry heavy and fossil-reliant member states** (Czechia) and that the policies are pushed by rich countries with another energy mix, notably France and Germany (Poland). To mitigate the adverse effects

of the current policies, Czechia and Poland demand more sensitivity to the national context, the inclusion of a clear impact assessment (Czechia), and cost calculation (Poland) of the EU climate policies.

Slovakia and Hungary put less emphasis on the arguments put forward by Czechia and Poland. They do, however, share the concern for **technology neutrality**. The V4 argues that countries' flexibility in choosing their own energy sources is necessary to carry out local decarbonization. According to them, flexibility guarantees that no member state is forced to make costly investments in renewable energy, which could lead to skyrocketing energy costs. As such, all V4 governments, Czechia and Slovakia in particular, have insisted that member states should have the right to choose their own energy mix and that nuclear energy and natural gas should be classified as "green energy sources" during the European Council meetings.

3. Moderation, concrete solutions, and the responsibility of global players

Besides emphasizing technology neutrality, all V4 members pointed to the potential adverse consequences of climate policies, which could harm the national and EU economy and competitiveness. While the V4 is willing to engage in EU climate policy, it is emphasized that an ambitious climate policy cannot come at the expense of economic stability, growth, and competitiveness and cannot deepen energy poverty. Thus, **economic concerns take precedence over climate action**.

In addition, all V4 states refer to the **responsibility of other global actors** in climate change. In their 2019 discourse, politicians often emphasized the limited role of the EU, which is responsible for only 9% of global carbon emissions (Eurostat 2022). Big polluters like China and India bear a larger responsibility for climate change and should, therefore, step up their efforts.

Lastly, the Czech and Polish governments prefer **concrete policies** that focus on specific problems such as droughts, land depletion, or plastic waste. These concrete environmental problems were often not painted as a consequence or a cause of the climate crisis. The solution, therefore, demands less far-reaching and costly economic restructuring, making it more acceptable to the population, local actors argued.

4. The 'nuclear' option

As highlighted above, significant emphasis is put on technology neutrality, or the freedom of countries to determine their own energy mix. Interestingly, in all V4 countries, nuclear energy is perceived as the way to bring emissions down and materialize the green transition. A possible explanation could be that replacing coal-fired power plants with nuclear has only a limited impact on the socio-energy regime⁹, as the energy production remains centralized and the regulated monopoly in production and distribution can remain in place (Wagner, Grobelski, and Harembski 2016).

Hence, for countries with coal power plants and a high proportion of electricity generation from coal, a transition that includes nuclear is often deemed beneficial. Unsurprisingly, therefore, this strategy is used in **Czechia and Slovakia**, which currently rely on both coal and nuclear power plants for their electricity production (Kochanek 2021). For **Poland**, on the contrary, the emphasis on nuclear to achieve carbon neutrality is less straightforward. Poland currently has no nuclear power plants, and transitioning to nuclear would require a costly and long-term investment.

All V4 countries currently are currently building or considering building new plants to increase the share of nuclear in their energy mix. However, the Hungarian initiative is undoubtedly the most controversial. Hungary's Russia-backed expansion of its only nuclear power plant at **Paks** has sparked criticism and raised security concerns (Morgan 2019), and neighboring Austria even took the matter to court (Kurmayer 2022).

5. Funds for change: a pragmatic approach to climate regulation

Besides reliance on nuclear energy, country analyses show that EU investments are also considered crucial to materialize decarbonization in the V4. It is, however, important to note that the debate on the climate neutrality commitment in 2019 coincided with the negotiations on the 2021-2027 **multiannual financial framework**. Consequently, the discussions on the long-term budget undoubtedly played a role in how the V4 states positioned themselves vis-à-vis the climate neutrality commitment.

⁹ the interconnection between the design of energy systems and the design of societal arrangements. It refers to the way the production, consumption, and distribution of energy are organised in the supply chain.

Czechia fears that, due to its industry-heavy economy, the cost of transition might be too high and will affect the **competitiveness** of the Czech economy in the EU. While there was no principled opposition to climate action, the government has been making the case that they do not have the financial nor administrative means and that the country would only agree to climate initiatives if it could rely on EU financing for its economy's transition. Meanwhile, in **Hungary**, the veto of the EU climate neutrality commitment in June 2019 was used as a bargaining chip to obtain more money from EU funds.

Similarly, in **Poland**, the approach to EU climate policy is transactional, with Poland, to some extent, willing to accept climate policies if the EU supports the country in its transition. However, it should be noted that, especially in the Polish case, substantial investments will indeed be necessary to materialize the just transition of the coal-powered economy.

6. Progressive voices

While the V4 countries are traditionally not at the forefront of climate action in the EU, there is an increasing consciousness that, even though the transition will be costly, the cost of non-transition might be even higher. More progressive pro-climate voices consequently also appeared in the political discourse of the V4 in the analyzed period.

For example, the main **Polish** opposition platform, the Civic Coalition, argued that the government policy lacks a long-term vision, that the transition is a necessity and opportunity, and warned that with rising emission fees, coal-fired power generation would not remain profitable. While the opposition favored more ambitious climate action, its arguments were mainly economic. Emphasis on the global threats of climate change was limited to smaller and weaker opposition groups.

Similarly, in **Czechia**, the Pirate Party presented the green transition as both a necessity and an opportunity. It further accused the then PM Babiš of hindering climate action and destroying the environment and stressed the need for Czechia to commit to climate neutrality. As in the case of Poland, emphasis was put primarily on the economic cost of non-transition for an outdated and non-competitive economy.

Interestingly, opposition to the government's climate policies was also visible in **Hungary**.

For the discussions on migration, the rule of law, and the NGEU recovery plan, the opposition had difficulties being heard in the political debate. However, PM Victor Orbán remained largely

silent on climate issues, not employing his “master frame of the declining west”¹⁰ and allowing for rare visibility of opposition voices. While there was no big debate between the Hungarian government and the opposition over the problems and solutions for climate policies, the green and democratic opposition was slightly more ambitious, rejecting the prioritization of economic growth over climate change.

7. Vetoes and Victories: climate discussions as a political tool

‘Vetoes and victories’ summarizes the last theme of this comparative analysis, which refers to the use of the climate issue as a political tool by the V4 governments. The EU negotiations on climate neutrality, in particular, were used by all governments as a political opportunity to present themselves as defenders of the national interest.

At the European Council summit in June 2019, –Poland, Hungary, and Czechia initially refused to subscribe to the commitment of climate neutrality by 2050, leading to tensions in Brussels. When **Czech** PM Andrej Babiš finally endorsed the deal in exchange for technology neutrality commitment in December 2019, he portrayed himself as a successful fighter for Czech positions¹¹. Similarly, the **Slovak** government presented the deal as a victory for all Slovaks and used its position as a tool to promote the strength of the country as a European nation¹². **Hungary** also voted in favor of the commitment in December 2019 in exchange for extra support to finance the green transition, which the government presented to the citizens as its success (Magyari 2019). Lastly, also **Poland’s** sustained opposition to the climate neutrality goal after December 2019 – resulting in the permission to achieve the EU targets at a slower pace and the creation of a fund with significant resources for Poland’s transition – was painted as a success by the governing party.

The EU negotiations on climate neutrality, in particular, were used by all governments as a political opportunity to present themselves as defenders of the national interest.

¹⁰ Orbán’s frame of the declining West is an overarching narrative that conveys the idea that Western Europe, having lost its values and mired in migration and crisis, no longer acts as a role model for Central Europeans.

¹¹ See Czech Discourse chapter published under the RevivEU project: [Research \(reviveu.net\)](#)

¹² See Slovak Discourse chapter published under the RevivEU project: [Research \(reviveu.net\)](#)

Conclusion

This comparative analysis has aimed to give an overview of the similarities and differences in the policy and discourse of Czechia, Slovakia, Poland, and Hungary. The takeaway messages are the following:

1. **The transition towards climate neutrality is more difficult in the V4 compared to some other EU states.** While the V4 countries are not frontrunners in EU climate efforts, they have shown a reasonable amount of activity to fulfill the decarbonization goals. To understand the region's preferences, one must understand the specifics of the local economy as well as the energy mix. The region is still highly reliant on manufacturing, particularly the automotive industry, and (at least in the case of Czechia and Poland) coal-generated energy. Therefore, the green transformation will likely be relatively more costly and potentially endanger a larger number of jobs. Furthermore, these countries have already undergone one difficult economic transformation in the last 30 years, making them more cautious of another economic overhaul.
2. **Climate policy has so far been largely non-politicized in most of the V4.** This is slightly different in the case of Czechia, where climate neutrality has been more salient in the public discourse, forming an outlier. However, in general, other concerns – like migration (Czech Republic and Hungary), political scandals and corruption (Slovakia), or the rule of law (Poland and Hungary) – tended to dominate the political agenda. It remains to be seen whether climate will become more politicized as concrete measures with real impacts on local economies will be rolled out.
3. **Climate policy is subjected to other policy goals.** The existence of anthropogenic climate change is usually not contested by the core actors in governments. However, climate policy is often subjected to other policy goals, including foreign policy contacts (Hungary's relationship with Russia), the strive to secure more EU funding, economic growth, innovation, and competitiveness. Sometimes, climate policy is also used by national leaders as a political tool to present themselves as defenders of the national interest or else as a justification for strong rule and national exceptionalism (as is the case in Hungary).

4. The war in Ukraine is an important factor in decarbonization.

The war in Ukraine has provided a political imperative to reduce dependency on Russia, adding additional pressure to the debate on energy transition, particularly in Central and Eastern Europe. In **Poland**, which has long neglected the issue of the energy transition, the war has provided an important impulse to search for alternatives to the current coal-based energy model, justifying policies that would not be possible under normal circumstances. Also in **Czechia**, the international developments sparked debate on energy security and the necessity to strengthen its energy independence through, amongst others, nuclear energy or diversification of energy suppliers (Nattrass 2022). In **Hungary**, the war in Ukraine equally had repercussions. The heavily import-dependent economy experienced soaring electricity and gas prices after the invasion. While the benefits from increased domestic production could be significant, the Hungarian government has prioritized foreign policy contacts over energy autonomy and climate considerations, preferring to strengthen its ties with Putin.

What do the results mean for the 2024 European Parliament elections?

The RevivEU national reports and this comparative report analyzed both the discourse and practical policy of V4 states vis-à-vis climate neutrality. In this final part, we draw implications for the upcoming 2024 European Parliament elections:

Czechia

- Climate neutrality and Fit for 55 proposals, particularly the ones related to automotive (Euro 7, CO₂ emission standards), are likely to be among the most salient topics ahead of the European Parliament elections.
- With the exception of Pirates, the main Czech political actors (ANO, ODS, SPD) are going to adopt, at best cautious, at worst alarmist discourse regarding the EU climate goals, claiming it threatens the EU competitiveness and strategic autonomy.
- As evidenced during the Czech 2022 EU Presidency, the shift in local energy mix towards non-emission sources is going to be framed mostly as a matter of energy security and independence from Russia.

Slovakia

- Climate policies have been perceived rather positively by Slovaks, but it has, so far, not been one of the main political topics. However, a recent proposal on car emission standards will likely cause new societal conflicts and make climate topics more politicized.
- EU climate policy will probably not be among the main political topics of the European Parliament election campaign.
- The Slovak Republic has invested much of its recovery plan in supporting the green economy and decarbonization. Individual measures within the country can become a topic in the pre-election debate.

Hungary

- In Hungary, the issue of climate neutrality has been deliberately kept away from the political agenda, and it is unlikely to resurface in the European Parliamentary elections campaign (though the summer heatwaves might give the issue a renewed salience).
- While the opposition will try to link the climate goals to the imperative of energy independence from Russia, the government will likely emphasize the merits of the Paks 2 project as an important contribution to that goal.
- Climate action is a rare exception that doesn't fit neatly in the opposition-government cleavages, in contrast to many cultural issues (such as LGBT rights, immigration, or gender-related matters). Though most Hungarians are committed to the cause of carbon neutrality and climate change mitigation, it is unlikely for either the opposition or the government to mobilize many voters on this issue alone.
- While some opposition parties (LMP, PM, and, to some extent, Momentum) will pro-actively try to craft a "greener" image in the eyes of the anti-Orban liberal opposition, their green agenda competes for a relatively narrow bloc of the urban middle and upper classes, whose votes are likely to splinter, as a result.

Poland

- The circumstances surrounding the war in Ukraine may make the topic of climate neutrality more relevant in Poland than in earlier years. Climate neutrality is likely to be raised mainly in the context of Poland's energy security, the war in Ukraine, and independence from Russia.
- The previously neglected topic of nuclear energy may gain importance, as the Law and Justice government has emphasized the necessity of introducing nuclear energy in Poland with its decisions in the first half of 2023.

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