

Green Wedge?

*Mapping dissent against
climate policy in Europe*

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Executive summary

This research is a first step towards mapping the climate conversation in Europe. The aim is to get a better sense of the various communities and groups that will support the European Green Deal (EGD), as well as understand the types of dissent and counter-mobilisation that will inevitably arise and risk derailing the implementation of the EGD's main policy objectives.

We were prompted to initiate this investigation against the backdrop of somewhat complacent assumptions (comforted by a number of surveys) about a large consensus across European publics regarding the climate emergency and the need to address it – especially in the aftermath of the first wave of Covid, which seems to have triggered an increased awareness of the climate emergency and fuelled a desire to 'build back better'. Our concern was that climate policy might instead become the latest populist rallying cry (potentially replacing immigration and migration as a wedge issue).

To evaluate the mobilisation potential of detractors we decided to track the online conversation around the EGD, and more broadly around climate policy in eight European countries. Our findings should give policy-makers pause for thought:

- First, **there is little public consensus on climate policy, and that whatever consensus in favour of a proactive climate policy exists, it is fragile.**
- Second, in the context of – at best – this fragile consensus, EU institutions that should be seeking to build coalitions and alliances with potential supporters in civil society are failing to do so: the conversation in Brussels stays in Brussels. There is very little engagement between the institutions driving the EGD and civil society groups and organisations. The result is that, not only are climate policy detractors critical of the EGD and mounting challenges against it, but so too are the groups that, in theory, should be allies (but, in reality, are very critical). **This means that negativity and protest are developing on either side of the issue – the EGD is too much for some, and not enough for others, and neither faction is being engaged. In the case of potential supporters, this is a real missed opportunity.**
- Third, online mobilisation is driven by emotional content that is best transmitted via memes, and various meme derivatives. It is ironic and subversive, and extremely viral. **EU institutions and policy-makers struggle to engage with the emotional charge (and generational stamp) of this content.** Hence the absence of engagement between policy-makers and civil society. This content can be found on both sides of the argument: on the side of those who seek to undermine the EGD, as well as on the side of those who feel it is too weak, and inadequate, to meet the challenges posed by climate change.
- Finally, and most importantly, we note that the climate issue is not just another issue: it has the power to profoundly reshape the European ideological landscape. **Not only is climate not creating consent, it has the capacity to fragment our political landscapes further.** We notice a significant transformation: the most widespread accusation from climate policy detractors is to accuse climate policy supporters of eco-fascism and authoritarianism. Equally, we note that climate policy supporters are increasingly on the side of restraint, constraint and the curtailment of individual choices (to protect the planet). **Progressives are redefining what progress means – and the detractors are taking up the language of freedom fighters.**

This is not just a language game: it seems to be a profound shift in the values attributed to some key democratic concepts in the context of an existential threat. Paying attention to this transformation and its generational and ideological dynamics is key for successful engagement with potential allies and to avoid accidentally fanning the flames of climate policy dissent.

Introduction

As the long tail of the Coronavirus crisis winds its way through European economies and societies, EU institutions are trying to move into recovery through transformation. The European Green Deal (EGD) is emblematic of this effort: It is at once a recognition of the greatest threat facing humanity, a commitment to facing it collectively, and a strategy to harness the recovery effort towards the greater good (stability, social justice, well-being) of the European Union. The EGD could, therefore, be the making of the next iteration of the EU. And the pandemic, despite its toll, has both shown that Europe can come together to protect its citizens, and, perhaps, revealed citizens readier than they once were for profound changes in their institutions and priorities. This project investigates what EU citizens across eight countries¹ might be ready for when it comes to climate policy. Its aim is to convey a more accurate picture of who is ready for some difficult trade-offs and who is not: a roadmap if you will, to allow decision-makers to make the most of the former and to manage and convince the latter.

Making sure that positive system-change results from the EU's chosen recovery trajectory and the EGD will depend on a deep understanding of people's motivations, attitudes and desires, and the capacity to appeal to them and frame policy change in ways that tap into the better angels of their nature; the EGD might be its biggest challenge yet. Indeed, the debate around the EGD will crystallise the paradox that Covid-19 is already revealing: the need to address deep inequalities (that will have been worsened by the crisis) and restart the economy *all the while* harnessing lessons from the crisis in order to avoid an almost inevitable, deeper one (including climate catastrophe).

Despite the expressed appetite for change, and perceived demand for climate policy, EU leaders need to think about how to secure the consent of citizens, some of whom will be – and feel – they have already been disproportionately affected by the crisis and, further, might feel disproportionately affected by any ambitious policy initiatives around climate change.

A perfect storm?

One of the dangers of the current moment is the potential for a resurgence of populist mobilisation against the EGD on the one hand, and on the other, protest by those who feel that climate policy is not going far enough. Liberal democratic governments should expect to be squeezed from two sides: by those who will argue in favour of turning the crisis into an opportunity to change our economic models, embrace a green transition and address the deep dysfunctionalities of a model that led us to the state exposed by the pandemic – and to do so more radically and more quickly than EU and national institutions are proposing; and by those who will argue that a ‘return to normal’ and the rescue and preservation of existing models of work and industry are the priority to protect citizens from further economic and social hardships. That latter camp will include people from across the political spectrum, moved by a different sense of the hierarchy of emergencies. But they will also include populists of every hue, who will not only use the aftermath of the crisis to question the fundamentals of globalisation, interdependence and multilateral institutions – but who will (a) frame ambitious policies such as the EGD as superfluous in a time of ‘reconstruction’; (b) depict the EGD as designed and led by an elite who, they will be quick to point out, might have withstood the economic consequences of the crisis better and thus will be better able to bear the cost of the green transition and, therefore, (c) argue that the EGD is yet another instance of the elite asking for a disproportionate contribution from ordinary people to secure a public good (climate policy) that may not actually be top of their list. Finally, the populists will argue that, while climate change is real, it needs to be tackled differently – thus a host of proposals will follow that are not in the ‘denialist’ camp, but will consistently attempt to blunt the instruments of the EGD, slow policy proposals down, and convince members of the public to avoid ‘buying into catastrophism’. This is already at play across Europe and stands to get much worse as the EGD and the recovery get rolled out (in the context of a set of economic crises). And this last position might turn out to be the most dangerous position of all: largely short of radicalism, but lethal in the inertia and resistance it promotes and generates. Add to this the fact that many people will feel that they have simply suffered enough – and there appears to be a perfect storm of resistance and polarisation brewing against any system change that requires immediate trade-offs and further sacrifices.

While decision-makers are not unaware of the pitfalls, there needs to be thorough work, urgently, to gather an understanding of how to secure democratic consent around these issues. We are at the very beginning of the battle: it has only barely begun, but our initial research maps the contours of the conflicts to come. This is the time to become cognisant of the map of real attitudes, and their potential for mobilisation across the European polity.

Yet, at the moment, our research suggests that not only have these questions not been answered, but, worse, policy-makers (despite their best intentions) are barely connected to civil society conversations and attitudes.

The dangerous assumption of a ‘Climate Consensus’

A number of studies have highlighted a growing public consensus around the existence of climate change and the urgent need to address it. An international comparative study by Ipsos and EDF²

carried out in September 2020 reports that across the world, while at the moment the pandemic tops most people's list of concerns, this does not erode their concerns regarding the state of the environment. The environment is in the top five preoccupations of most European countries, and also Canada, China, India and Australia (though not in Russia, the United States or Brazil). And for 62% of respondents across the world, the pandemic is linked to human activity on the environment (that view is dominant across the world, but particularly so in the global south). For the vast majority of people, what is most worrisome is climate *change* per se, and specifically the increased frequency of extreme climate events. However, according to this study, one-third of respondents worldwide do **not** think that climate change is the result of human activity (the figure for Europe is on average 33%). And a full 38% of them think that climate change has both negative and positive consequences. This is, in fact, the case for 61% of Norwegians, 51% of Swedes and 44% of Canadians.

When it comes to solutions, most publics are also a bundle of contradictions: most want the government (and, for Europeans, the EU) to drive environmental policy, and a vast majority don't think governments are doing enough – but support for measures plummets the minute these are likely to have an impact on everyday life (taxes on flights, gasoline, congestion charges, for instance). A study carried out by More in Common, notes that across seven industrial democracies, the environment is consistently the third top concern (after health and unemployment).³ And support for large-scale investment in a more sustainable economy is consistently high (ranging from 54% in the US to 77% in Italy). But in this study, too, despite the expressed hope that the environment might be the glue to bring polarised or fragmented publics together, paying higher taxes on gasoline or car ownership garners extremely low levels of support (23% in France and 43% in the UK). Again, well short of a majority. Anything involving a restriction or increased cost (on mobility, in particular), fails to secure majority support. This is worth noting given some of the arguments and narratives around freedom that we will examine later on in this report.

So, what exactly is the nature of this so-called consensus? A survey by the German think tank d|part helps to draw out its limits and why it should not be taken for granted.

The limits of consensus

The d|part study confirms that a large majority of Europeans and Americans take climate change seriously, and that a large proportion of those think that it is partly caused by human activity. But the research also reveals that a large proportion of them consistently underestimate the degree of humanity's contribution to recent climate change as well as the severity of its impact. 'There is a considerable group of "soft" sceptics who believe that climate change is caused equally by human activities and natural processes – ranging from 17 per cent in Spain to 44 per cent in France.'⁴ In the end, those who deny or underestimate humanity's contribution to recent climate change (those who think that climate change is equally, mostly or entirely caused by natural processes all taken together) are in the majority in France, Poland, the Czech Republic and the USA.⁵ Finally, the study shows that a respondent's awareness of the *human causes* of climate change appears to correlate with support for climate action. Conversely, the more respondents tend to think that this is a natural process (that has little or not much to do with human involvement) the less ready they are to act.

This is worrisome and adds a number of crucial nuances:

First, that consensus on the existence of climate change is not enough to translate into action against climate change. So, this consensus may actually mask a level of comfort, or fatalism that is not conducive to supporting active policies.

Second, this large proportion of concerned, but relatively passive, people are a soft middle: they are precisely those whose preferences are malleable enough to be affected – for the better, but also for the worse. In this respect it is worth bearing in mind people's soft attitudes towards migration and immigration, or in the UK towards Europe – until both issues were manipulated to rise in salience and become a wedge issue. This is precisely the danger with this sort of soft consensus, based on a divided position (such as climate change causes are 50% natural, 50% human).

Finally, we would argue that, even if this consensus were real, if the past few years have demonstrated anything, it is that reasonable majority attitudes are routinely overridden by the strident demands and intimidating stances of detractors. Governments can easily be overwhelmed by a loud minority, election campaigns can easily be manipulated and swayed to reflect a large minority (or to create one). The French Gilets jaunes are a case in point. The point is that it is easy to throw good will and positive attitudes off course. And that this is happening all the time and threatening to happen in Europe (where societies are fragmented, polarised by inequality and by populist forces) around climate.

The danger, therefore, is that this consensus is fundamentally fragile and 'disruptible', and that it masks a deep public conservatism that does not bode well for bold action.

1.

OUR APPROACH: DATA, CONTEXT AND INTERPRETATION

This publication marks the beginning of a project designed to achieve a better understanding of public attitudes and climate policy in eight EU countries. The aim is to use this understanding to help policy-makers develop a more realistic and effective form of engagement with the public and civil society actors around climate policy. To do this we have chosen to pay close attention to the spontaneous and unguarded conversations that take place online. This allows us to develop an awareness of new and emerging communities and movements, but also to get a sense of what prompts changes and evolutions in people's attitudes and preferences – in the context of the conversations *they* choose to have, rather than the questions *we* choose to ask.

The limits of aggregate data (or why we didn't use a survey)

For more than 80 years now opinion polls have been the yardstick of opinion research. And although polling was a considerable improvement on the way public opinion was approached earlier, it has its limits.

From our point of view, opinion polls can be problematic because they obscure two crucial aspect of the public sphere:

- **the uneven weight of different voices.** Public spaces seldom (if ever) tend towards the Habermassian 'ideal speech situation' in which everyone's voice counts equally. Some people tend to have much louder voices than others. By positing that one individual opinion equals another, opinion surveys can be misleading if they are used to gauge the strength of groups or communities, or the likelihood of an event.
- **the fundamentally dynamic dimension of public opinion.** In the pollsters' own words, opinion polls are 'snapshots'. But how helpful are snapshots when what fundamentally matters is movement? Analysing public opinion is not, or should not be, so much about mapping static forces as about measuring how things move, and how fast (especially in the world of social media and virality). In many regards, at least from the point of view of a policy-maker, opinion is often more a matter of tactics than one of strategy. Losing a battle can often lead to losing the war.

We feel that to complement the survey work (both existing and currently being carried out) it is important to measure the various, numerous 'ecosystems' of emotions that tend to overtake politicians.

There are three important points then: First, these phenomena may appear to be surface phenomena but that is not all that they are. The evidence is that they can reconfigure public attitudes quite quickly given their viral, and almost 'tidal' qualities. Most importantly, the fact that this can happen quickly does not mean that it isn't working to entrench opinions. In this respect, these apparently superficial phenomena can refashion or affect the tectonics of politics: whatever may be happening on the surface may not remain there, and can have long-term consequences for attitudes. Second, it is worth noting that attitudes are most easily 'refashionable' in people whose attitudes and emotions are 'up for grabs'. The voters with changeable minds here are those citizens who are persuadable because they are unsure. Precisely those large swathes of citizens identified in

the d|part study. Finally, these fast-emerging, fast-acting ecosystems or communities of emotion can also constrain policy actors quickly and effectively, so they need to be understood alongside the attitudes mapped and measured by surveys. Understanding them will give us a measure of what it will take to build a longer-term democratic consent that cannot be so easily undermined.

Separating the signal from the noise

Scanning the world wide web makes no sense: raw data is meaningless. Our approach is data-intensive, but we start with a theoretical perspective: rather than trawling through endless content, we know what we're looking for. In this respect our approach grants us the possibility of what anthropologists refer to as 'thick description'. We look for and then describe what we think is relevant. It enables us to distinguish the 'signal from the noise'. In a field that is very, very noisy.

In the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic, we want to understand the way in which the stakes around the EGD are evolving across eight EU countries, and across Europe as a whole. We are interested in the hidden wiring of public opinion and the ways in which various clusters of opinion are likely to constitute hurdles for the development and the implementation of the EGD, regardless of what the majority of citizens express in traditional survey data. To do this we want to investigate the way in which public opinion clusters are emerging online.

Mapping and exploring the three universes of public opinion

The research here looks at public opinion differently: it focuses on the circulation of information and the building of narratives through the collection of social data. We collect digital traces: words, pictures, videos, interactions, links, digital objects. Not to describe what is inside people's minds, but to understand the dynamics of digital public spaces and how people interact with one another, with communities and inside communities, and with institutions.

To do this we use a threefold model of public space defined by different conflicts:¹ the *hyperbubble*, the *hyperholders* and the *hypercrowd* (see **Figure 1**). This is a way of exploring a classical socio-political question: how do social cleavages, and thus conflicting interests and values, translate into the political field and, beyond, into the public space.

- The **hyperbubble** focuses on the political and administrative elite: the small Brussels scene and the only provider of 'European Green Deal' content in the narrowest sense.
- The **hyperholder** space refers to hyper-engaged interest-brokers and stakeholders in the context of a vastly complex system. In each case-study country, the hyperholders sit at the junction of politics, negotiations with industry and corporate lobbies. Precisely where there is the potential for the display of conflictual views.
- The **hypercrowd** refers to 'the people', in its various meanings, who have visible activity online, who are connected and exchanging views.

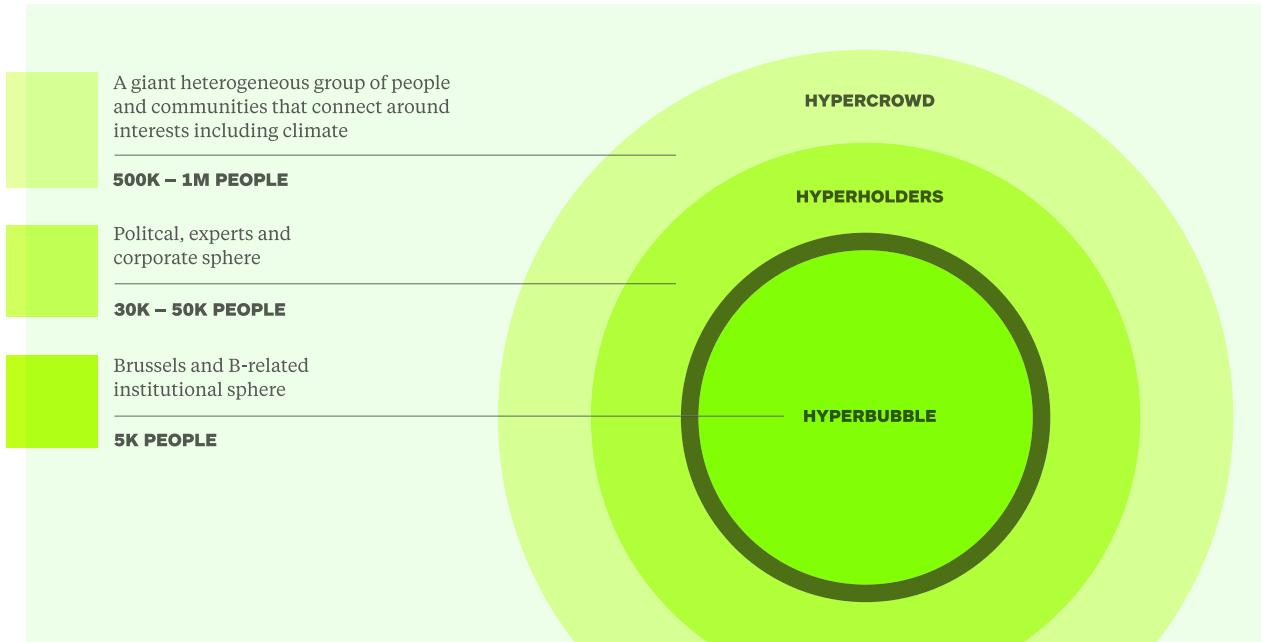


FIGURE 1. THREEFOLD MODEL OF PUBLIC SPACE

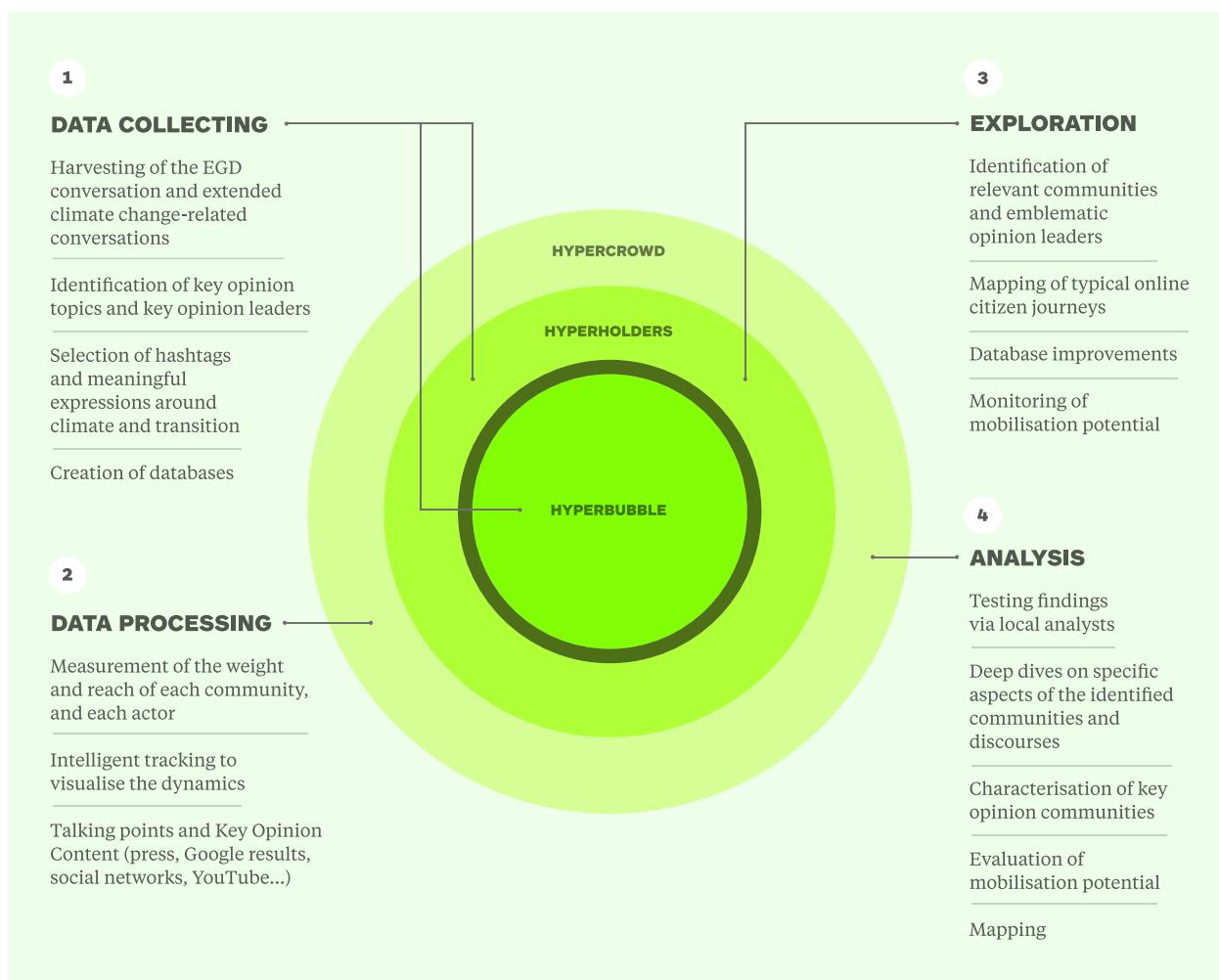


FIGURE 2. OUR MODEL OF DATA COLLECTION

By observing the fluctuation of arguments and semantics within each of these three universes and the manner in which they cross from one to the other (or not), operate and occur, and spread through communities, we are able to gradually develop an accurate understanding of the dynamics of public opinion in Europe in 2020/21.

We proceeded by identifying significant words and expressions first in the hyperbubble and hyperholder space and observed the differences in perception in each country.² We then extended the scope of our analysis to various communities (hypercrowd) identified by local analysts (see **Figure 2** for an outline of the process).

The results of our initial research led us to draw attention to two key areas: the relationships – or absence thereof – between European institutions and policy-makers and the civil society actors in the European climate conversation. This is the focus of the first half of this report (to get a sense of the nature of interactions: Who is speaking? To whom? How often? How intense are the exchanges? And what is their viral capacity?).

The second part of the report focuses more explicitly on the content and style of the conversations outside of the hyperbubble.

Subsequent reports drawing on the collection of further data and analysis will focus on the national landscapes of the eight case-study countries.

2. BRUSSELS IS TALKING TO ITSELF: ACTORS AND RELATIONSHIPS

We wanted to get a sense of how the Brussels hyperbubble (the ‘engine’ of the EGD) was shaping and influencing the conversation, who was interacting with it, and what kind of conversation was taking place.¹ So, here we are reporting across the first two spheres: the Brussels hyperbubble and the next circle out, the hyperholders (see Box 1 for a breakdown of the groups we monitored).

BOX 1. BRUSSELS HYPERBUBBLE AND THE HYPERHOLDERS

Between November 2019 and November 2020 we monitored:

183,159 people (62% men and 38% women)
 154,654 tweets and 546,988 retweets displayed potentially 5 billion times in the Twitter newsfeeds of these users
 They shared 19,184 articles and 2,111 videos
 60% of their messages were written in English

We selected a panel of 2,500 European opinion leaders specifically to observe the ‘hyperbubble’:

European Council (88 accounts)
 European Commission (328 accounts)
 EU Parliament (509 accounts)
 EESC EU (239 accounts)
 EU executive agencies (250 accounts)
 International organizations (10 accounts)
 Lobbies (195 accounts)
 Think tanks (311 accounts)
 NGOs (155 accounts)
 Journalists (452 accounts)

In terms of geographical distribution, the European Green Deal is primarily an EU – rather than a European – topic; a quarter of the speakers are in Brussels. And four countries have a dominant and equal share of the conversation: Germany, Spain, France and Italy (see **Figure 3**).

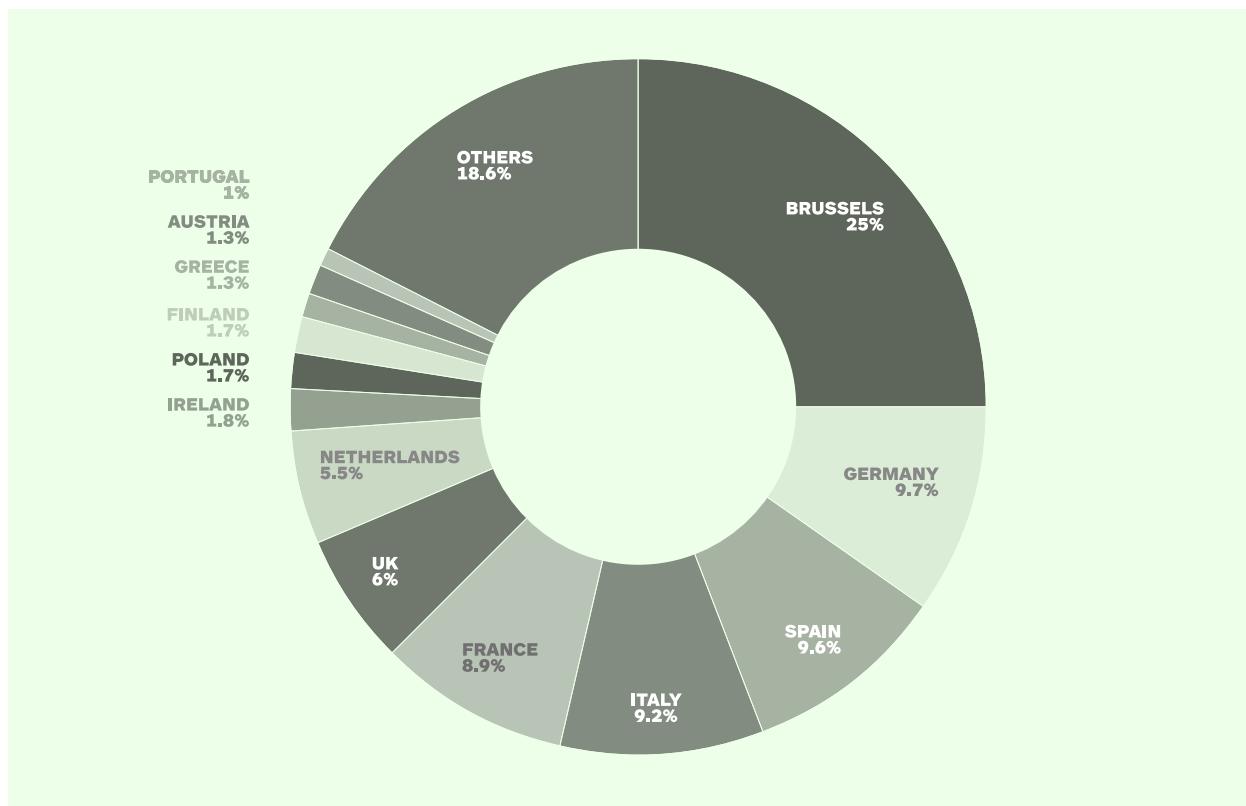


FIGURE 3. WHO IS TALKING ABOUT THE EGD?

Some of the findings were disappointing, but not terribly surprising. Some were surprising in their starkness. And some were alarming in terms of what they told us about the nature of this conversation – which is essentially a monologue.

An expert conversation

Unsurprisingly in the hyperbubble and hyperholder spheres, the framing of the discussion is by experts, for experts and around expertise – **Figure 4** shows a word cloud of the most common descriptors found in participant biographies across various social media:



FIGURE 4. EXPERTS IN THE EGD CONVERSATION

An institutional conversation...

Hardly surprising as well, but quite striking nonetheless, the EGD conversation in the hyperbubble and the hyperholder spheres is mainly an institutional conversation – driven by institutions and for institutional actors:

- The European Green Deal was talked about on 2,500 pages between September and November 2020. Among them, 100 pages published 10 posts or more about the topic.
- The top active pages show a heavy representation of national organisations involved in the debate and environmentalists, but most of these pages have very limited audiences (see **Figure 5**).



FIGURE 5. TOP ACTIVE PAGES IN THE EGD CONVERSATION

... that generates few interactions outside Brussels

Engagement with institutional pages is very low. The most followed EGD pages are those of the European Commission, but the crowd is silent.

Publications from the European Commission or the Commission's Environment Directorate-General or DG Climate get only a few likes, comments or shares, despite their 1.1 million, 275,000 and 105,000 subscribers, respectively. This can be explained by several factors:

- The posts **lack visibility** (the Facebook algorithm shows the posts to only a selection of subscribers).
- There is a **lack of interest** from the subscribers themselves (which leads to even more ‘downgrading’ or ‘selecting out’ by the algorithm).
- Finally, the **lack of engagement** (people see the piece of news, might find it interesting, but not impactful enough to react) plays a crucial role.

There is no conversation with influencers outside the bubble. In the broader conversation (beyond the hyperbubble and the hyperholder space), 15,000 speakers have more than 10,000 followers: a high number of influential people have taken part in the debate and there has been interest. **Figure 6**, which charts the distribution of participants in a Twitter discussion, illustrates the point.



FIGURE 6. DISTRIBUTION OF PARTICIPANTS IN A TWITTER DISCUSSION

The point is that if the conversation were led differently, there are plenty of – influential – people out there who are keen to engage. But at this point the conversation remains locked in the hands of the EU, and specifically of the Commission.

The graph in **Figure 7**, which charts the peaks in the EGD conversation between November 2019 and October 2020, makes the same point: peaks are driven by institutional pronouncements. Yet we can see that when a non-institutional actor (here, Greta Thunberg) does engage, they can easily rival an institutional voice.

The key would be to make sure that voices such as Thunberg's are part of the conversation and engaged with, rather than the parallel tracks we see here.

The conversation on the European Green Deal has no resonance beyond the hyperbubble, and even then, the uptake is low from within. **Figures 8 and 9** are a good illustration of this state of affairs. For the chart in **Figure 8**, we isolated the messages about the EGD coming from the hyperbubble (orange) from the whole EGD conversation (blue).

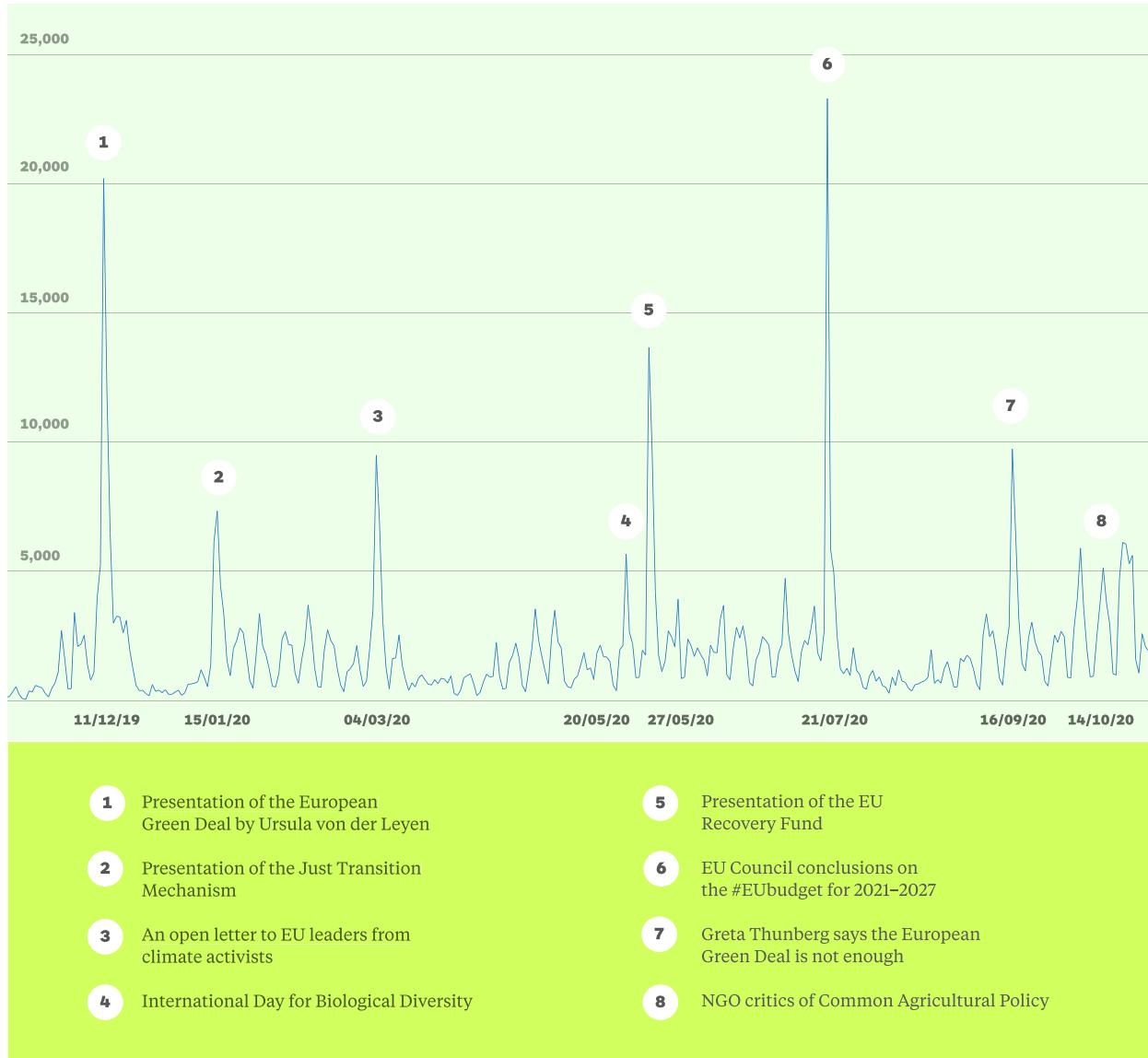


FIGURE 7. EGD CONVERSATION PEAKS BETWEEN NOVEMBER 2019 AND OCTOBER 2020

What we can see is that roughly one in four contributions (25% of the conversations) come from our hyperbubble. Their messages frame the agenda *as well as* the conversation – and the broader conversation closely mirrors theirs. This reveals a very important insight: that the conversation never develops its own dynamics, it never ‘takes off’. The fact that there are only three non-hyperbubble speakers for every hyperbubble speaker is an indicator of very low engagement. A dynamic conversation, or a debate, would be reflected by a blue line that does not mirror the orange one but, rather, has its own independent dynamics.

The cluster map in **Figure 9** illustrates the same thing differently: the dominant speakers are institutional clusters, and the hyperholders (NGOs, experts, think tanks) are on the periphery of the conversation – they are barely involved.

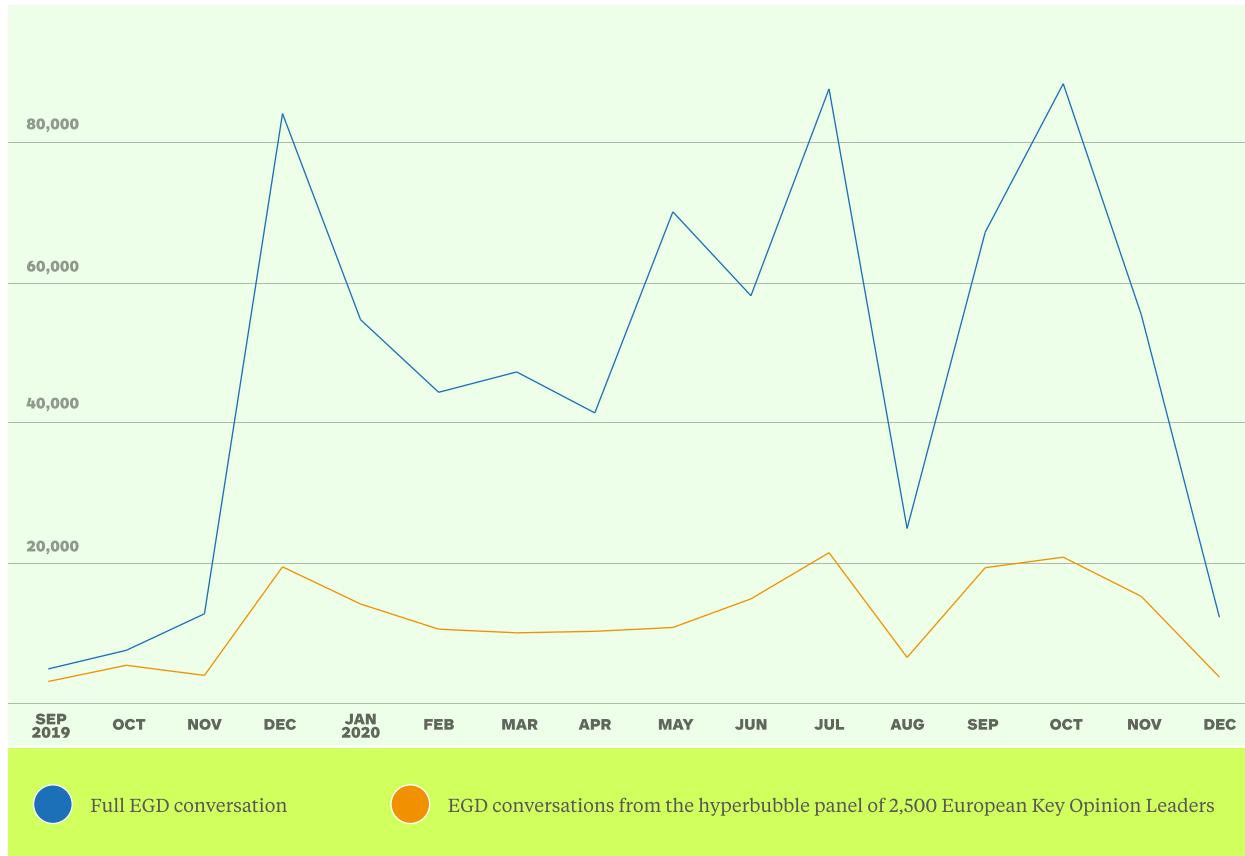


FIGURE 8. EGD MESSAGES FROM THE HYPERBUBBLE

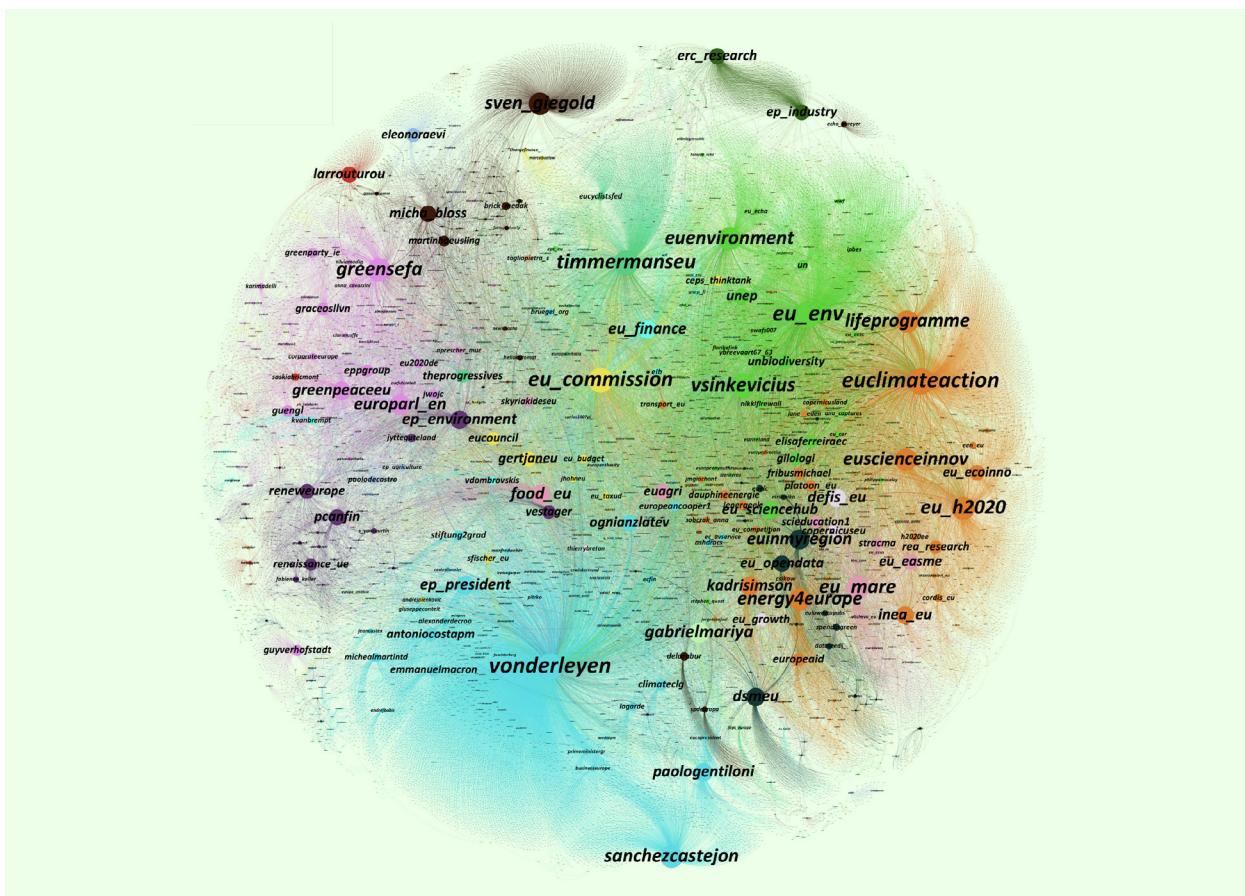


FIGURE 9. INSTITUTIONAL SPEAKERS DOMINATE THE EGD CONVERSATION

It is worth noting that the absence of discussion is not just a feature inside the hyperbubble, and between it and the rest of the public sphere. The fact is that in ordinary civil society there is little discussion of the European Green Deal (or more broadly on Europe and climate): very few mainstream media articles about the EGD were shared on social media at all between November 2019 and November 2020. And what is shared is mostly institutional content and the figures are low.

The disconnection between institutions and civil society actors

Having reached out well beyond the core constituency of the EGD (hyperbubble and hyperholders) to get a sense of citizen engagement with the issue, we decided that to access citizens we needed to extend the data collection to broader areas of discussion. We therefore chose ten keywords that seemed from our qualitative research to have more resonance: global warming, climate change/imbalance, climate emergency, carbon/energy footprint, energy performance/efficiency, energy transition, climate/environmental transition, carbon neutrality, biodiversity, Paris agreement); these allowed us to collect large volumes of climate-related conversations.

The conversations around those words and expressions in our eight case-study countries ranges from 300,000 to 500,000 tweets per month. But even with a much broader set of keywords designed to capture a broader climate conversation the disconnection between institutions and civil society remains staggering.

Two test conversations

To test the closed, monologic and non-porous nature of the institutional conversation, we focused on two² of the eight conversation peaks around the European Green Deal conversation between October 2019 and November 2020:

- The EU Recovery Fund presentation (27 May 2020).
- The vote by the European Parliament in favour of allocating funds to the energy transition followed by Greta Thunberg's Twitter comment (16 September 2020) criticising the EU's lack of ambition ('The one thing that's worse than not doing enough to face the climate emergency is to pretend that you're doing enough. #EUGreenDeal').

First conversation: the EU Recovery Fund presentation

There were 31,024 tweets shared by 18,051 people between 26 May and 31 May 2020. And most of the conversation consists of comments that do not generate any autonomous discussion. **Figure 10** shows a cluster map of this conversation.

- The first community, in purple, gathers around 15% of the volume of accounts, around the president of the European Commission. She interacts directly with the community in light green of the official account of the European Commission (13% of the volume of accounts).

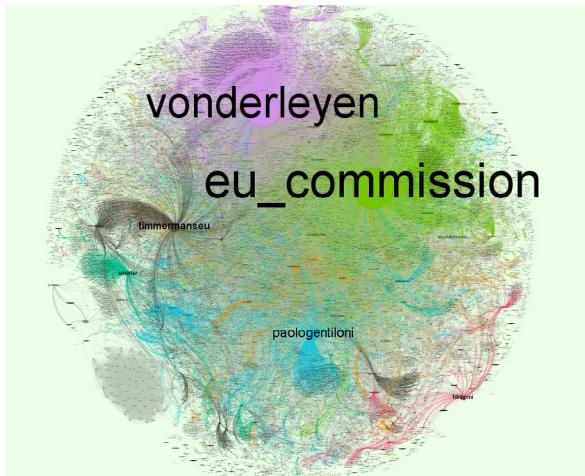


FIGURE 10. CLUSTER MAP OF EU RECOVERY FUND CONVERSATION

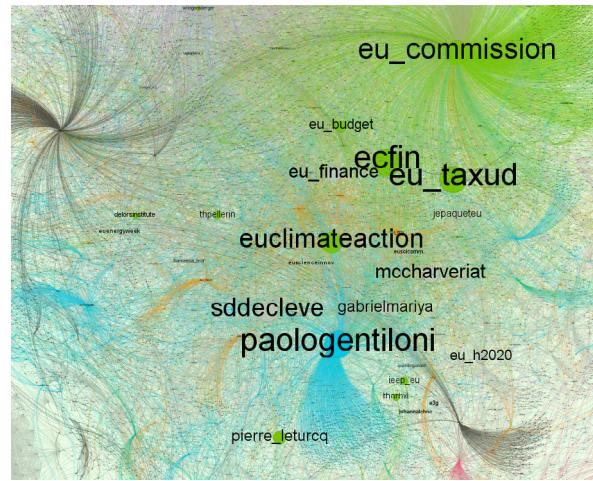


FIGURE 11. EUROPEAN COMMISSION CLUSTER MAP OF CONVERSATION



FIGURE 12. VON DER LEYEN TWITTER ACCOUNT MESSAGES



FIGURE 13. EU COMMISSION TWITTER ACCOUNT MESSAGES

- The next community in light blue (9% of the volume of accounts) is the European Commissioner for Economic Affairs, Paolo Gentiloni.
- The community marked in black corresponds to the Vice-President of the European Commission for the EGD, Frans Timmermans.

Two issues are revealed quite starkly in the European Commission cluster map (see **Figure 11**):

- The highlighted institutional accounts of the European Commission reveal a discussion limited to the hyperbubble. **No European NGO or civil society actor is at the centre of these exchanges.**
- Everyone is talking to their own community, **not to each other across communities.**

The two main communities are structured around Ursula von der Leyen on the one hand and the European Commission on the other (in other words, the same community). They account for 25% of the volume of accounts and interact almost exclusively with each other (see details in **Figures 12 & 13**).

Only a few actors from the Jacques Delors Institute (notably via Pierre Leturcq, political analyst on climate change) and other think tanks (Céline Charveriat, director of the Institute for European Environmental Policy, for instance) find their way into the European Commission community. **Figures 14 and 15** show that experts from European think tanks are linked to the European institutional sphere, within which they form a sub-community. But they, in turn, do not interact with the rest of civil society.

Paolo Gentiloni's tweet³ on the European recovery plan was very well relayed by his fellow citizens. His community (9.3% of the volume of accounts; see detail in **Figure 16**) is out of step with the rest of the exchanges, while being connected to that of the European institutions. It notably includes the former Italian Prime Minister Enrico Letta⁴ and the Italian Minister of Economy and Finance Roberto Gualtieri.⁵ Outside of Commissioner Gentiloni, the influential Italian accounts do not touch the Brussels sphere, and do not talk to each other.

Another community (in black, 6.3% of the volume of accounts; see detail in **Figure 17**), which interacts only with the official European Community account, is the constellation around the Vice-President of the European Commission for the EGD, Frans Timmermans (this community connects to the Netherlands and also includes supporters of Geert Wilders, president of the Dutch Freedom Party. The latter comments on a tweet from Timmerman promoting 'Nexit').

In orange is a community with several institutional accounts (5% of the volume of accounts), including Virginijus Sinkevičius, European Commissioner for the Environment (see **Figure 18**). His cluster map reflects his efforts to promote debate (some of which he organises) on social networks. Sinkevičius manages to engage the European Environmental Bureau on agricultural methods and we note that he integrates their community.

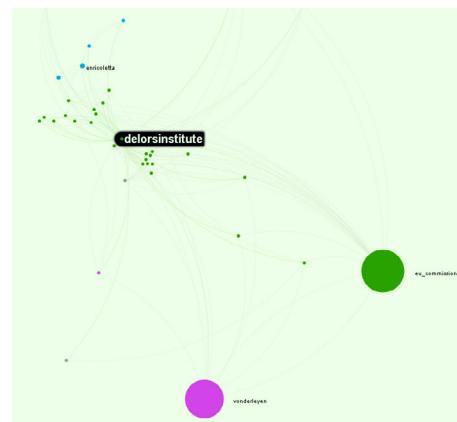


FIGURE 14. EUROPEAN THINK TANKS HAVE FEW LINKS TO EU INSTITUTIONS

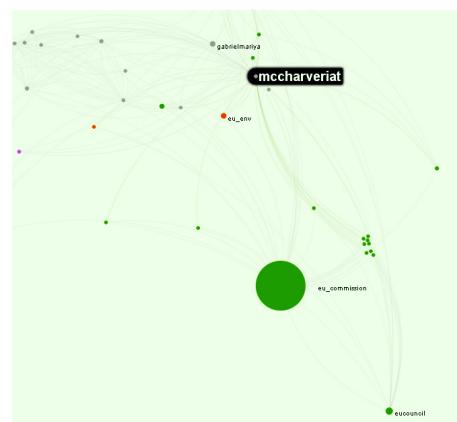


FIGURE 15. EXPERTS HAVE FEW LINKS TO EU INSTITUTIONS

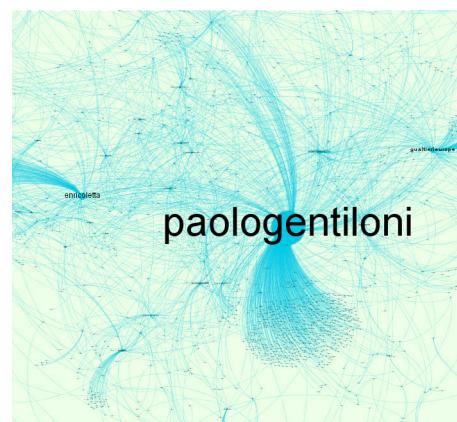


FIGURE 16. GENTILONI TWITTER ACCOUNT MESSAGES

Second conversation: The European Parliament vote in favour of funds for the green transition (followed by Greta Thunberg's critical tweet)

There were 26,716 tweets shared by 15,745 people between 14 September and 21 May 2020. Most of the conversation is around Greta Thunberg's tweet, and not about the vote, which is commented on only by experts.

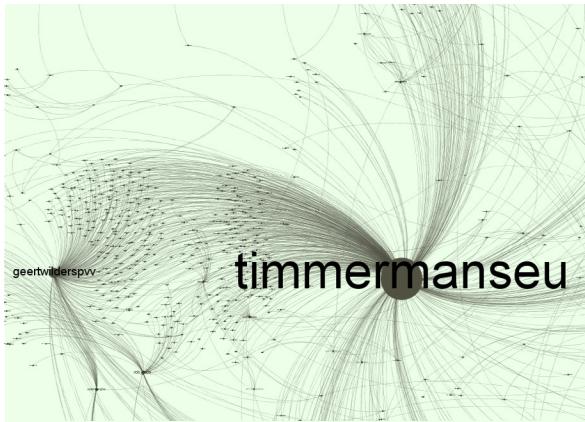


FIGURE 17. TIMMERMANS TWITTER
ACCOUNT MESSAGES

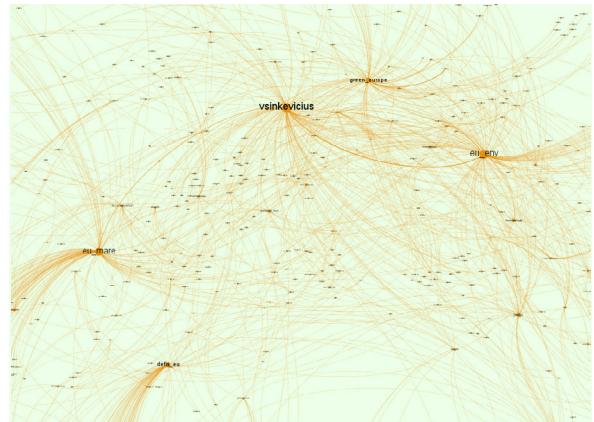


FIGURE 18. VIRGINIJUS SINKEVIČIUS TWITTER
ACCOUNT MESSAGES

The map in **Figure 19** is very striking in its spontaneous illustration of Thunberg's (the community in black at the top of the map, 8.4% of accounts) status as a watchdog and critic, but on the edge of the conversation. Like a small, detonated bomb near the main event. The activist's supporters are uninterested or at the very least not dragged into institutional communication, as shown by their disconnection.

The same two institutional communities, in purple (17% of the volume of accounts) around Ursula von der Leyen, and in light green around the European Commission (10% of the volume of accounts) are naturally highly connected. Other exchanges take place between those two, and the light blue community of DG Climate (8.7% of the volume of accounts) as well as the bright pink community of Frans Timmermans (4.7% of the volume of accounts).

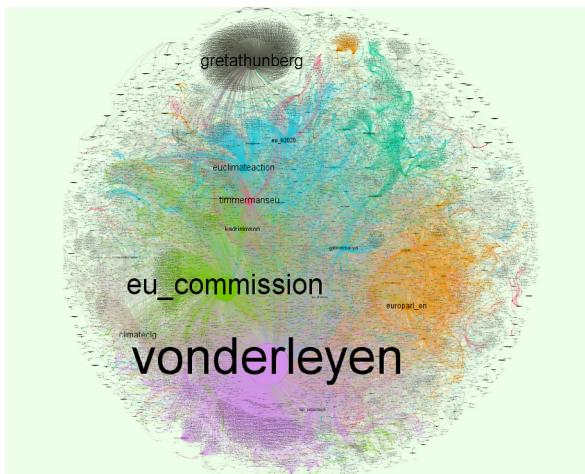


FIGURE 19. EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT VOTE FOR GREEN
TRANSITION FUNDS – AND GRETA THUNBERG'S TWEET

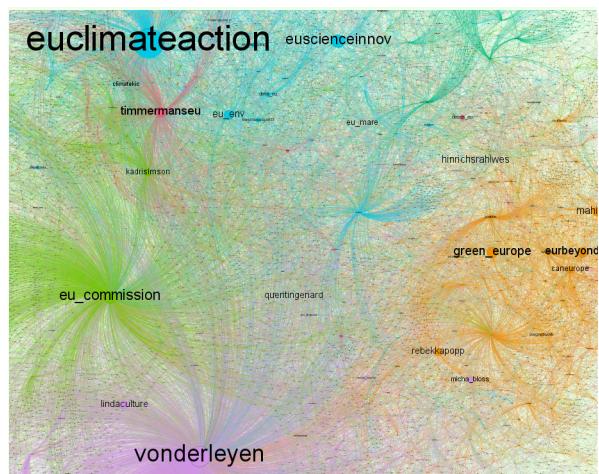


FIGURE 20. EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT VOTE FOR GREEN
TRANSITION FUNDS – AND GRETA THUNBERG'S TWEET

There is no sign of participation from specific national communities: exchanges are mostly in English (57.6%). French, German, Spanish or Italian contents are too limited to be revealing. Another sign of a hyperbubble prism.

When we zoom in, Greta Thunberg's account vanishes from the map given her peripheral position in the conversation (see Box 2). But several accounts come into focus in the orange community around the European Parliament's account (which also vanishes); see the detail in **Figure 20**. This reflects telling dynamics: a calling out of the European Parliament by environmental NGOs that criticise the allocation of funds. The strength of the calling out brings their accounts to the fore – the absence of EP response translates into the visual disappearance of the EP account, which is overwhelmed by what turns out to be one-way communication by the NGOs.

BOX 2. THE ISOLATION OF GREENPEACE AND GRETA THUNBERG

Greenpeace chose to call out the European Commission in one of its campaigns during the week of conversation we chose to scrutinise, mentioning some MEPs such as Karima Delli by name, but without much success or comeback. These exchanges are poorly relayed and are not echoed in the institutional sphere. Greenpeace looks like it is connecting to institutional accounts because they're calling them out, but once they do,

there is no answer (see **Figure 21**). More importantly: no citizens or other activists get involved to try and get a reply ('Hey you, MEPs, why don't you answer Greenpeace's question?'), which is what usually happens on Twitter and other social media.

For Greta Thunberg, this isolation from EU institutions is even more blatant (see the detail in **Figure 22**).



FIGURE 21. GREENPEACE CALLING OUT THE EUROPEAN COMMISSION



FIGURE 22. GRETA THUNBERG'S ISOLATION FROM EU INSTITUTIONS

As illustrated in **Figures 23 and 24**, and much as we had observed in our first EGD conversation peak, the communities around Ursula von der Leyen and the official European Commission's account interact almost exclusively with each other.

And the account of the European Commissioner for Energy Kadri Simson⁶ shows the lack of discussion between the institutional sphere and NGOs: although it is central between the accounts of the Commission, its President, and the DGs associated with the EGD (light blue community), it has no interaction outside this network (see **Figure 20**).⁷

The light blue community of DG Climate (see **Figure 25**) is linked to Mariya Gabriel, European Commissioner for Research and Innovation and the official account of the Horizon 2020 research

programme (EU_H2020), which focuses on hydrogen research⁸ as part of the European Green Deal.

Frans Timmermans also has his own community that interacts with the other three institutional communities of the EU (see **Figure 26**).



FIGURE 23. THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AND COMMISSION TALK ONLY TO EACH OTHER



FIGURE 24. THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AND COMMISSION TALK ONLY TO EACH OTHER

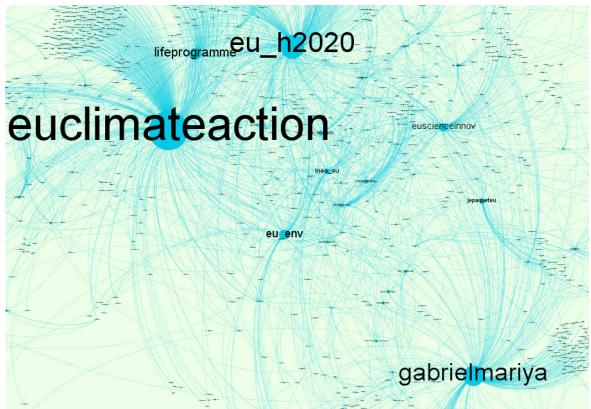


FIGURE 25. MARIYA GABRIEL, EUROPEAN COMMISSIONER FOR RESEARCH AND INNOVATION, TWITTER ACCOUNT ACTIVITY

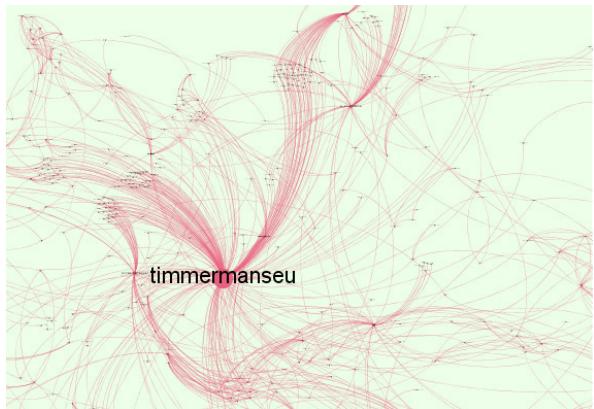
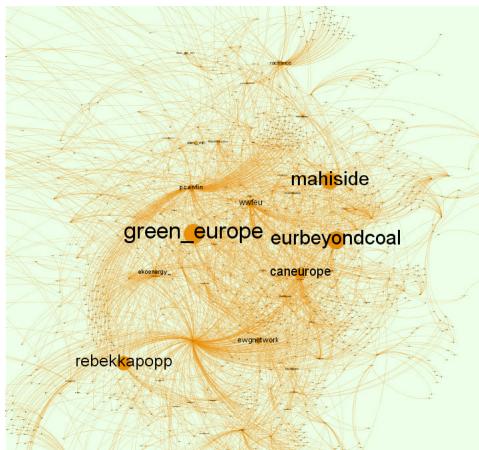


FIGURE 26. FRANS TIMMERMANS' TWITTER ACTIVITY

More insights on the relationship between Brussels and European civil society

The European Parliament: targeted by NGOs but unresponsive

The European Parliament is mentioned often in the linked communities marked in orange as several NGOs target it in their campaigns (see detail in **Figure 27**). They are therefore in the same community, with a high centrality score, despite low reciprocal mentions. But as we can see there is no engagement from the EP, as it doesn't appear connected to them:



**FIGURE 27. EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT
FAILING TO ENGAGE WITH NGOs**



**FIGURE 28. NGO INFLUENCE DOES NOT
MATERIALISE IN THE PUBLIC DEBATE**

- Green Europe,⁹ the largest European network of pro-environment NGOs, calls for concrete actions for the environment.
- Europe Beyond Coal,¹⁰ an alliance of European civil society actors to end the use of fossil fuels, is lobbying to ensure that the transition fund does not finance fossil fuels.
- Climate Action Network Europe,¹¹ another alliance of NGOs to fight climate change, is very critical of the European Parliament's action on climate.
- Also of note is a thread by researcher Rebekka Popp¹² of the think tank E3G (Third Generation Environmentalism), who criticises the possibilities of using the fund for natural gas projects.

Weak NGO coordination and impact

Among the various NGOs calling out the European Parliament, only the Green Europe network manages to penetrate the institutional community, but this remains very limited (see **Figure 28**). NGOs share their network and benefit from their supporters' engagement but their influence isn't materialised in the online public debate.

The EU's institutional sphere appears to be open only to interest groups and think tanks – but think tanks are isolated from the rest of civil society

The institutional discussion at EU level is closed. This dynamic appears clearly in the maps shown in **Figures 29 and 30**: such maps are evidence of what the Pew Research Center typology refers to as a 'tight crowd',¹³ a network of highly interconnected experts who know and mention each other. Corporate think tanks and lobbies are part of it.

No obvious traffic manipulation

When we calculated the Twitter manipulation coefficient¹⁴ on both the European recovery plan conversation (15.3, low) and on the Parliament/Greta Thunberg conversation (16.4, low), there did not appear to be any manipulation of exchanges. Many users retweet abundantly,

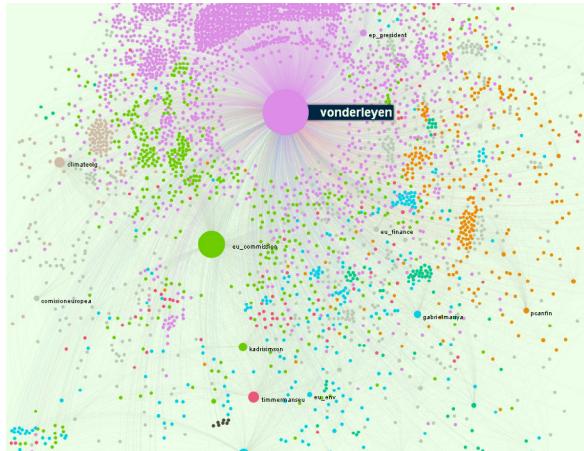


FIGURE 29. A TIGHT CROWD 1

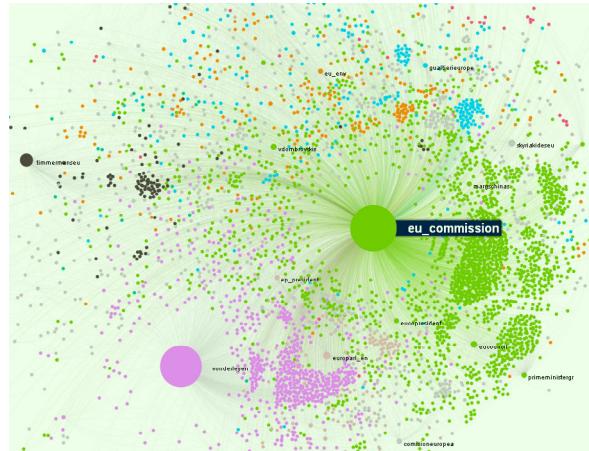


FIGURE 30. A TIGHT CROWD 2

but without being linked to each other or to other actors. This is the same for both conversation peaks.

This is hardly surprising considering the institutional domination of exchanges and the isolation of NGOs and civil society actors – in such a configuration, influential covert influence operations are too dangerous because the routes are too direct (and therefore too easy to spot and trace). Such manipulation needs the opacity generated by complex and active debate, which is precisely what we are not (yet) seeing. But we venture two predictions: that these will become frequent as disagreement takes hold and conflict escalates, and that visual memes will be the battlefield of predilection much as it was in the recent US elections.

Negativity reigns supreme

In the broader EGD conversation, negative content is shared far more than ‘positive’ or ‘pro-climate policy’ content.

Out of the top 50 most-shared articles about the European Green Deal between October 2019 and November 2020 (beyond which the sharing volumes are relatively low), we find:

- 20 European institutional publications
- 20 generalist press articles: mostly factual, sometimes critical, very rarely enthusiastic (although ‘save our trees’-type headlines generate more shares than neutral headlines). This is a noteworthy point: neutrality is the least effective register. This is something to keep in mind in a field where science and technical knowledge might tend naturally towards a neutral (scientific or institutional) stance.
- 10 green activist opeds, including the two most-shared articles of the year
 - Climate strikers: Open letter to EU leaders on why their new climate law is ‘surrender’ (3 March 2020): a potential readership of 14 million, based on the reach of these 1500 people whose cumulative audience reaches this figure¹⁵

- European Green Deal must be central to a resilient recovery after Covid-19 (9 April 2020): a potential readership of 7 million¹⁶
- (the tenth most-shared item dropped to a potential readership of 500,000)

One thing that appears to define the EGD conversation, and more broadly the climate conversation, at the moment, is a singular lack of engagement and enthusiasm: and it is so, mainly, because it is a conversation still driven by EU institutions (which are poorly connected to those communities that might be interested), and because the mainstream press provides what might be referred to as a ‘casual chronicle of a world falling apart’ (the latest figure about the melting of the ice caps, the extinction of a species, or the vanishing Siberian permafrost). This offers the possibility of a consensual plea in favour of the planet, but not much else. What is worth noting at this first stage of results is that this lack of engagement across institutions and groups, as well as between civil society actors, seems to be at play at the national level too (and will be investigated subsequently).

A second important point needs to be made here, and that is that not all content is created equal. EU institutions use a register that does not seem able to rival the virality (and reach and dynamism) of *user-generated* climate-related content.

For example, the comic strip in **Figure 31** was shared nine times on the author’s Twitter account, five times on his 570k-fan Facebook page, but reshared thousands of times on all platforms with personal comments. Such content is an opportunity for people to express an emotion (in this case nostalgia, regret, etc). It’s not the content that goes viral, it’s the emotion.



FIGURE 31. SILVER LINING

3. CONTENT, STYLE AND COMMUNITIES IN THE CLIMATE CONVERSATION

The virality of emotions and the use of memes

Our research highlights a fundamental issue for EU institutions: that not only is there a lack of engagement between EU institutions and the rest of civil society, but that this lack of engagement is also due to the nature of the register used by institutions, institutional actors and policy-makers. If EGD policy-makers and politicians want to engage in productive conversations with citizens (productive in the sense of informative and commitment generating) and shape forthcoming debates around the EGD, they must take into account that what travels is emotional content. Most activists know this – as do most populists.

Years of populist politics have made us wary of what feels like ‘too much emotion’ – or at the very least too much emotionality. On the other hand, what we know from research in psychology and neuroscience is that emotions are key to action: that facts and emotion combine to create commitment and produce action. Daniel Kahneman’s work on how the two systems (emotional and analytical) always work together to produce behaviour is central to our understanding of political action.¹ The success and virality of memes is a further illustration of how effective the fusion of an analytical message with an emotional appeal tends to be.

Remaining in what one might call ‘broadcast mode’ simply does not create the kind of conversations and engagement that will create online interest, and beyond that, awareness and commitment.

Despite attempts to engage with the institutions (both EU and national), NGOs are faced with an institutional lack of dialogic ability. Institutions have never been very good at engaging citizens – indeed they have seldom wanted to. But in a world where a disengaged citizen is often a citizen who can be more easily manipulated, and in the context of wicked problems that demand collective action – then institutions must learn to engage. Faced with pure broadcast rather than dialogue, the NGOs will tend to retreat and ‘do their own thing’. From a strategic perspective this is a huge lost opportunity both to shape the debate, and also to build relationships with NGOs and their members (as well as their quiet supporters) that can go beyond broadcasting policy announcements that are met with criticism.

By remaining in broadcast mode, the dynamic requirements of engagement are not met, and the conversation never actually happens. In other words, the institutions remain isolated and incapable of shaping attitudes. Furthermore, shying away from a more emotionally engaging register allows detractors to sway that soft middle layer of citizens who are divided on the issue.

In this respect, our research shows the growing – and extremely effective – use of visual memes to trigger emotional reactions, engagement and community. As An Xiao Mina puts it in her volume *Memes to Movements*, ‘a meme is an invitation’.² And invitations are difficult to resist because they fundamentally appeal to our desire to participate and belong.

The various uses – and the success – of a meme like Pepe the Frog illustrate the importance of visual as well as text-based material. Visual memes can travel faster and more seamlessly than hashtags and texts. They create an opportunity for constant adaptation and exchange. With fewer rules than text – a more ‘cobbled together’ approach, in the sense of images and text that can be

consumed and refashioned and repurposed quickly – they are transformable, but also more easily consumable by an audience that is vastly more susceptible to visual rather than textual culture. Not just because our brains process visual content much faster than text, or because most people are visual learners anyhow – but also because memes tap into mimicry and repurposing of content, which is the kind of learning and production that Millennials and GenZ are much more naturally drawn to. As one author puts it, drawing on Dawkins' theory of memes: 'Memes are particularly salient online because the internet crystallizes them as artifacts of communication and accelerates their distribution through subcultures'.³ For digital natives these artefacts of communication are not just a strand of our civilisation – they are civilisation. The lack of attribution, their authorless-ness and their essentially coproduced nature make them the 'artefact' of choice for younger publics.

A look at the two types of content (see **Figures 32 & 33**) grants us a glimpse of what works and what doesn't work:

The photograph in **Figure 32** is designed to induce fear, but it is quasi-factual in its delivery of documented proof. And, while it may be making an argument about life on earth – it is not making an argument about the life of the person who will be receiving it. As we note, that particular Facebook page has in excess of 1 million fans. But the post is static – it does not trigger much engagement or sharing. The content in **Figure 33** is a natural meme: it has a designed space for mashing content; anyone receiving it can rewrite the message and make it theirs, anyone can be part of the telling of the joke. And many people will 'not get it' and may be excluded. Some will get it and be offended. Both outcomes are good outcomes for engagement – one creates a larger a community of purpose, and the other amplifies the virality as people disagree with it. The fact that the person in the meme is a well-known, well-liked TV sitcom personality (whose character has a subversive side beneath an apparently harmless exterior) adds to its subversive power.

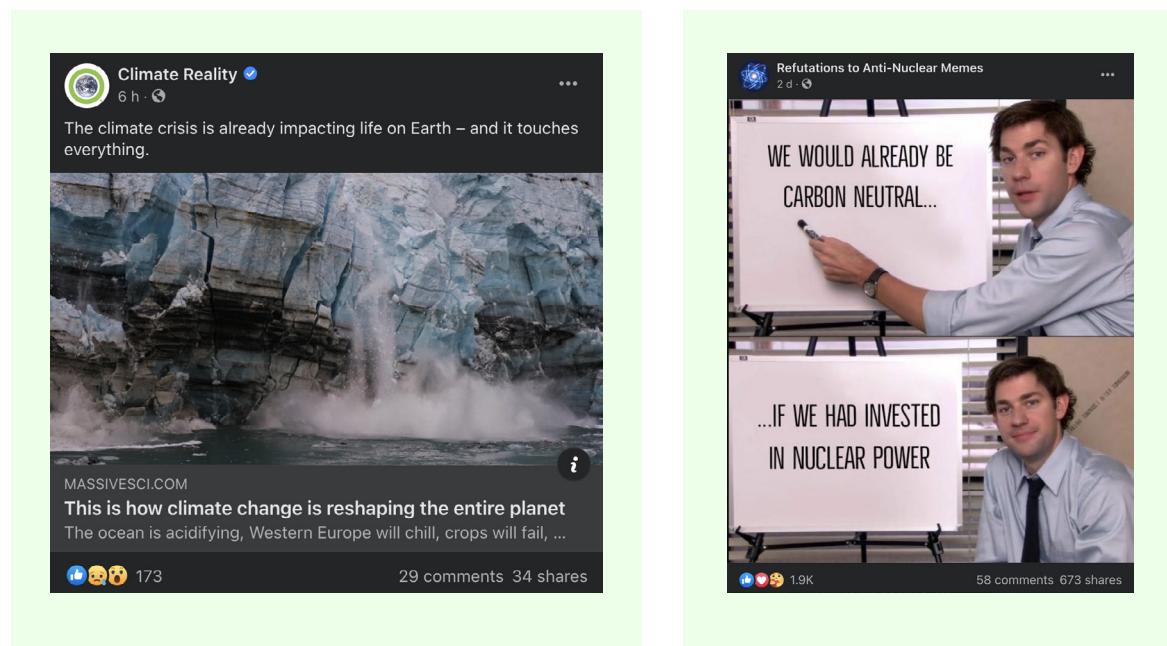


FIGURE 32. FACEBOOK PAGE WITH 1 MILLION FANS
BUT LOW ENGAGEMENT

FIGURE 33. FACEBOOK PAGE WITH 50K FANS
BUT HIGH ENGAGEMENT

Looking at memes around climate change gives us a clue as to the emotional (and therefore ‘triggerable’) communities that are emerging in the margins of the mainstream discussion. It is – for now – impossible to measure the impact of memes (especially as the content is often reposted on the dark net, or at least private groups). But some of our data does give an acute sense of the power of meme virality.

The selection of memes shown in **Figures 34–40** illustrates first and foremost the register within which memes operate: all of them are subversive through irony.⁴ The ironic charge is profoundly subversive because it posits the opposite of what is being said in the first degree – the irony makes it, *de facto*, non-mainstream. Second, the irony provides a detachment – a space between the humour and the gravity of the situation or the anger felt – that allows all sorts of other meanings and emotions to creep in or be read in but also written in by others. Because they are ironic and tongue in cheek (as well as suggestive rather than prescriptive) they are a key weapon in semiotic ideological warfare. They offer the possibility of laughing at those in power, of opening new spaces where non-mainstream ideas are expressed with the plausible deniability that goes hand in hand with their suggestive rather than explicit nature. This is also what gives this new political discourse, which marries words and visuals that can be infinitely adapted, its unparalleled plasticity, and its virality.

Finally, ‘Getting it’ – the joke, the insult, the nudge – also demands of the reader an implicit allegiance with the community. In this respect, a meme is a great tool to ascertain the contours of a community or potential community – but also to let the shapeshifting of the meme broaden the network and create new communities. In other words, memes are an extremely effective mobilisation tool.

One striking aspect of meme culture is that every meme functions like a dramatised vignette. And each meme author is a mini drama producer or director. Over time others contribute or repurpose the meme, add actors, subtract them, change the script, the narrator, the ending or the premise. It is no wonder that this multi-platform, co-produced form is the tool of choice for younger activists.

The selection of memes in **Figures 34–40** illustrates the ironic and subversive register across climate memes (both pro- and anti-), as well as some of the key ‘dramatisation’ vignettes that recur in the vast climate ‘meme world’.



FIGURE 34. DESPAIR DRAMA MEMES

Despair drama

Despair drama puts forward the hopelessness of a situation. The aim of the meme is not to inform, but to highlight absurdity and the blindness 'of others' and then the resigned despair of the author. This is an inevitability brigade that blames others and relaxes into catastrophe (see **Figure 34**).

On the side of climate policy detractors, it sometimes takes the form of 'apocalypse irony' (see **Figure 35**).



FIGURE 35. APOCALYPSE IRONY MEMES

Anti-boomer drama

The message here is about blaming previous generations – namely boomers who had it too good and are leaving behind a wasteland. But are unrepentant. See **Figure 36**.

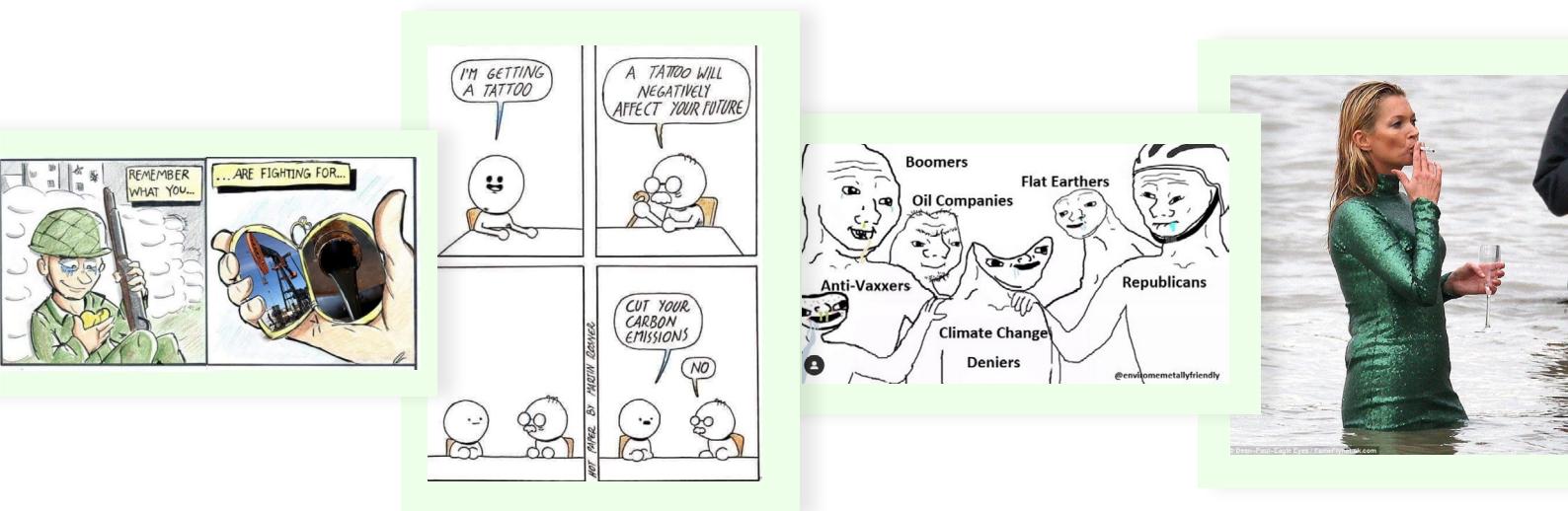


FIGURE 36. ANTI-BOOMER DRAMA MEMES

Icon bashing

Attacks on Greta Thunberg abound – in meme world they tend to take the form of accusations of duplicity (she's in it for the money and the fame), a long-running accusation of being the manipulated plaything of the rich and powerful, or a spoilt little girl demanding the impossible (see **Figure 37**).

Greta-bashing is a world-wide sport. But others get their fair share too (Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Al Gore, to name but two). Climate policy dissenters are particularly interested in revealing climate change activists to be in thrall to false prophets and therefore easily swayed into believing lies, falling into hysteria and mobilising. The message is that they are easy prey.



FIGURE 37. ICON-BASHING MEMES

Capitalism drama

Capitalism is another issue on which both pro- and anti-climate-policy protesters tend to converge (see **Figure 38**). For the former, climate change can be addressed only through a fundamental and wholesale reappraisal of humans' relationship to natural resources and to each other. Capitalism as the framework that regulates the relationship is designated as the prime culprit. No systemic planetary change can occur without a change of system. The accusations therefore tend to centre on the fact that climate change will never be a priority for capitalist institutions (be they private, or public institutions that work within capitalist economies) that will always privilege growth at the expense of the rest. For those mobilising against climate policy, accusations are levelled against political institutions (in capitalist settings) that stand to gain from bringing in climate policy.



FIGURE 38. CAPITALISM-BASHING MEMES

Failed futures

One of the recurring themes online, but even more so in the galaxy of memes, is an emphasis on a failed vision of the future. This area dovetails somewhat with boomer bashing – but it is more explicitly about having confiscated the future of future generations (across species) (see **Figure 39**). Each of the featured vignettes performs a number of tasks: each can highlight several aspects of the drama: cruelty, nonchalance, misplaced surprise, blindness, recklessness.



FIGURE 39. FAILED FUTURE DRAMA MEMES

Everyday science dramas

Cutting across both camps, memes about the use of science and appeals to evidence are a dominant feature of the world of memes (see **Figure 40**). They fall mainly into three categories: accusing the other side of misreading any signal for a catastrophe (as is suggested by the leaning tower of Pisa meme); accusing the other side of misunderstanding the world around them; ignoring the basic facts, or the basic numbers.



FIGURE 40. EVERYDAY SCIENCE MEMES

Two points are particularly relevant for our next section, but also for the research going forward: the first is that the memes dovetail with what we see emerging across the online presence of the communities we are tracking – the fault lines are clear, they are generational, they revolve around key personalities (and personality bashing as well as ‘personality cults’), they point to key issues such as the role of capitalism, versions of social justice. But, also, a different relationship to time (the future is a scary and lonely place): the past is depicted as having ‘fallen into the wrong hands’; progress and autonomy no longer hold the same sway, and no longer bear the Enlightenment hallmark of being intrinsically linked to each other. There also appears to be a different relationship to risk and catastrophe: while accusations of hysteria are rife, assessments of impending doom can seem weirdly cold and detached (see the despair drama memes, **Figure 34**, or failed future drama memes, **Figure 39**). The mix of gravity, irony and resignation feels relatively new, and cannot but highlight the gap between the emotional and tonal register of the online activist conversations (on both sides of the climate issue divide) and those of the institutions and policy-makers.

The second important point at this stage is that one key characteristic of memes is their plasticity and their capacity to travel. This is interesting because the communities we are observing are not particularly open. In fact, if anything characterises them it is that they tend to be relatively defined

rather than endlessly malleable. This may change over time (most of these communities are quite new and therefore have not had time to mature, splinter or ‘flirt’ and integrate very much with one another). Their messages are still relatively tight, as are the groups. But memes travel and are repurposed. So, it is worth tracking how memes might connect communities online in ways that might be more difficult offline and create bridges where none exist at the moment. The plasticity of memes might offer the opportunity for the occasional alliance or joint action. In this respect memes could provide the elision that brings disparate (and not necessarily allied) groups and communities together under the cloak of ambiguity. Which is precisely what EU policy-makers and institutions seem to be incapable of doing. What begins to emerge as a picture is a real asymmetry of style and content: with institutions at odds or irrelevant to the actors and communities engaged in climate action – whether they be in favour of or against.

Communities and emerging narratives

When we scanned active speakers around the climate issue in our eight selected countries, we spotted 37 particularly engaged communities and analysed their positioning, reach, mobilisation tools and potential.⁵ We have not included established political parties – however, they too (especially on the populist right) conform to the key themes outlined below. We preview a selection of the communities we will be following and monitoring over the next year, and who do not operate – or at least organise – in the full glare of the mainstream media. They have been selected because they are emblematic of the kinds of communities we find around the climate issue (even when their initial focus is not climate policy) and are representative of the political and social ecosystems that policy-makers need to be cognisant of. This is a cross-cutting view of the type of mobilisation that we see across Europe, and a lens through which to evaluate and anticipate the kinds of themes and resentments that are likely to be triggered as policy unfolds both at the EU and the national level, as well as the style and content to which detractors will resort.

Five key attitude clusters can be spotted across the 37 communities we have zeroed in on:

- An anti-climate stance that is largely about anti-progressivism.
- A fundamental mistrust in institutional positions on climate (both from pro- and anti-climate policy movements).
- A shared reverence for science and evidence.
- A generation of (mostly, but not all, young) activists that is explicitly connecting the climate change issue to the issue of social justice. It is worth noting that the pro-climate social justice movement is mainly led by younger activists and in those cases, social justice and generational justice are two sides of the same coin. In a debate where generational lines are live (as illustrated by the use of anti-boomer memes (see **Figure 36**) and by the style and tone of the mobilisation).
- A set of attitudes and communities that use the climate issue to articulate the nexus between the local and the global.

Anti-progressivism

Across our case-study countries, we can identify an anti-climate policy attitude that is largely unified in its ultra-conservativeness in the sense that its main aim is to take on ‘progressives’ (meaning those arguing for the distribution of the fruits of progress to the greater number – including economic goods, but also social goods such as emancipation from the constraints of sexuality, gender, background, race). In this reactionary view of the world, climate policy is perceived as one more liberal aberration.

Most of these communities (though not all) are also ultra-nationalist. The conservative and nationalist movements of Central and Eastern Europe (where an overall anti-European and climate-sceptic discourse dominates) find an echo in other mobilised communities in southern European countries such as Italy and Spain.

Their main opponents, in climate matters, are the pro-climate-policy left activists who are considered dangerous radicals, as well as EU institutions who are held as far too interventionist, and excessive – if not oppressive – in their regulatory zeal.

When it comes to demographics, values or fields of expression, this stance encompasses a plurality of communities. It can be shared by ‘soft-pro-climate’ (people who are not anti-climate policy but are put off by any kind of radical activist stance on climate), pro-technologists (who think that the climate crisis is real but can be ‘fixed’ by technology), climate-sceptics, conservatives and libertarians (who view climate policy as interference), right across radicals to moderates.

Pro-climate policy *activists* are discredited for a variety of reasons: for being too extremist or alarmist, or for not properly taking the economic stakes into account; or for not proposing the right solutions (because they are perceived as ‘anti-progress’ or ‘backwards’); for hindering individual liberties; or, lastly, for fighting the ‘wrong emergency’.

We show two examples of such communities – the Czech Reformy online magazine and community (**Figure 41**), and the French ‘Blabla 18–25 ans’ forum, whose young members are mainly unified in their loathing of ‘the left’ (**Figure 42**). Climate is not a priority topic, but when it is, they vigorously reject what they take to be green one-track thinking.

Neither of these communities is focused on climate, but they mobilise – in quite different ways and across different demographics – against climate policy to raise suspicion against the media and institutions, and in the case of Blabla 18–25, against ‘politically correct’ policy. Yet another illustration of climate being used as a wedge issue by groups who seek to weaponise it in order to draw voters and citizens away from rival parties and groups.

Distrust in institutions cuts across the conversation

The rejection of institutions is a hallmark of our current political era. However, it is particularly interesting in the case of climate change narratives, because it is the posture that most clearly cuts across the pro- and anti-climate-policy movements and communities. Criticism against

institutions ranges from mild mistrust (in particular, of EU institutions), all the way to complete loss of confidence in institutions and elites.

Anti-institutional communities can be grouped into three distinct types of communities:

- Conservative and populist movements represented by lower-middle-class actors whose interests and concerns are not represented by institutions. Communities are characterised by a general 'anti' posture on a whole set of subjects (climate, immigration, Europe...) and by conspiracy theories.
- Anarchist and/or libertarian communities who view institutions as oppressive, and whose discourse is also largely one of institutional and media conspiracies.
- Some climate activists who despair of institutions being able to deliver real, effective and radical climate policy.

What brings them together is their belief in the incompetence, opacity and corruption of institutions. Their existence is worrisome because they will act in a pincer effect against national and EU institutions who will be attacked on both sides and will struggle to find a balanced way of delivering policy and of communicating about policy. Developing a different way to engage with the EGD and making sure that the conversation is as inclusive as possible is one of the only ways in which this mistrust of institutions can be tackled: find civil society organisations with whom you can interact and make them co-producers of the debate.

Distrust in institutions manifests itself differently. For those groups such as Stop Europa (see **Figure 43**), and a host of other anti-EU groups, who use climate as a wedge issue, climate is one more weapon in their arsenal as they take to task the EU, and their national institutions. The issue of climate replaces – or works alongside – an issue like immigration or the refugee crisis. It is used to discredit EU institutions and that is the main aim.

For pro-climate activists, the lack of trust in institutions is a secondary stance – mainly a byproduct of their interaction with them, or of institutional failure to deliver in climate terms. This should both alarm us and give us hope. Alarm us because it suggests that across the spectrum there is a reservoir of defiance against EU institutions. It should, however, reassure us in that for the pro-climate policy activists, the rejection of EU institutions is not an intrinsic or defining stance. The relationship can be repaired if it can be shown that the institutions are acting in good faith and that the relationship is/could be productive.

The appeal of science and the draw of evidence

The scientific and technical nature of environmental issues and environmental policy means that all communities are tempted to bring science and evidence to the table in support of their positions. The nature of the debate brings together diverse communities ranging from pragmatic communities to technophiles, via activist scientists. There does not seem to be a significant anti-science movement (at least not in Europe). Rather, science – or views and figures that are made to pass for

science – is used to support different positions. Science is the battlefield, and scientific arguments are the weapons of choice. Indeed, some of the communities we observed are led by strong scientific personalities, and most of them share a common belief in technological progress to save the planet. But this belief may well lead them to call into question any climate policy that does not give exclusive primacy to science (for example, ‘cleanness’ and affordability of nuclear energy should not be disregarded on the grounds of public discomfort with the risks associated with it).

Against militant remarks deemed too ‘extreme’ and emotional, these communities advocate a hyper-rational, evidence-based discourse while highlighting the shortcomings of institutions.

These techno-optimists curate and share innovative initiatives to resist climate change and their content is highly viral, even if the promoted projects aren’t always serious.

France’s version of this position and type of community is emblematic of the country’s reliance on nuclear energy (and the difficult debate to which this gives rise at the national level). The leading figure of Jean-Marc Jancovici brings together a large community of online fans (see **Figure 44**). He regularly promotes nuclear energy, by mixing dry technical erudition with entertaining provocation. This combination has allowed him to grow a huge fanbase – much larger than that usually associated with a scientific expert.

Another issue around which science and evidence are often articulated is the role of economics. A number of movements advocate the primacy of economic issues over climate issues – and this across the pro- and anti-climate policy communities. The argument around the primacy of economics can bring together apparently opposing types of communities – liberals (to libertarians) like the ‘Ze’ in France, who believe the market will drive adaptation, and conservative (to nationalist) communities like PrawicowyInternet or Konfederacja fans in Poland, whose priority is national economic preservation, and who argue in favour of protectionist policies.

But economic issues are not the preserve of the anti-climate policy communities: these issues also cross into pro-climate policy communities that claim to have a ‘pragmatic approach’ (in France this is sometimes code for a pro-nuclear stance).

For example, the Danish ‘climate realists’ use scientific arguments, facts and figures to argue that climate activists are ‘going too far’ and that their recommendations would severely jeopardise economic growth (see **Figure 45**). Often the argument also goes hand in hand with an accusation of backwardness – pro-climate activists are accused of wanting to give up on progress and comfort and ‘go back to candle-light and horse-drawn carriages’. This community argues that rationality should be the only guide (rather than ‘panic’) and that different problems arising from climate change need to be addressed calmly and over time through a mix of tech and markets. No good will come, they argue, from activism and the involvement of the general public. Such communities, while not denialist in any ways – quite the opposite – are nevertheless not problem-free. With their emphasis on science and expertise they reassure the public that there is no emergency – in many ways they do complicate the task of governments and institutions that demand an effort on behalf of the public, or ask for trade-offs and restraint. They are emblematic of the kind of soft consensus stoking that can easily generate resistance. Especially as they make it their mission to attack climate activists who are seen as too alarmist and radical.

Social justice

In the communities we observed, climate is often linked to other economic, political and social issues. Among pro-climate policy movements, the environmental issue is often associated with social justice, and the two are considered interdependent. Left-wing activists link climate and social justice to make an argument in favour of wholesale system change.

The link between climate change and social justice is interesting and illustrates how easily climate can become a wedge issue: for pro-climate activists, taking up the cause of climate change and sustainability is the long-term way of addressing deep imbalances in trade, in redistribution, in lifestyle and work patterns. For them, the pandemic has served to highlight the costs of choices driven exclusively by globalisation and profit, at the expense of the planet and human well-being. Social justice in this context is a rebalancing of priorities in favour of increased well-being and security for everyone through environmental choices that no longer attribute primacy to choice, capitalism and profit. For others, such as the Gilets jaunes, the demands for social justice can be no less real – but their conception of social justice exists in the current paradigm – and so are dominated by classic issues of redistribution and fairness, but not a demand for wholesale system change. In fact, most anti-climate communities argue that climate policy will come *at the expense of* social justice (much as the Gilets jaunes did when they argued that there was a trade-off between ‘the end of the month and the end of the world’).

Movements such as ‘Fridays for Future’ or ‘Extinction Rebellion’ that originated in northern Europe are now embedded in all of our case-study countries. In these movements, two other main issues are added to the question of social justice: gender, in ecofeminist movements, as well as a generational dimension (most of these communities are created, led and ‘moderated’ by younger activists).

Despite significant coverage in traditional media (and despite the attention they attract thanks to Greta Thunberg bashing – which tends to generate a counter-effect of support against aggressive opponents), these young movements have trouble consolidating their community online. And they are far more isolated than the coverage they generate suggests. Outside of their ‘hardcore fans’, the reaction of some ‘boomer politicians’ and a fair amount of trolling, their impact on the debate is actually quite low as illustrated by their isolation and their low engagement outside the boundaries of their own group.

The eco-feminist movement, which is strong in Spain, uses its intersectionality and environmental expertise to link climate issues to the broader patriarchal system (see **Figure 46**). While they draw a parallel between the exploitation of nature and the exploitation of women, their main argument is rooted in a critique of capitalism as the main cause of climate change and the driver of exploitation across the board.

But social justice is not only the preserve of those who mobilise in favour of climate policy. The French Gilets jaunes are emblematic of what was (initially at least) a social justice backlash that painted climate policy as a threat to social and economic justice (see **Figure 47**). In their case, the argument was that the climate policy (in this case an increase in petrol taxes) would disproportionately affect their members who were more reliant on their cars, whose jobs were further away from home and whose status was ‘peripheral’ to Paris elite tunnel vision.

From the local to the global – and back

Local movements are multiplying in all our case-study countries and bringing together a plurality of actors – citizens, activists and scientists – around a common cause. In all these cases, the relationship with the community – both social and geographic – is central: the community provides the reason and aims for mobilisation.

We have identified two broad types of communities. The first are groups involved in a local ecological challenge such as the Polish Koalicja ratujmy rzeki (Coalition to Save the River): highly effective at the local level through a dedicated and devoted following (see **Figure 48**).

The second type fall into the category of more diffuse local communities where the concern for climate issues is integrated into a valuing and protection of a way of life. These can be rural or urban.

Local movements such as the ‘Vélotafeurs’ in Paris are deeply committed to one issue, but the issue has the potential to spread (see **Figure 49**).

On this issue, too, we can find pro- and anti-climate policy groups. The two selected (see **Figures 48 & 49**) happen to mobilise in favour of climate policy, but there are plenty of others who mobilise against windfarms or other such projects in the name of preservation and conservation of the landscape, against the forces of globalisation and diversity.

One of the most interesting aspects of these communities, and the themes we can spot across them, is that the rallying cries, especially on climate, can easily cut both ways: ultra-conservatism can be a rallying cry against progressive radical climate groups, but it can also be associated with a type of climate activist that doesn’t shy away from a certain authoritarianism in the name of the climate emergency. Social justice is in the hands of XR, as much as it was in the hands of the French Gilets jaunes. Science is used by communities and groups right across the climate policy spectrum: to deter those who are deemed hysterical, and to accuse those who seem complacent. Distrust of institutions is also shared by pro- and anti-climate policy communities: for one camp the institutions are too intrusive, for the other they cannot be trusted to be radical enough – and for both they are seen as protecting the interests of different factions of an imagined elite. Finally, placing the local community at the heart of the defence is a tactic used as much by conservative anti-climate activists who want to protect tradition and existing patterns of life (including jobs, and landscapes against encroaching wind turbines), as it is used by pro-climate activists as the place to sustainably reconcile the demands of globalisation with the well-being of local communities.

This suggests therefore that climate is a classic wedge issue destined to split traditional publics and coalitions. But the impact of climate policy goes further: we argue that climate is fundamentally reshaping the ideological landscape of advanced economies.

WHO?

Euro and climate-sceptics
Close to right-wing liberal ideas of individual freedom and minimal state intervention
Xenophobic, anti-refugees
Conservative

WHERE?

News portal: www.reformzy.cz, publishing videos and articles from Czech and foreign authors
Facebook, Twitter, YouTube
Political activity of the leader Vit Jedlička

WHAT?

Mainly political content
Anti-EU, anti-UN, defend national interests
Claim that global warming is a fraud
Believe in the principles of the free market
Make fun of progressive movements

AUDIENCE DATA

 7k+ followers of the [official fanpage](#)

 2k+ followers of [Vit Jedlička's account](#)

 11k+ followers [of the official channel](#)

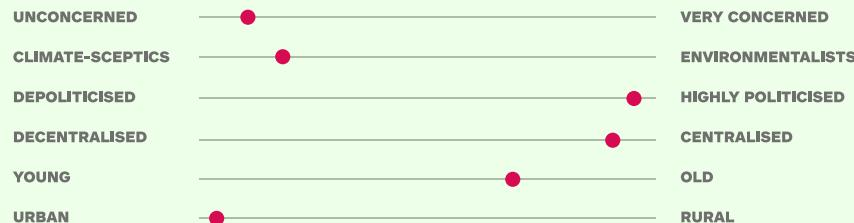
**ARCHETYPAL LEADER:
VIT JEDLICKA**

Politician and leader of Klub Reformy.cz
Climate-sceptic
Former member of the liberal-conservative eurosceptic Civic Democratic Party (ODC)
Since 2009, a member of Svobodní, a right-libertarian eurosceptic party

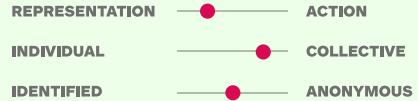
**MOBILISATION
POTENTIAL: HIGH**

Very active on Facebook
Tight links with the [Svobodní party](#)
May radicalise in reaction to any opposition activity

IDENTITY



HOW



FAVOURITE OBSESSIONS

LIBERTY, INFORMATION, '2020 IS A YEAR OF GLOBAL COOLING', 'GERMAN LAW SEEKS TO PROMOTE UNRELIABLE GREEN ENERGY TO NATIONAL SECURITY', 'CZECH MEMBERSHIP IN THE EU IS TOO EXPENSIVE FOR THE COUNTRY'

TOOLS

Using authority arguments through quotes
Spreading and commenting on national and international news
An ethos of truth (revealing the hidden truth)
Presenting themselves as an alternative position

TOP HATREDS

STATE, KLIMATICKY ALARMISMUS, THE GLOBAL WARMING SCAM

TONE

FORMAL, ANALYTICAL, CERTAIN

FIGURE 41. REFORMY.CZ CLUB AT A GLANCE

'BLABLA 18-25 ANS'

FRANCE

50K
ACTIVE USERS

1M
READERS/VIEWERS

SLEEPING OPPONENTS
NOT PRIORITARILY FOCUSED ON
THE TOPIC BUT EASILY ACTIONABLE

WHO?

Young men
Geeky, provocative
Partly inspired by the US alt-right
Meme culture enthusiasts

WHERE?

A [forum](#) on the jeuxvideo.com website (the French 4chan), [2sucres](#) and a few other alternatives to the jeuxvideo.com platform
Social networks where members recognise themselves by their common codes and jokes

WHAT?

Enemies of 'the righteous', critical of the left, feminists, social justice warriors and other 'weak' people
Rejection of institutions (GIEC, NATO, Al Gore)
Predominantly think that the fear of global warming is excessive
Invoke 'rationality' and praise science

AUDIENCE DATA

 Jeuxvideo.com. Hundreds of threads related to climate per month
Lots of threads with 100+ comments

 [Hundreds of identified users](#)
80k followers of the forum 'Best-of' account, thousands of mentions per month

 Half a dozen YouTubers with 100k+ audience
Potential to reach 2m highly engaged users

ARCHETYPAL LEADER: VALEK NORAJ

Masculinist / amateur bodybuilder
316k followers on [YouTube](#), 110k on [Twitter](#)
Very well produced far-right videos, 'educational' and funny, as a doyen of his type

MOBILISATION POTENTIAL: VERY HIGH

Internal virality on the forum
Easily led behaviours
Involved in production and sharing of memes
Active users on all platforms (YouTube, Twitter, Snapchat, Instagram)
Tight links with the far-right party
National Rally

IDENTITY



FAVOURITE OBSESSIONS

C'EST UN COMPORTEMENT D'AR*, UNE CHANCE POUR LA FRANCE, #PEPE, #ELFAMOSO, #ISSOU, CHANCLA, CELESTINE, RISITAS**

HOW

REPRESENTATION  ACTION
INDIVIDUAL  COLLECTIVE
IDENTIFIED  ANONYMOUS

TOP HATREDS

'THE RIGHTEOUS', FEMINISM, INSTITUTIONS, ECOLOFASCISTE, GAUCHIASSES

TONE

STRONG, ASSERTIVE, SHOCKED

TOOLS

Making fun of progressive thinking and trends, mocking people
Using memes, internet language and codes
Hostile raids
Speaking without prompting discussions or debate

FIGURE 42. 'BLABLA 18-25 ANS' AT A GLANCE

WHO?

Lower middle class (working in the service industry)
Live in urban areas
Believe in work, nation and family as founding values
Conservative, catholic
Masculinist, nationalist, xenophobic

WHERE?

Both online and on the streets
Mostly on social media such as Facebook, Twitter
Active readers of [Il Primo Nazionale](#) news website (20k readers)
Protests in Naples, Turin and other cities on 26 October [against new coronavirus restrictions](#)

WHAT?

Anti: EU, immigrants, Islam and China
Anti-mask: coronavirus is not serious and does not warrant slowing down the economy
Lack of trust in government and official media
Spread conspiracy theories
Politically mostly right (Forza Italia, Lega); some far-right (Casa Pound, Forza Nuova)

AUDIENCE DATA

 800k+ members in a public group [Stop Europa](#)
 21.5k followers of Ilaria Bifarini
13k+ followers on the [No unione europea no euro](#) page
More than 20 different local [Facebook groups](#)

ARCHETYPAL LEADER: ILARIA BIFARINI

Economist and writer
Author of three books on the false myths of neoliberalism
Describes the economic system as a conspiracy and Europe as a propaganda tool
Wants to reveal 'the truth'

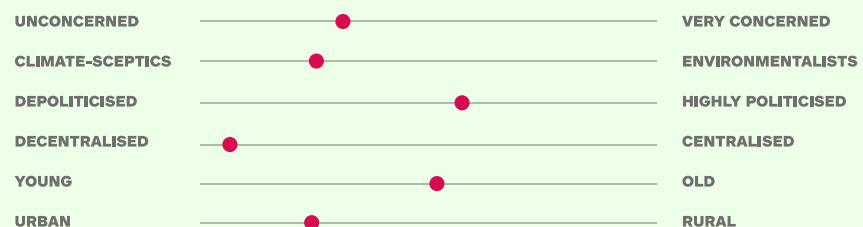
MOBILISATION POTENTIAL: VERY HIGH

Not concerned with the environment but are against European initiatives
Any new measure that impacts their income can generate a strong and immediate reaction
Currently mass-protesting against lockdown because it prevents them from working

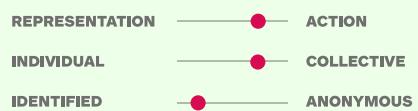
FAVOURITE OBSESSIONS

ITALEXIT, #ITALIASIRIBELLA, #ITALIASEDESTA, DPCM, GOVERNO DELLA VERGOGNA, RESTIAMO LIBERI, DITTATURA SANITARIA, GOVERNO DI LIBERAZIONE NAZIONALE, TERRORISMO MEDIATICO, ANDRATUTTOBENE

IDENTITY



HOW



TOP HATREDS

SINISTRONZI, ANTICOMUNISTA, COVIDIOTI, VIRUSTRUffa, PROPAGANDA, GRETINI

TONE

STRONG, ASSERTIVE, OUTRAGED

TOOLS

Sharing news comments
Sharing decontextualised and demagogic videos on Facebook
Using assertive and commanding sentences
Traditional protest practices: marches, banners, slogans, etc.

FIGURE 43. STOP EUROPA AT A GLANCE

J.-M. JANCOVICI ENTHUSIASTS

FRANCE

10K
ACTIVE FOLLOWERS

1M
POTENTIAL READERS

POTENTIAL WORST ENEMIES
HYPER-FOCUSED ON CLIMATE DEBATE,
REJECTING 'ECOBULLSHIT'

WHO?

24-45-year-old men
Highly educated
Engineers and stats geeks
People fed up with simplistic comments on complex issues and traditional media coverage
Mostly nuclear energy supporters

WHERE?

Relaying and commenting on Jancovici's public pronouncements despite his (official) absence from Twitter or Facebook
YouTube official channel
University and engineering schools and campuses
'Energy geek' debates

WHAT?

Enemies of 'dogmatic' green activism
Enemies of 'emotional' green movements
Hypercritical of institutions & governments, including the EU

AUDIENCE DATA

Facebook 10k fans curating the best of Jancovici in a 'co-opted private group'
Has become a 'meme'

Twitter 2k+ mentions per month
50k+ followers of an unofficial account

YouTube 10m video views
100k subscribers

LinkedIn 500+ followers
Up to thousands of likes and hundreds of comments

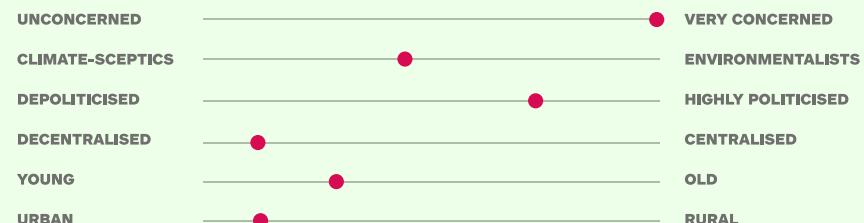
ARCHETYPAL LEADER: JEAN-MARC JANCOVICI

Engineer, free thinker who enjoys criticising the mainstream doxa
Nuclear energy supporter

MOBILISATION POTENTIAL: VERY HIGH

Produces extreme punchlines, arguments or viral talking points against the 'naïve' aspects of climate transition
Extremely persuasive two-step flow of communication model
Climate-sceptics may use Jancovici's arguments in their discourse

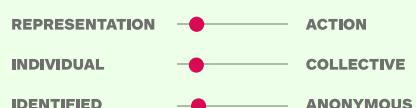
IDENTITY



FAVOURITE OBSESSIONS

ÉLASTICITÉ DE PRIX DU PÉTROLE, BILAN CARBONE, CROISSANCE INFINIE, THE SHIFT PROJECT, SHIFTERS, ATELIERSDUSHIFT

HOW



TOP HATREDS

CROISSANCE VERTE (GREEN GROWTH), ÉOLIENNES (WIND FARMS), CROISSANCE INFINIE (LIMITLESS GROWTH)

TONE

DIRECT, FUNNY, CONDESCENDING AND IRONIC

TOOLS

Internet language and codes
Memes of J.-M. Jancovici to spread on different platforms (Facebook, Twitter)
Pop culture
Humour and photoscapes

FIGURE 44. J.-M. JANCOVICI ENTHUSIASTS AT A GLANCE

WHO?

Mainly 25–50-year-old men
Well educated
Conservative

WHERE?

On social media such as Facebook and Twitter
Also documentaries, TED talks and YouTube videos
Following is mainly on social networks where members with the same attitudes towards climate share and repost statements

WHAT?

Known for the 'Lomborgian Argument'
Critical of the UN
Generally agree that global warming is a problem
Invoke 'rationality' and praise science

AUDIENCE DATA

 1k followers of a private group with connections to Lomborg: ['Peoples revolt against climate hysteria'](#)
2k followers of a public group with connections to Lomborg: ['I am a climate realist'](#); uses the slogan 'I am a climate realist' before anything is posted. Writes in codes

 70k+ followers: Top tweets around critics of official climate policies, especially from the UK

 100–350k average views

 2,450 hits

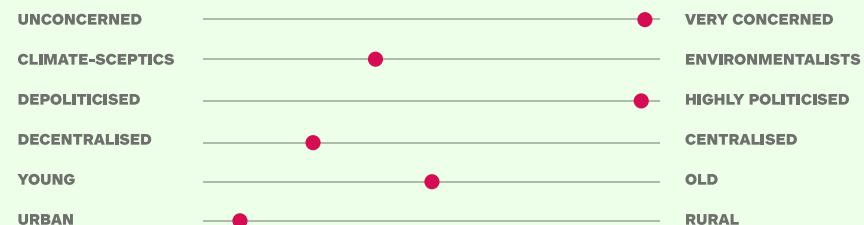
**ARCHETYPAL LEADER:
BJØRN LOMBORG**

Masculinist, geeky
Well-produced content with academic arguments

MOBILISATION POTENTIAL: VERY HIGH

Highly alarmist content, not provocative but uses logic to promote conservative ideas
Well-put, easy-to-understand arguments
Followers are active users on all platforms (YouTube, Twitter, Snapchat, Instagram)
Tight links with international networks, especially in the USA

IDENTITY



FAVOURITE OBSESSIONS

**CLIMATE REALIST, FALSE ALARM, FEARPORN,
GEOENGINEERING, CLIMATEADAPTATION, MDGs, SDGs,
PRIORITIES**

HOW

REPRESENTATION: INDIVIDUAL → ACTION
INDIVIDUAL → COLLECTIVE
IDENTIFIED → ANONYMOUS

TOP HATREDS

**CLIMATE HYSTERIA,
UN, IPCC**

TONE

**INSTITUTIONAL BUT
INCLUSIVE**

TOOLS

Rational arguments, powerpoints and data to establish authority
Centred around the charisma of Bjørn Lomborg
Creating proximity through humour and questions directly addressed to the public
Triggering sympathy

FIGURE 45. COPENHAGEN CONSENSUS CENTER AT A GLANCE

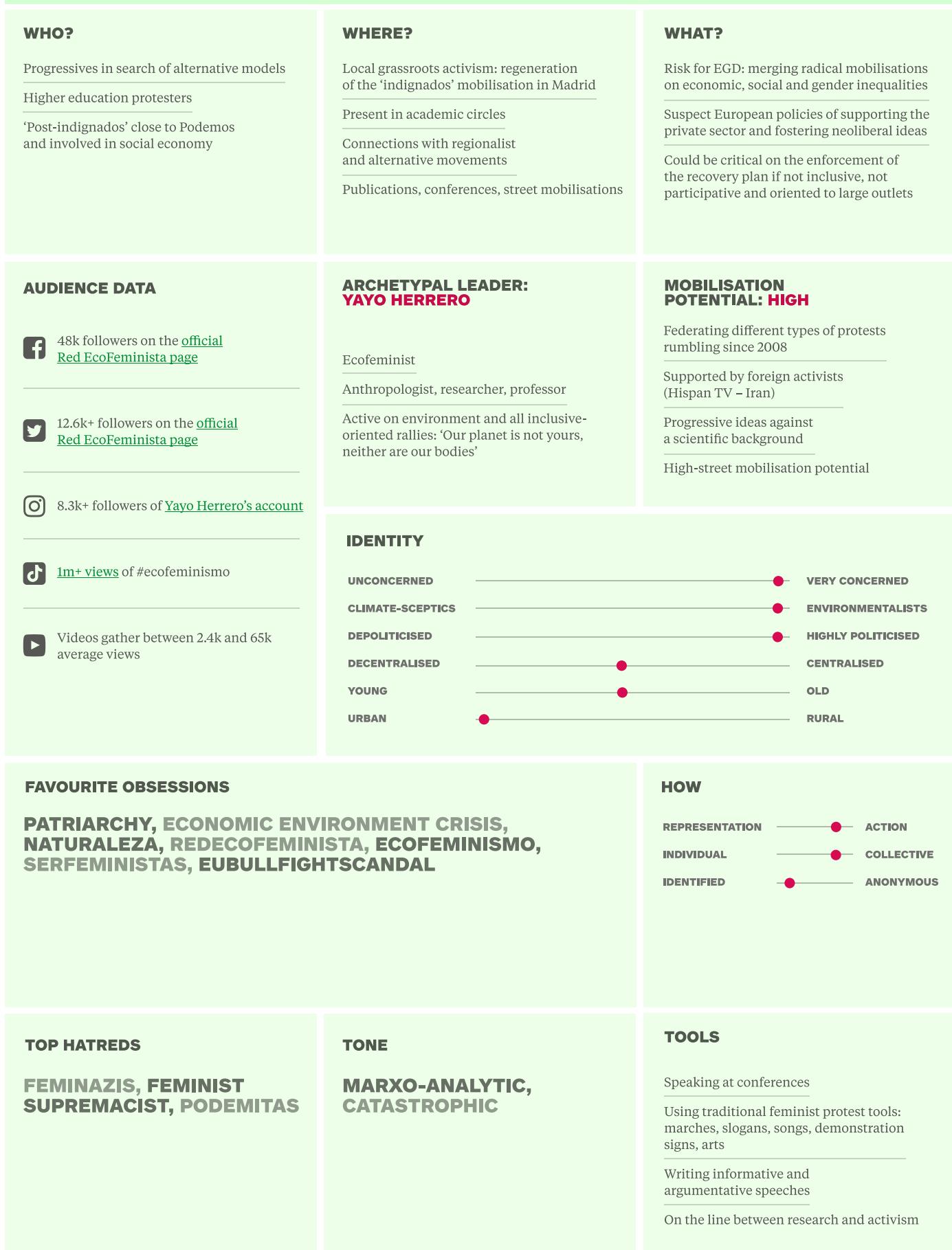


FIGURE 46. RED ECOFEMINISTA AT A GLANCE

GILETS JAUNES

FRANCE

5K
ACTIVE PROTESTORS
FOR THE LAST
DEMONSTRATION

25M
SYMPATHISERS
IN RECENT
POPULARITY
POLL

POTENTIAL RADICAL OPPONENTS
PRIMARILY CONCERNED WITH THE RISE
OF TAXES ON FUEL

WHO?

Populist grassroots movement

Born in semi-rural and suburban zones of medium-sized cities

Global sceptics and distrustful of political figures and discourse

WHERE?

Started with Facebook groups

249 Facebook groups counting more than 5m people in 2019

Now on Whatsapp, Telegram and Discord for the remaining core activists, due to fear of being tracked

ARCHETYPAL LEADER: ERIC DROUET

269k members of his Facebook group 'la france en colère'

Other leaders like Maxime Nicolle, Ingrid Levavasseur, Jacline Mouraud, who have declared a broken life but no regrets...

WHAT?

Rejection of institutions and traditional political speakers

Asking for more direct, decentralised democracy

Attracted by conspiracy theories

Can combine a 'pro environnement discourse' with a strong defence of individual freedom

Concerned with balancing 'Green' against 'social justice'

MOBILISATION POTENTIAL: **VERY HIGH**

After a year-long sequence of strong mobilisations and heavy media coverage, their activism is now mainly underground

They can be easily reactivated following new taxes or restrictions

IDENTITY



FIGURE 47. GILETS JAUNES AT A GLANCE

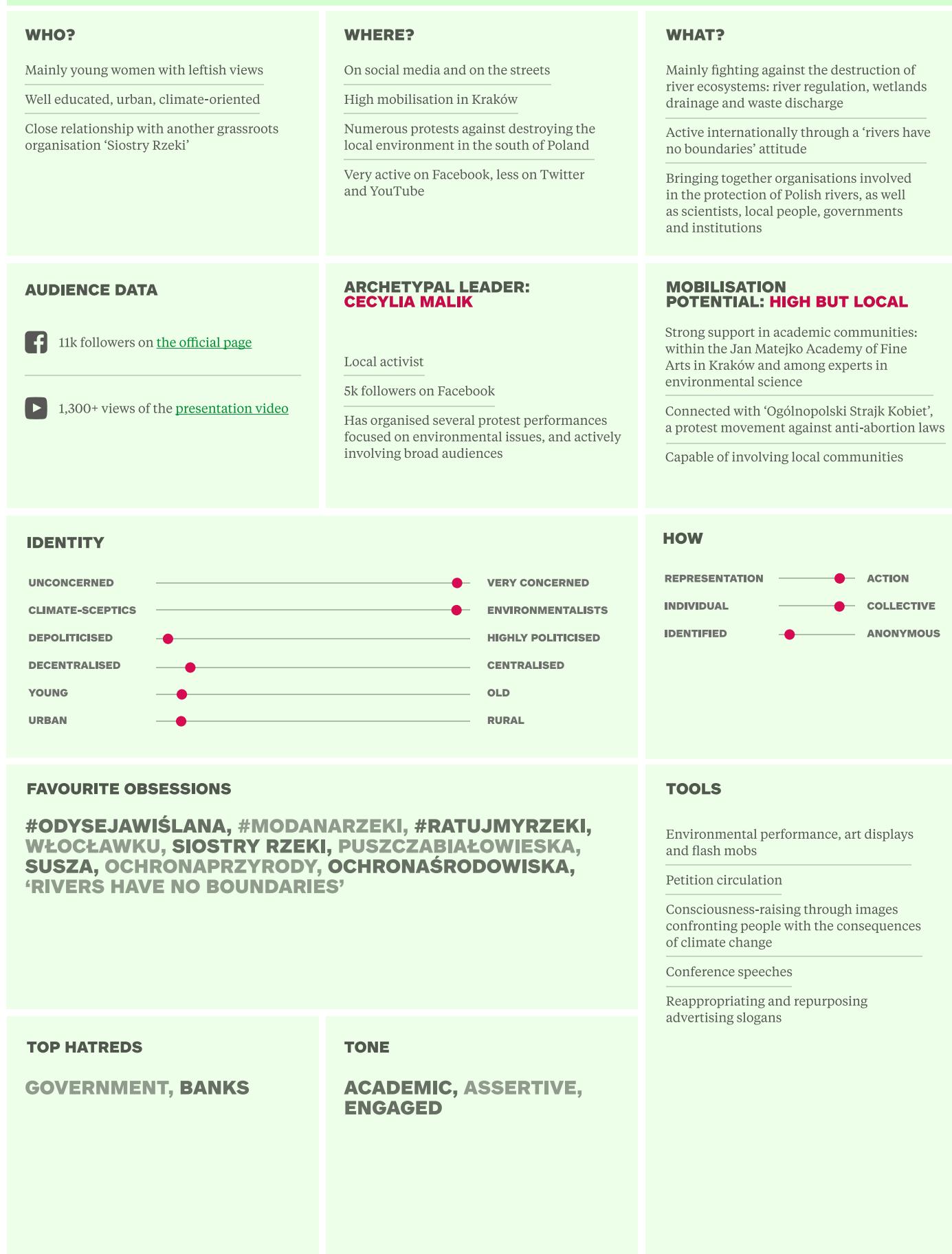


FIGURE 48. KOALICJA RATUJMY RZEKI AT A GLANCE

LES 'VÉLOTAFEURS'

FRANCE

1K
EXTREMELY ACTIVE USERS

1M
READERS/VIEWERS

VISIBLE ADVOCATES
AROUND THEIR FOCUS ON URBAN TRANSPORTATION

WHO?

From 'vélo' + 'taf' ('job'): those who cycle to work

Young and middle-aged, mostly men on Twitter, a few women on Instagram

Paris + larger cities (Lyon, Lille, Bordeaux, Marseille)

AUDIENCE DATA

 1 [group](#) with 5k+ members
1 [page](#) with 6k+ followers

 10k+ posts per month

 30k+ #vélotaf posts

 2m+ views of #vélotaf videos

WHERE?

Very active on Twitter, Instagram

Daily testimonial photos and videos of urban conflicts (and happy moments, too)

Can get lots of views on TikTok

WHAT?

Enemies of car-centred lifestyles

Complain about drivers and motorcyclists

Support local green policies

'Naming & shaming' + virtue signalling

Highly focused on city planning and urban development policies

ARCHETYPAL LEADER: FRANCK OLIVIER TORRO

< 1k followers on Twitter

Spokesman for the very influential RasLeScoot association

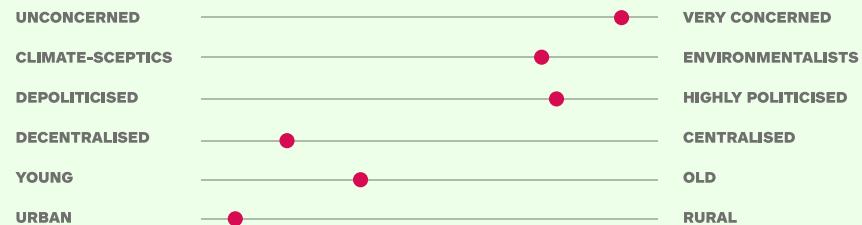
MOBILISATION POTENTIAL: EXTREMELY HIGH

Pro-cycle infrastructure lobbying

More and more in direct conflict with motorcycle and car aficionados

Linked to a number of environmental organisations

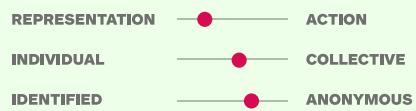
IDENTITY



FAVOURITE OBSESSIONS

VÉLOTAF, CYCLOSPHÈRE, TWITTCYCLES, SOLUTIONVÉLO, VÉLORUTION, SURMAROUTE, VÉLOTAFFEUR, PISTECYCLABLE, #RASLESCOOT

HOW



TOP HATREDS

SCOOTERS, BALANCETONSCOUT, GCUM

TONE

PROUD, SUPPORTIVE OF EACH OTHER, SPIRIT OF DISSENT, SOMETIMES AGGRESSIVE

TOOLS

Pictures of road rules violations or unpleasant behaviour

Continuous recordings of commuting

Online shaming based on 'point & shame' practice

Call-out culture which consists of boycotting someone because of their 'wrong' behaviour

FIGURE 49. LES 'VÉLOTAFEURS' AT A GLANCE

4.

TWO KEY CONCLUSIONS

Having combed through the first results of our research, two foundational conclusions emerge. One concerns the ideological realignment prompted by the climate debate. The second conclusion is to do with the nature and style of online engagement displayed by activists on both sides of the climate debate – namely an engagement that is driven by emotion and shared and shaped by a subversive register steeped in irony and often driven by memes. Both of these points are essential for policy-makers to consider.

Freedom vs. constraint: a deep ideological shift

Across the data we have pulled up – across memes, Tweets, FB pages, community and campaign pages – one particular accusation cuts across all of them: that of ‘eco-fascism’. This particular label is a favourite of anti-climate policy activists (including relatively moderate ones) and is regularly hurled at climate activists. The reasoning is that environmentalists are moved by a monolithic urge to control everything and everyone around them, that their single-mindedness on climate is tantamount to an authoritarian ideology that blinds them to other priorities or preferences; and also that they are willing to impose – and indeed that they relish the imposition of – constraints and restrictions on personal and collective freedoms. It is a caricature that – in a Covid context of increased sensitivity to the issue of individual freedoms – has gained currency at speed, as illustrated by the meme in **Figure 50** aimed specifically at Greta Thunberg:



FIGURE 50. GRETA THUNBERG AS A NAZI GIRL MEMES

The concept of eco-fascism appears in two guises – sometimes it is used to criticise the ‘authoritarian tendencies’ of green activists and elected officials (ironically, especially by the right and the far-right), as depicted in **Figure 50** (other frequently recurring terms in this context are ‘ayatollahs’, ‘green khmers’).

But the concept of fascism is also used by experts and journalists to refer to a new (green) far-right family, of ‘born again’ ecological fanatics such as the meme shown in **Figure 51**, drawn from 4chan, referring to a fictitious ‘ecofascist party’ (other frequently linked accusations in this context are ‘doomer’ and ‘Brenton Tarrant’ – a reference to the Christchurch Mosque shooter).

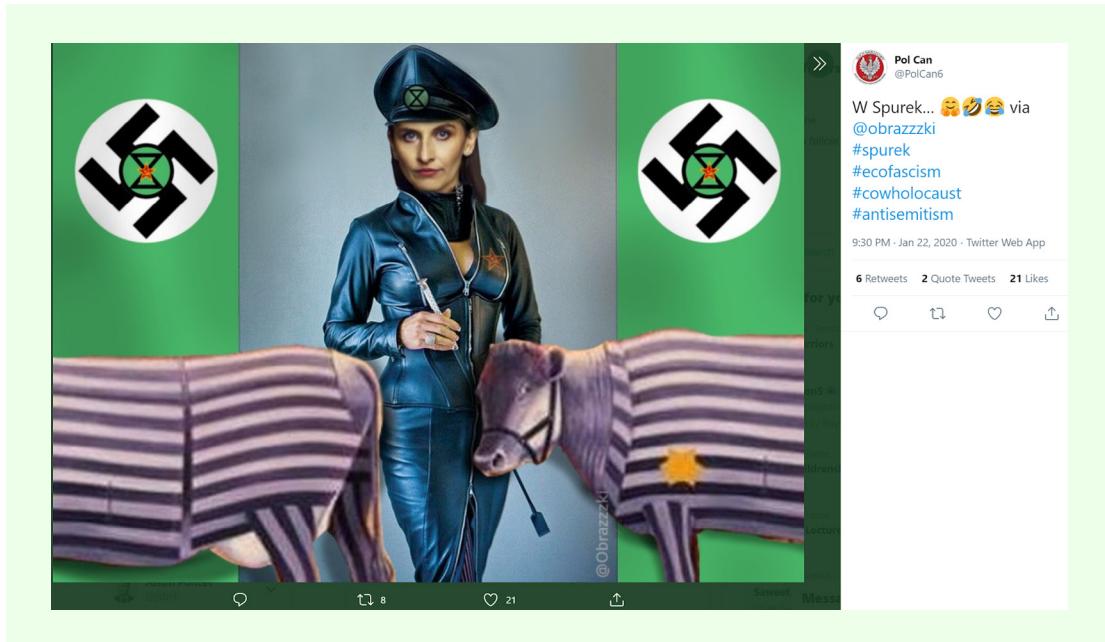


FIGURE 51. ECOFASCISM MEME

What is important is (a) that the accusations of eco-fascism are pervasive, and that they are so across Europe; and (b) more importantly, that the use of this term points to an ideologically re-engineered relationship between freedom and constraint. Whereas over the last few centuries, and certainly since the end of the Second World War, freedom from constraint has been associated with progressivism, the current narratives around climate change are in the process of reversing this. Constraint, restraint, loss of personal autonomy and freedom are increasingly depicted as the hallmark of environmental activism and policy, by its detractors. And activists are not refuting the mantel: achieving a more sustainable lifestyle through reduced consumption, but also a reduced appetite for individual autonomy, a reduced palette of choice is not something that younger generation activists shy away from. The mix has a familiar whiff of the 1960s, new age respect for nature and the planet, as well as health consciousness, but in combination with a new restraint on all sorts of other personal freedoms (sexual, nutritional, mobility-based) that 1960s activists were in fact demanding rather than refuting. This 'new puritanism' that underpins a much greater sense of emergency is something that needs to be taken into account by a set of institutions that are staffed by generations (boomers and Xers, rather than Millennials and Zs) for whom the guarantee of such freedoms was paramount. For the new pro-climate activists, social justice may be paramount, but social justice is articulated within parameters where choice plays a much smaller role. What this leads to is the vacating of the freedom space that is being grabbed with unparalleled zeal by climate policy detractors or reassurers. They are claiming the freedom flag for themselves and creating a situation in which, again, policy-makers need to beware of how they define and frame goods such as freedom and choice – because they can inadvertently play into the hands of what one might call 'climate policy limiters'.

This is an important transformation. It tells us something about the narrative and ideological terrain that is being shaped by both types of activists (pro and anti), and therefore should serve as a warning about the framing that needs to be used when reaching out to constructive communities – communities that may respond better to 'freedom from' rather than, say, 'freedom to'. It also tells

us something about the fundamental upheaval that climate change signifies in the way that communities and individuals feel they need to position themselves vis-à-vis the issue. This is not just another issue; this is an issue that has the potential to affect our shared long-term understanding of the public good, of the commons, and of the ways in which we best defend them.

At the European (and, also, at the national) level, we might be able to anticipate the formation of three distinct groups around which the conflict around climate will be organised in the near future:

- In one camp, pro-environmental groups (such as Extinction Rebellion, Fridays for Future or ‘user’ communities) who demand more climate commitments/measures and argue in favour of increasing regulations and constraints.
- In a second camp (which includes climate-sceptics, but also ‘climate agnostics’ and those who are ‘undecided’), those who argue in favour of fewer constraints, and are already pointing to climate ‘abuses’, the ‘authoritarian threat’ of an excessive climate focus and restrictions of individual or public freedoms.
- And, finally, a third camp, made up of experts, who call themselves ‘realists’ – who do not contest the human origin of global warming (Landschaft Verbindung, pro-nuclear for the climate...) but who call for scientific and technical answers rather than restrictions (which they depict as the product of hysterical over-reaction, or ignorance). We can refer to them as ‘reassurers’, which is tantamount to putting them on the side of the sceptics (in terms of their potential impact if not in terms of their tactics).

One key hypothesis to test going forward is whether the third bloc (now a minority in some countries, but a growing one including in Nordic countries) is likely to tip the consensus by voluntarily or involuntarily siding with one of the two groups that oppose each other head-on.

And this takes us back to consensus: There is just as much chance that climate change will further fragment our political world rather than drive a new consensus. Not only because it can become a wedge issue, but because like some wedge issues it can completely scramble the ideological wires. It will cut across conservatism and progressivism and invert the freedom/constraint dynamic. These are not adjustments; they are tectonic shifts, which, in turn, are likely to reveal other divisions that we can already see at play: namely generational ones, educational ones, as well as rural/urban divisions.

The style and register of engagement

The second important takeaway is that the style and register of engagement of policy-makers (both at national and at EU level) who are driving the EGD will be fundamentally challenged not just by the content but by the register and style of activism that characterises both the pro- and the anti-climate policy protesters.

The pincer effect is one of the first things to note here. As we suspected, it is likely that the EGD will come under fire from both kinds of detractors: those who say it is going too far, and those who will argue it is going nowhere near far (or fast) enough.

The second thing to note is that while it may be difficult to pacify climate-sceptics and populist detractors, it should be a little easier to make the occasional alliance with climate policy supporters or, at the very least, enter into sustained engagement. Yet, as noted earlier in this report, there is an asymmetry of style and register between EU institutions and civil society (even when it is organised at the European level) that prevents this engagement – and therefore these potential alliances – from emerging. Where activists are ironic, subversive and emotionally engaged, policy-makers remain in factual broadcast mode, and are reluctant to engage in the kinds of exchanges that would lead to a united front on some key climate issues.

5. RECOMMENDATIONS

These two conclusions, in combination with the data we've shared, lead us to make a number of recommendations.

The uniqueness of this study is that we are working with social media rather than polling. This is important for two key reasons: First, because Covid has tended to shrink the world: lockdowns mean that mobilisation and debate have largely moved online. So, social media have become even more important sites of political activity. Second, because these are the channels used by the young people that decision-makers want and need to reach around climate policy.

The data we have gathered in combination with our analytical country essays should serve as a guide for your consent-building strategy and for its accompanying communications strategy.

1. Dissent will come from both climate policy detractors and climate policy activists. You need different tactics for each

- **Do not put out a single set of messages: put out messages for EGD detractors and separate messages for potential allies. They will land where you need them.**
- **Do not engage with dissenters as if they were a single set of actors.** Engage authentically with those who call you out. Explain, collaborate, cooperate. Their grievance is that you are ignoring them, and their concerns. Prove them wrong. Their strength is their capacity to develop relationships and networks. Copy their register, their tone and their tactics to engage with them. Right now, you're barely engaging – and when you do, you are at cross purposes.

2. Both types of dissent will look different from one country to the next (see the qualitative country essays that accompany our data-driven research). You need to address it differently in different contexts

- Detractors and activists tend to use emotional registers that are highly context-specific. Therefore, **opportunities for engagement need to be bottom-up and shaped by local partners rather than top-down and shaped by EU institutions.**
- Existing **bottom-up exercises need to be given the resources and scope to engage fully.**
- Don't just translate a common set of messages or information briefs into 27 languages: use local partners and organisations to **tailor the messages appropriately for the country context.**

3. Don't take consensus for granted

- Public consensus for pro-climate policies is at best soft – it is fragile and could easily be reshaped by anti-climate activists, or simply vanish under the pressure of trade-offs. These **soft supporters need attention and reinforcement.** They can become the backbone of climate policy – or turn into passive detractors.

- **The best way to engage with this large and crucial group is:**

- to **address their concerns in context:** Again, a country by country (and in some cases, such as in Germany, for example, a region by region) basis is what is needed rather than bland blanket statements or information that may not reflect national or regional concerns.
- to **address their concerns on an emotional level:** For example, an extreme weather event, or damage to an urban landscape is not simply a climate fact, it can be experienced as an emotional blow to one's home city, or one's way of life (see our essay on Italy). Knowing how climate events and climate facts affect people emotionally is the best way to engage with them in ways that are relevant and effective. And that is feasible only when context is taken into account.
- to **engage in conversation rather than remain in broadcast mode:** Ask questions, reply to call-outs, retweet, participate from within rather than from the side-lines. This will build shared knowledge and expertise and counter the trust deficit in institutions.

4. Emotions travel: use them

- **Engage with the tone, style and aims of policy and not just its substance.** Social media is powered by networks; networks thrive on the communication of feelings. Curate facts to trigger reactions that will create engagement. Emotionally curate the aims of policy to appeal to the public.
- **Use new tools: In a world that is increasingly fragmented and still divided along national and regional lines, memes are a new mobilisational grammar that travels well because it is coproduced in context.** Memes contribute to a shared political consciousness across international youth. Importantly, they should act as an inspiration to simplify messages, target people according to their main concerns and foster engagement through repurposing and sharing.
- **Be aware of the new register of politics:** Again, memes with their high viral charge of irony and subversion are malleable, but also are very good at triggering emotion that can cut across political and social divides and create new communities of style and register.

5. Get out of the bubble

- **Treat civil society organisations (even critical ones) as potential partners.** The lack of engagement is leading to a dangerous fragmentation of forces that will fragment public support and/or erode it.
- **Ensure coordination of communication with potential partners:** Narratives launched without strong partnerships and committed allies do not reach their targets. Start the conversation with critics who are pro-climate policy early. Bring them in **before** you start the campaign.

Allow them to shape the message. Even if they remain critical it will be more of a dialogue – they can get their point across, but so can you.

6. Watch your framing: the concepts of choice and constraint are being repurposed for a planet at risk

- **Advanced democracies have been shaken to their ideological core by 25 years of populist activity.** The result is polarisation and/or fragmentation + Covid + climate emergency. This combination is redrawing our ideological landscapes. What was associated with traditional left/right or conservative/radical or liberal/reactive stances no longer applies in the same way. **Liberals are lobbying for more constraints and less choice. The hard right is demanding mobility and freedom. This is not just rhetoric; a change in values is upon us.**
- **Invest in understanding new and emerging ideological divisions.** Examine the language and values of those groups advocating in favour of climate policy. Adopt the new frames. Question the old enlightenment dichotomies: moderation is the new freedom, and populists are masquerading as freedom fighters. Know the frames used by your detractors and your supporters.
- **Reframe your policy statements** to reflect the meanings and values attributed to traditional political concepts by mobilised communities. Freedom, progress, constraint, security – all of these are being repurposed by new communities of action in favour of or against climate policy. This needs to be taken into account in communications terms. Learn the new language of politics.

Notes

Introduction

1. Czech Republic, Denmark, France, Germany, Italy, Poland, Spain and Sweden.
2. https://www.edf.fr/sites/default/files/contrib/groupe-edf/obs-climat/2020/obscop2020_principauxresultats_1a_fr.pdf
3. <https://www.moreincommon.com/media/bfwlsrxu/more-in-common-the-new-normal-comparative-7-country-en.pdf>
4. https://dpart.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Comparative_report.pdf, p. 2
5. Ibid., p. 10

1. Our approach: data, context and interpretation

1. Our model is based on three key aspects of the practice of communications. First, we keep in mind that people's reactions to media messages are always mediated by interpersonal communication – as the saying goes, 'the messenger is the message'. Second, we know that social practices need to be understood in relation to one another, and that the quest for distinction – the need to differentiate oneself from other groups – is a very powerful driver of social behaviour. Third, we know that attitudes and personas depend on the context of the narrative. Just as there is no public opinion, there is no 'average internet user' – the same person can be a public expert on Twitter, a funny guy on Instagram, or a political nerd on a Telegram channel. This is what scholar Dominique Cardon refers to as the 'clair/obscur' of the internet (Dominique Cardon, *La démocratie Internet : promesses et limites*, Paris: Seuil, 2010).

We draw on the 'two-step flow' model of communication as elaborated by Paul Lazarsfeld, Bernard Berelson and Helen Gaudet in their 1948 volume entitled *The People's Choice* (New York: Columbia University Press), which analysed voters' decision-making processes in the 1940 US presidential election. We also draw on Pierre Bourdieu's notion of habitus: a fundamentally stable set of connections and networks that shape how individuals behave, express themselves, communicate, react and so on (Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron, *La Reproduction*, Paris, Les Editions de Minuit, 1970). But whereas the habitus refers to something fundamentally stable, the way it is reflected in the social world can vary according to the structure of a given field.

2. To narrow the scope of our investigations we divided the climate topic into six vertical themes that are recurrent among environment-related issues, that involve public policies and mobilise hyperholders: Agriculture, Food & Health; Construction / Buildings; Energy; Individual / Collective transportation; Tourism; Economy / Recovery.

2. Brussels is talking to itself: actors and relationships

1. We looked at the online activities of 2,500 key personalities and communities and noted that 15 hashtags are used in messages about the European Green Deal. This allowed us to collect the (almost) complete conversation (700,000 tweets between November 2019 and November 2020): #EUGreenDeal, #EuropeanGreenDeal, #GreenDeal, #GNDE, #GNDforEurope, #NextGenerationEU, #NextGenEU, #JustTransitionMechanism, #JustTransitionFund, #ResilientEU, #ClimateNeutralEU, #CleanAirEU, #EUclimatelaw, #EUclimateaction and #EUGreenweek.

2. We chose the first because it was fresh and recent, and the second because of its potential for conflicting views.
3. <https://twitter.com/PaoloGentiloni/status/1265582344188067845>
4. <https://twitter.com/EnricoLetta/status/1266378386764468227>
5. <https://twitter.com/gualtierieurope>
6. <https://twitter.com/KadriSimson>
7. Other than with the Corporate Leaders Group (<https://twitter.com/ClimateCLG/status/1305788333604442114>), which highlights the display of climate commitments by private businesses.
8. <https://twitter.com/GabrielMariya/status/1306877072682479617>
9. https://twitter.com/Green_Europe
10. <https://twitter.com/EurBeyondCoal>
11. <https://twitter.com/CANEurope>
12. <https://twitter.com/RebekkaPopp>
13. <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2014/02/20/part-2-conversational-archetypes-six-conversation-and-group-network-structures-in-twitter/#network-type-2-tight-crowd-network-communities>
14. According to the Computational Propaganda Research Project of the University of Oxford. Available at: <https://comprop.ox.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/93/2019/01/Manipulating-Twitter-Traffic.pdf>
15. <https://www.carbonbrief.org/climate-strikers-open-letter-to-eu-leaders-on-why-their-new-climate-law-is-surrender>
16. <https://www.climatechangenews.com/2020/04/09/european-green-deal-must-central-resilient-recovery-covid-19/>

3. Content, style and communities in the climate conversation

1. See for example, just to name a few, the work by Daniel Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow* (Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2011); George Marcus, *The Sentimental Citizen: Emotion in Democratic Politics* (Penn State University Press, 2002); Drew Westen, *The Political Brain: The Role of Emotion in Deciding the Fate of the Nation* (Public Affairs, 2007); and Eddie Harmon-Jones and Piotr Winkerman, *Social Neuroscience* (Guilford Press, 2007).
2. An Xiao Mina, *Memes to Movements: How the World's most Viral Media is Changing Social Protest and Power* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2019): p. 6.
3. <https://www.technologyreview.com/2019/10/24/132228/political-war-memes-disinformation/>
4. B Wiggins, *The Discursive Power of Memes in Digital Culture: Ideology, Semiotics and Intertextuality* (Routledge, 2019).
5. The 37 communities we spotted and analysed, across eight countries: *Czech Republic*: Reformy.cz club, Občanský institut fans, Hnutí DUHA, Limity jsme my, Klimatická Koalice, Fridays for Future, Extinction Rebellion; *Denmark*: Copenhagen Consensus Center, Stram Kurs supporters, Stay Awake, Extinction Rebellion; *France*: Vélotaf, Le Blabla 18–25, The Ze, Jancovici enthusiasts, Les Engraineuses; *Germany*: Rebellion der Traümer, Land Schafft Verbindung, Ende Gelände, Wir haben es satt; *Italy*: Gilet Arancioni, StopEuropa, Marcia della Liberazione, Sardines, Fridays for Future; *Poland*: PrawicowyInternet fans, Konfederacja fans, Koalicja ratujmy rzeki, Inicjatywa Dzikie Karpaty; *Spain*: Keepers of Tradition, Eco-Feministas, Techno-optimists, Local activists, Struggling far-left; *Sweden*: Fridays for Future, Parents for Future, Extinction Rebellion.

The coronavirus crisis has forced policy-makers and citizens to reassess both the scope and the role of government policy, at every level. Making sure that positive system change results from this trajectory will depend on a deep understanding of people's motivations, attitudes and desires, and the capacity of politicians and policy-makers to appeal to them and frame policy change.

One of the areas in which the EU and member states will experience the biggest challenges for the continued pursuit of reform is the European Green Deal (EGD). Indeed, climate policy in general could easily be turned into a 'wedge issue' by populists and used to split electorates, discredit national and EU elites, and fragment support for climate policy.

In this report – the first of a series on climate policy in Europe – we caution against the assumption that there is 'climate consent' in public opinion and explore the social media climate conversation in eight European countries. Through our research we give a first account of the style and register of emerging dissent against climate policy and explore how the issue of climate is likely to fundamentally reshape our ideological and party-political landscapes.