



# GREEN POLICIES, GRAY AREAS: FARMERS' PROTESTS AND THE ENVIRONMENTAL POLICY DILEMMA IN THE EUROPEAN UNION

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## ■ Introduction

■ The beginning of 2024 marked a significant escalation in the intensity and frequency of farmer protests, underscoring widespread discontent with the current agricultural policy frameworks, notably those influenced by the European Union's environmental regulations. These protests, which spanned various EU countries including France, Germany, Italy, Spain, Poland, and Romania, not only disrupted local and national economies but also brought to the fore critical debates around sustainable agriculture, food sovereignty, and national versus EU-level governance.

Farmer protests are not a new phenomenon in the European Union; they have been a significant aspect of European agricultural politics for decades. Historically, these protests have often erupted in response to falling prices, rising costs, or new EU regulations perceived as out of touch with on-the-ground realities. For instance, in the early 2000s, French farmers blockaded roads to protest changes in EU agricultural policies that they claimed favored agribusiness over small-scale producers. Similarly, in 2009, dairy farmers across Europe staged numerous protests in response to plummeting milk prices due to EU quota changes. These historical protests set a precedent for current demonstrations, underscoring recurring themes of economic vulnerability and resistance to top-down regulatory changes that fail to account for local and regional farming contexts.

The 2024 farmers' grievances, while diverse, shared common themes centered around the perceived overreach of EU policies – particularly the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) and the European Green Deal – which are often seen as misaligned with the practical realities of farming.

\* <https://doi.org/10.62560/csz.2024.02.03>



The protests were characterized by dramatic demonstrations and blockades, signifying a deep-seated resistance against what many farmers view as untenable environmental regulations that compromise their livelihoods without sufficient compensatory measures or support. This wave of dissent provides a poignant context to explore the intersection of environmental policy, national sovereignty, and the viability of traditional farming practices within the modern European political and economic landscape. Over the years, while there have been notable advancements, CAP has consistently been criticized for its failure to fully integrate environmental protection into agricultural practices effectively. Guy Pe'er (2019) points out the significant mismatch between the CAP's financial distributions and its achievements in environmental and social spheres, arguing that the policy's heavy reliance on direct payments does not sufficiently tackle critical environmental challenges like biodiversity loss, climate change mitigation, and sustainable land use. Peter and his team suggest a radical overhaul of the CAP, advocating for a shift to a more targeted and performance-based system where funding is intricately linked to the achievement of environmental benefits and sustainability improvements.

On the other hand, the European Green Deal (EGD) is presented as much more than a climate initiative; it is a transformative economic and social agenda aiming to achieve climate neutrality by 2050 within the European Union. The comprehensive strategy outlined in the EGD suggests a significant shift towards a sustainable development model that could potentially redefine the European economic landscape. A study authored by Sarah Wolf, Jonas Teitge, Jahel Mielke, Franziska Schütze, and Carlo Jaeger, argues that the EGD is not only a climate strategy but also a significant socio-economic opportunity that could reshape the European economy into a sustainable development model (Wolf et al., 2021).

However, Eckert and Kovalevska (2021) argue that the rhetoric used in the Green Deal not only serves to strengthen the European Commission's authority but also tends to obscure complex sustainability issues under layers of technical jargon. This obfuscation can alienate the public and obscure the real challenges involved in transitioning to sustainable practices. The optimistic depiction of the EGD's potential effects contrasts sharply with the more daunting, on-the-ground realities of enacting comprehensive environmental protection and genuine ecological sustainability.

Thus, this disenfranchising discourse of the EGD poses significant challenges by fueling the rise of right-wing politics within European agrarian movements is significantly influenced by the socio-economic changes wrought by neoliberal policies, particularly after the 2008 financial crisis. Natalia Mamonova and Jaume Franquesa (2020) argue that policies such as the CAP and EGD have deepened economic inequalities and fostered disenchantment among rural populations, creating a fertile environment for right-wing populist rhetoric. This rhetoric frequently taps into national identity and socio-economic insecurities, appealing to rural constituencies who feel left behind by mainstream political agendas and marginalized by the broader economic structures.



Caradaică's examination of voluntary carbon markets, particularly those focused on forestry projects for carbon removal, serves as an example that illustrates a significant disconnect between European Union policymaking and the actual beneficiaries of such policies. This misalignment exemplifies the challenges in aligning broad environmental initiatives with local economic realities and stakeholder interests, highlighting a trend that often leads to the prevalence of anti-environmentalist and Eurosceptic discourse across the EU. Despite the well-intentioned design of these policies, they frequently encounter skepticism from local industries and member states. This skepticism often stems from the perceived economic and bureaucratic burdens these policies impose, which can severely impede their effectiveness and acceptance.

The central hypothesis of this study explores the relationship between anti-environmentalist and Eurosceptic discourses as they manifest in farmer protests across the European Union. This research aims to dissect and understand the nuances of these discourses across various member states, with a specific focus on agricultural policy debates driven by the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) and the European Green Deal (EGD). While we anticipate that anti-environmentalist and Eurosceptic sentiments may frequently intersect within these protests, the hypothesis posits that the presence of one does not necessarily imply the presence of the other.

To investigate, we will employ discourse analysis on the manifestos and public statements of the main actors involved in the farmer protests of early 2024. Our study encompasses six European countries: Germany, France, Spain, Italy, Poland, and Romania. This selection ensures representativity across different political contexts within Europe, covering Western Europe, Southern Europe, and Central-Eastern Europe. By choosing two countries from each region, we aim to facilitate comparability and draw more nuanced conclusions about the regional variations in how these discourses are shaped by local political, economic, and social contexts. This methodological approach will allow us to provide a detailed comparative analysis that contributes to a deeper understanding of the interplay between environmental policies and national sovereignty concerns within the EU. These six countries have been chosen out of the countries that had the largest farmers' protests in late 2023 – early 2024.

Throughout this paper, we will first look at the existing body of literature covering the topics of anti-environmentalism and Euroscepticism, to understand the state-of-the-art of these two phenomena. The second step is to investigate each specific country's case study, by briefly describing the farmers' protests that took place in each country's case study and by analyzing the manifestos and the demands of these protests. When analyzing these documents, special consideration to specific points that relate to either anti-environmentalism or Euroscepticism, or both.



## Anti-environmentalism

Anti-environmentalism, a phenomenon characterized by opposition to environmental policies and skepticism towards the scientific consensus on environmental issues, has gained traction in various global contexts over the past decade. This stance is typically marked by resistance to regulatory efforts aimed at protecting and preserving the environment, including policies on climate change, pollution control, and biodiversity conservation. The rise of anti-environmental sentiment is significant because it challenges the efforts to address some of the most pressing issues facing humanity today, such as climate change and environmental degradation.

To add to the complexity of the anti-environmentalist issue, Angela Turck, Lasse Schloemer, and Wiltrud Terlau delve into the so-called "trilemma" of land use, which encompasses the intertwined goals of mitigating climate change, ensuring food security, and preserving biodiversity. This trilemma reflects the challenges farmers face in balancing these often conflicting demands, with each goal seemingly at odds with the others when viewed from a traditional agricultural perspective (Turck et al. 2023).

Radical right parties strategically frame environmental issues to mobilize voter support by tapping into broader socio-political anxieties. These parties frame environmental policies as threats to national sovereignty, economic growth, and cultural identity, effectively transforming what are traditionally seen as universal valence issues into contentious positional issues. This reframing aligns with their broader populist and nationalist agendas, appealing to voters who perceive environmental regulations as impositions by elite and external forces, such as the European Union or global governance frameworks (Gemenis et al. 2012).

In a study covering the farmers' protests in the Netherlands that took place in 2019, Van der Ploeg examines the phenomenon in the context of deep-seated grievances against environmental regulations, perceived threats to farming practices, and the broader socio-political tensions manifesting as rural populism. The farmers, facing regulatory pressures to reduce nitrogen emissions and other environmental impacts, rallied against what they perceived as an unjust targeting of their livelihoods. This protest movement, however, is characterized by the author as a form of regressive populism, which, while mobilizing significant rural support, does not necessarily address the underlying challenges of sustainability and equity within agricultural policy (van der Ploeg 2020).

In their seminal work, "The Handbook of Anti-Environmentalism", Stoddart, Tindal, and Dunlap explore the multifaceted nature of opposition to environmentalism, highlighting how resistance spans from overtly corporate-driven agendas to more subtle, internally critical perspectives within environmental movements themselves. They split the existing anti-environmentalist discourses into 'critical' or 'reflexive'.



They present a clear distinction between traditional anti-environmentalism, which is typically championed by corporate interests and conservative ideologies that favor market freedom over stringent environmental regulations (critical), and the emerging 'reflexive' anti-environmentalism. This latter form is particularly intriguing as it emerges from within environmentalist circles, pointing out the adverse consequences or exclusionary practices that can arise from environmental initiatives. This nuanced exploration helps illuminate the complex dynamics and diverse opposition that environmental policies face, reflecting broader societal debates about how best to achieve sustainable environmental outcomes (Tindal et al. 2022), and will be critical for the analysis of the farmers' demands in the six European countries.

## Euroscepticism

Euroscepticism in Europe has emerged as a significant and dynamic force shaping the continent's political landscape over the last 20 years. This phenomenon, characterized by a critical or outright negative stance toward the European Union and its institutions, has roots in a diverse array of socio-economic and political anxieties. The term itself encompasses a broad spectrum of attitudes, from reformist skepticism, which advocates for specific changes to the Union's policies or structures, to rejectionist skepticism, which argues for a country's withdrawal from the EU.

Several crises have acted as catalysts for Eurosceptic sentiments. The sovereign debt crisis in the early 2010s exposed economic vulnerabilities and led to severe austerity measures in several EU countries, which, in turn, fueled disillusionment with EU governance. The 2015 migration crisis further compounded this issue, as the influx of refugees challenged the Union's border policies and sparked debates over national security and cultural integration. Perhaps the most significant manifestation of Euroscepticism was the United Kingdom's 2016 referendum on EU membership, which resulted in a decision to leave the Union, marking the first instance of a member state choosing to exit. This event, known as Brexit, not only underscored the feasibility of withdrawal but also emboldened Eurosceptic groups across the continent, advocating for similar referenda in their own countries.

Theoretical approaches to studying Euroscepticism are varied and multidimensional, reflecting the complexity of the phenomenon itself. Authors, such as Paul Taggart (1998), have emphasized the importance of understanding Euroscepticism as not only a response to political and economic developments but also as a deeper expression of political alienation and disenchantment with mainstream political options. Catherine de Vries (2018), on the other hand, has contributed to the economic explanations by exploring how perceived economic disadvantages or disparities due to EU policies catalyze Eurosceptic sentiments among citizens. Furthermore, Catherine Sorensen's work has delved into the identity-based theories of



Euroscepticism, suggesting that it often arises from fears that EU membership erodes distinct national cultures and identities (Sorensen 2008).

When it comes to the relationship between Euroscepticism and environmentalism, the European Green Deal has been a particularly easy target for Eurosceptic criticism. In a study done for the European Commission, Andrés Rodríguez-Pose and Federico Bartalucci provide a comprehensive examination of the disparate regional impacts of the green transition within the European Union. The authors develop a Regional Green Transition Vulnerability Index to measure the varying susceptibilities of EU regions to socio-economic upheavals triggered by the shift towards low-carbon standards (Rodríguez-Pose–Bartalucci 2023).

Rodríguez-Pose and Bartalucci illustrate that less-developed, peri-urban, and rural regions, particularly in Southern and Eastern Europe, are more vulnerable to negative repercussions from the green transition. The paper highlights that these regions are already economically fragile and could experience intensified hardship due to policy shifts aimed at mitigating climate change. The authors argue that if these transitions are not managed carefully, they could exacerbate social discontent and potentially increase support for climate-change-skeptic political movements, particularly from the radical right.

## Country profiles

### France

The French farmers' protests are perhaps the longest in Europe, starting back in October 2023. The farmer protests in France that began in late October 2023, spearheaded by the National Federation of Agricultural Holders' Unions (FNSEA) and Young Farmers (JA), have intensified significantly by January 2024. These protests, originating in Occitanie, involved peaceful actions such as flipping road signs at town entrances, a movement sometimes called "On marche sur la tête" (We're walking on our heads), which then spread to other regions of France.

The intensification of the movement coincided with the upcoming European elections, starting with an unauthorized blockade of the Toulouse-Tarbes highway (A64) by farmers in Occitanie on January 18, 2024. The escalation included an explosion at the regional environmental agency's building in Carcassonne on the night of January 18–19, claimed by the Comité d'Action Viticole, though no injuries occurred as the building was empty at the time.

The manifesto from the FNSEA does not overtly express anti-environmentalist sentiments or a general Eurosceptic stance. Instead, it focuses more on specific grievances related to agricultural policy and its effects on farmers, without outright rejecting environmental concerns or the European Union as a whole. In the manifesto, the term "food sovereignty" appears twice, underscoring its significance to the authors' agenda. The Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) is discussed on



multiple occasions, with four negative mentions highlighting dissatisfaction and criticism from the authors. However, it also receives three positive mentions, suggesting a recognition of its potential benefits or roles in supporting agriculture. Additionally, the European Union itself is criticized three times, indicating a clear stance of discontent or opposition towards EU policies and actions as they pertain to agricultural practices<sup>1</sup>.

While there are criticisms regarding the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) and mentions of EU-related challenges, these are contextually targeted at how these policies impact the agricultural sector rather than indicative of a broader ideological opposition to the EU or environmental regulations per se. The references to CAP, both positive and negative, highlight concerns about policy effectiveness and equity, rather than fundamental opposition to the EU's environmental goals.

Given the specific agricultural focus and the nature of the criticisms, the manifesto seems to advocate for reforms and better consideration of farmers' needs within the existing frameworks rather than opposing them on a foundational level. Therefore, it would be more accurate to describe the manifesto as expressing a reflexive anti-environmentalism combined with a soft Euroscepticism aimed at specific policy reform.

## Germany

Germany also has a long-standing tradition of farmers' protests and dissatisfaction with the CAP. Wiebke Nowack and Harry Hoffmann provide an in-depth look at the grassroots movement in Germany, which has been advocating for significant changes in agricultural practices and policies since 2011 through the "We are fed up" (Wir haben es satt, WHES) demonstrations in Berlin (Nowak–Hoffmann 2019). These protests, drawing substantial participation, have spotlighted various issues in Germany's agricultural sector, emphasizing the need for a shift from large-scale industrial farming to more sustainable, small-scale practices. Highlighting the dissatisfaction with the Common Agricultural Policy, the protestors have called for a reallocation of its budget to better serve public and ecological interests.

On December 18, 2023, the German Farmers' Association initiated a nationwide protest under the rallying cry "Too much is too much! Now it's over!" in Berlin. Approximately 6,600 demonstrators, including many farmers, converged at the Brandenburg Gate, echoing the Farmers' President Joachim Rukwied's demands to maintain agricultural subsidies. Concurrently, similar demonstrations unfolded in other German cities including Freiburg, Leipzig, and Chemnitz, signaling widespread discontent across the country. The protests captured heightened public attention on January 4, 2024, when a contingent of 100 farmers, along with other protestors, blocked the Hilligenlei ferry at Schlüttsiel port in North Frisia.

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.fnsea.fr/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Manifeste-final-FNSEA\\_Sortie-de-crise-COVID-19.pdf](https://www.fnsea.fr/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Manifeste-final-FNSEA_Sortie-de-crise-COVID-19.pdf)



This action notably delayed Federal Minister of Economics Robert Habeck and his wife, who were returning from a day trip. The situation escalated when the protestors refused Habeck's proposal to send a delegation onto the ferry, and he in turn declined to address the crowd directly, citing privacy concerns, leading to the ferry departing without further engagement.

Throughout early January, individual protests persisted, culminating in a coordinated week of action starting January 8. This included blockades of several highway access points across Germany, significantly disrupting traffic and impacting services such as the AWO hospital in Jerichow, which faced delays in receiving employees, patients, and supplies.

The demands articulated by German farmers reflect a deep-seated frustration with both national and European agricultural policies, characterized by concerns over taxation, regulatory pressures, competitive disadvantages, and media portrayal. The German Farmers' Association, along with Agriculture Connects Germany (LsV Germany), has been vocal about opposing the planned tax increases that directly impact the economic viability of farming operations. Specifically, they have targeted the imposition of an agricultural vehicle tax and the withdrawal of subsidies for agricultural diesel, seeing these fiscal policies as serious threats to the competitiveness of German agriculture<sup>2</sup>. Despite the federal government's offer to cancel the introduction of the vehicle tax and phase out the diesel subsidy over three years, these concessions were deemed insufficient by the farming community, which demands a complete withdrawal of these and other perceived fiscal burdens.

Additionally, the protests have highlighted perceived discrepancies in how the agricultural sector is portrayed in the media. Farmers have expressed dissatisfaction with what they consider a biased and one-sided media portrayal of their protests and general situation. This culminated in direct actions such as blockading broadcaster buildings and disrupting newspaper deliveries, underscoring their frustration with public representation. The German Farmers' Association has criticized these actions against the media, emphasizing the importance of press freedom but also indicating a need for more balanced and comprehensive reporting on agricultural issues<sup>3</sup>.

## Spain

The agricultural protests in Spain in 2024 are part of the broader wave of demonstrations across Europe. These protests have been primarily supported by major agricultural associations such as Unión de Uniones, ASAJA, COAG, and UPA, along with independent groups of farmers and livestock producers.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.tagesschau.de/inland/innenpolitik/landwirte-subvention-ampel-100.html>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.welt.de/politik/deutschland/article250137260/Bauernproteste-Achte-genau-darauf-was-die-so-senden-wenn-es-nicht-stimmt-steh-ich-sofort-auf-der-Matte.html>





agreements and the negotiation of mirror clauses.

The call to halt negotiations with major trade partners and to implement stricter controls on imports reflects a desire for greater national control over agricultural policies and trade practices. This stance indicates a skepticism toward the European Union's handling of trade agreements, which are viewed as favoring external interests over local farmers' needs. The demand for flexibility in the CAP further illustrates a pushback against EU-wide policies, advocating for reforms that prioritize national interests and the specific needs of local agricultural communities.

## Italy

The Italian farmers' protests, predominantly driven by dissatisfaction with European agricultural policies, highlight a range of economic and regulatory challenges that have sparked significant unrest among agricultural communities. Central to these grievances are the EU mandates requiring that 4% of fields remain uncultivated and the controversial bans on pesticides deemed essential by farmers. These regulations are viewed as severe impediments to farming operations, prompting calls for the renewal of an exemption from the IRPEF (personal income tax) on agricultural income, initially introduced in 2017. Additional demands aim to improve the income conditions for those within the sector<sup>9</sup>.

The protests escalated from January 31, with tractor-driving farmers initiating blockades at motorway toll booths to press for the elimination of anti-pesticide laws. This movement peaked on February 4, when farmers and ranchers orchestrated extensive blockades along key exits on the Autostrada Adriatica (A14), affecting locations like Castel San Pietro, Pesaro, and Porto San Giorgio<sup>10</sup>. The disruptions continued with significant blockades on major communication routes such as the Strada Statale 2 Cassia. On February 9, over 200 tractors converged on the Grande Raccordo Anulare, Rome's major ring road, in a partly authorized demonstration, though unauthorized blockades also occurred<sup>11</sup>. The protests, which primarily took place in Northern and Central Italy, saw further escalation on February 19, with tractors occupying major thoroughfares in Rome, such as Via Nomentana, effectively paralyzing significant parts of the city<sup>12</sup>.

The protests in Italy encapsulate a deep-seated dissatisfaction with current EU agricultural policies, which they argue place undue burdens on their traditional ways of farming under the guise of environmental sustainability<sup>13</sup>. Central to their

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9 <https://www.ilpost.it/2024/02/02/proteste-agricoltori-italia-richieste/>

10 <https://www.ilrestodelcarlino.it/cronaca/dove-protesta-trattori-oggi-affttn6q>

11 <https://tg24.sky.it/cronaca/2024/02/10/protesta-trattori-raccordo-roma>

12 <https://www.romatoday.it/attualita/trattori-roma-20-febbraio-2024.html>

13 <https://www.politico.eu/article/italy-rome-giorgia-meloni-farmers-to-cross-the-rubicon-with-rome-blockade/>



concerns is the EU Green Deal, which they critically refer to as "environmentalist extremism."

The farmers contend that the Green Deal's stringent regulations threaten the economic viability of traditional farming by imposing unsustainable practices that are not aligned with their operational realities.

Italian protests have been marked by a strong anti-environmentalist sentiment, particularly evident in their opposition to the EU Green Deal and novel food products like lab-grown meat and insect flour. The farmers express fears that these innovations, along with stringent environmental regulations, threaten their traditional ways of life and farming practices. This stance highlights a broader skepticism towards environmental policies that are perceived as being imposed without sufficient consideration of their practical and economic impacts on traditional agriculture.

Euroscepticism is another prominent theme in the protests in Italy. The farmers' critique of the EU's influence over national agricultural policies, exemplified by their rejection of the Green Deal and disdain for Brussels' perceived interference in Italian farming, underscores a broader distrust of EU governance. The call for a rewrite of EU policies and the demand for protective measures against imports resonate with a desire for greater national sovereignty over agricultural decisions and policies. This sentiment is further amplified by the government's rhetoric, which positions Italian farmers as defenders of national tradition against external influences.

## Poland

In March 2024, the EU's decision to renew duty-free Ukrainian agricultural imports while increasing protections for sensitive EU products sparked significant unrest among Polish farmers<sup>14</sup>. The easing of import restrictions led to an influx of Ukrainian agricultural goods, such as grain and produce, into the Polish market<sup>15</sup>. This glut caused a substantial decrease in demand and prices for local Polish products, as the market became saturated with Ukrainian imports that were perceived as lower quality<sup>16</sup>. The situation escalated as Polish farmers, supported by nearly all national farmers' unions, launched widespread protests, blocking major roads to express their discontent with the EU policies, which they argued were detrimental to local agriculture. These protests also included grievances about the broader implications of the European Green Deal, such as stricter greenhouse emissions regu-

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14 <https://www.gazetaprawna.pl/wiadomosci/kraj/artykuly/9474436,kolejne-protesty-rolnikow-4-kwi-tnia-co-zaplanowali-organizatorzy.html>

15 <https://www.dw.com/pl/prasa-polscy-i-czescy-rolnicy-blokuj%20C4%85-zbo%20C5%BCe-z-ukrainy/a-68297725>

16 <https://www.money.pl/gospodarka/rolnicy-protestuja-to-nie-unia-i-ukraina-sa-ich-najwiekszym-problemem-6998103587711488a.html#:~:text=Rolnicy%20protestuj%20C4%85%20na%20granicy%20z,kt%C3%B3ra%20zalewa%20C5%9Bwiat%20anim%20zbo%20C5%BCem.>



lations and animal welfare laws. The situation was further complicated by geopolitical tensions, as some protest elements displayed pro-Putin and anti-Ukrainian sentiments, which the Polish foreign ministry speculated might be influenced by external forces aiming to destabilize the region.

The opposition of NSZZ RI "Solidarność" to the EU Green Deal reflects a confluence of anti-environmentalist and Eurosceptic sentiments prevalent among certain sectors within Poland. The union argues that the Green Deal, with its stringent environmental mandates, would disproportionately harm Polish farmers by escalating costs and restricting traditional farming practices, thereby threatening the viability of family farms. This resistance is also rooted in a broader Eurosceptic viewpoint, which critiques the European Union's influence over national policies, asserting that such EU-driven initiatives do not sufficiently consider the unique economic and social contexts of member states like Poland. This opposition highlights a clash between environmental goals set at the EU level and national economic interests, encapsulated in the union's pushback against perceived overreach.

Despite being major beneficiaries of CAP funds, as Bilewicz argues, Polish farmers exhibit strong dissatisfaction (Bilewicz et al., 2022). The discontent with CAP is partly attributed to its environmental implications, which align with broader themes of anti-environmentalism. The policy has inadvertently encouraged practices that contribute to environmental degradation, such as promoting large-scale, intensive agricultural methods that are less sustainable and more damaging to ecosystems. The farmers' resistance to such regulations stems not only from economic concerns but also from a perception that these policies are misaligned with the practical realities of farming. This reflects an anti-environmental sentiment, where environmental regulations are viewed as impractical impositions that threaten their traditional way of farming and livelihood.

Bilewicz also underscores a strong Eurosceptic sentiment among these farmers, which emerges from their perception that EU policies, particularly CAP, fail to adequately reflect the unique agricultural context of post-socialist states like Poland. The dissatisfaction is rooted in the belief that EU policies are designed with a Western European bias, disregarding the historical and socio-economic backgrounds of Eastern European nations. This sentiment is compounded by the farmers' experiences of inequality and inefficiency in subsidy distribution, which reinforce their skepticism towards EU governance and its impact on their agricultural and economic independence.

## Romania

Romania is no stranger to government-changing protests. The Europeanisation process was seen as a modernizing force throughout society, and thus any European policy reforms would be welcomed. The 2017–2019 protests were also an example of civil society support for European policymaking (Dogot 2023). On the



other hand, the recent farmers' protests pose a striking contrast to the protests that occurred 5 years prior.

The farmers' protests in Romania took place in January and February 2024. Although not as extensive as their Western counterparts, these protests are nonetheless just as important to analyze. The scale of the protests was similar, however. Some estimates put the total number of vehicles used to block access in the largest cities at about 4500<sup>17</sup>. The main Eurosceptic party, AUR, also tried to capitalize on these protests. Having previously criticized the Romanian authorities' support for Ukraine in the conflict with Russia (Bujdei-Tebeica 2023), AUR tried to support the criticism of Romanian farmers against Ukrainian grain imports. However, this attempt did not amount to much, the protesters opting to not politicize their grievances.

Overall, the manifesto from Romanian transporters and farmers highlights significant discontent with current policies, both national and EU, reflecting broader tensions within sectors that feel overlooked or disadvantaged by these policies. The document underscores a critical intersection of economic, environmental, and political issues facing the agricultural sector in Romania today<sup>18</sup>.

The manifesto shows signs of anti-environmentalist sentiment, particularly in its opposition to environmental regulations that affect farming practices. For example, the demand for the elimination of diesel excise taxes and the opposition to certain EU environmental mandates reflect a preference for economic benefits over environmental protections. This stance suggests a conflict between the immediate economic interests of the agricultural sector and the long-term environmental sustainability goals promoted by the EU.

The call for the reintroduction of customs duties on Ukrainian products and the clear emphasis on national over EU-wide agricultural strategies reflect a Eurosceptic stance. This is evident in the demands for state-level interventions and legislative adjustments that prioritize Romanian agricultural interests over broader EU regulations and market dynamics. Such demands highlight a desire for greater national control over agricultural policies, indicating a pushback against perceived EU overreach in local agricultural matters.

Overall, the AAC's demands are reflective of a sector under strain from both external economic forces and internal regulatory challenges. They underscore a critical balancing act between maintaining agricultural productivity and navigating the complex terrain of EU regulations and international market dynamics<sup>19</sup>.

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17 <https://newsweek.ro/actualitate/video-george-simion-pus-pe-fuga-de-un-protestatar-nu-ai-ce-cauta-aici-intinde-o>

18 <https://www.euronews.ro/articole/lista-celor-76-de-revendicari-ale-agricultorilor-si-transportatorilor-ieftinirea>

19 <https://www.zf.ro/zf-24/care-sunt-cele-15-puncte-de-pe-lista-de-solicitari-cu-care-merg-22231805>

## Conclusions

The conclusion of our analysis shows that farmer protest discourses can be distinguished along two main axes: critically anti-environmentalist and reflexively anti-environmentalist, as well as sovereignty-based Euroscepticism and social Euroscepticism, following Sorensen's taxonomy. Reflexive anti-environmentalist and socially Eurosceptic discourses are more prevalent in France, Germany, and Spain, indicating a response to environmental policies that is more reflective of concerns about practical impacts rather than outright opposition. On the other hand, critical anti-environmentalist and sovereignty-based Euroscepticism are found more prominently in Italy, Poland, and Romania, where there is a stronger direct opposition to EU policies perceived as imposing unnecessary burdens.

This delineation suggests that while anti-environmentalism does not necessarily imply Euroscepticism, these discourses often coexist within the protests across all studied cases. The interaction between these discourses highlights a complex landscape of agricultural discontent within the EU, where economic, social, and national sovereignty concerns intersect with environmental regulations. The study's findings underscore the need for EU policymakers to consider these nuances in farmer perceptions and responses, aiming for more tailored and inclusive policy frameworks that address both environmental goals and the socio-economic realities of European farmers.

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