

Briefing · May 2024

Climate obstruction across Europe

Key points:

- Climate Obstruction Across Europe, coordinated by the [Climate Social Science Network \(CSSN\)](#), is the first book to document the development and nature of climate obstruction activities across Europe, which are efforts to deliberately slow or block climate action. Climate obstruction strategies range from outright denial to more subtle [forces of delay](#) and the [spread of disinformation](#).
- While outright climate denial has given way to delay tactics in recent years, denial has resurged in countries such as Italy and Germany. Denial is tied to the rise of the far-right, such as the Alternative for Germany (AfD), and is spread via conservative think tanks with links to the US – for example the Istituto Bruno Leoni in Italy.
- In the Czech Republic and Russia, widespread climate denial messages are spread by political parties and the government and have over time become part of mainstream perspectives.
- Greenwashing is used by industries and organisations to falsely promote themselves as part of the climate solution in a way that obstructs climate action. Fossil fuel companies such as Shell and think tanks such as EPICENTER, which has ties to the Italian gas industry, frame gas as a bridging technology that is crucial to the energy transition. This stance was adopted by the European Commission after intense lobbying by the fossil fuel industry.
- Obstructionists also try to delay action on climate by arguing that the rate of transition is too fast or can be postponed to a future point in time when the technology is available, such as through the development of ‘clean coal’ in Poland.
- Obstructionists prioritise the protection of national industry over climate action. On an EU level, large-scale policies on carbon tax and emissions trading have been rejected or watered down due to concerns of carbon leakage to other countries and the threat this would pose to EU industry.
- The topic of climate change is politicised and obstructionists pit different ideologies against each other to slow change. This tactic is used by far-right parties such as the Sweden Democrats and Vox in Spain.
- Understanding the way that different actors distort information systems to obstruct climate action and compromise the integrity of democracy in Europe is crucial in the lead-up to the EU election this June.

Climate obstruction in Europe

Climate Obstruction Across Europe is the first book to examine networks of disinformation in Europe. Previous research has primarily focused on the US as well as the activities of a few prominent fossil fuel companies and publicly visible conservative think tanks. The term ‘climate obstruction’ refers to deliberate efforts to slow or block climate policies that are aligned with the current scientific consensus on what is required to avoid dangerous warming.

The European Union has presented itself as a global leader in climate action for decades and has proposed ambitious climate pledges and policies at the international level. However, the EU is [unlikely to meet its 2030 climate targets](#) and certain climate policies in Europe face reversal. Issues such as economic crises, geopolitical tensions, conflict, global

competition and authoritarian control have been used as reasons [to roll back action on climate](#).

Climate obstruction has also been linked to the recent rise of the far right in European countries including Italy, Spain, Sweden and Germany. Polls suggest that nationalist right and far-right parties [could pick up nearly a quarter of seats](#) in the European Parliament in June elections. Understanding these networks of obstruction and the influence they have on information systems and policy objectives is critical to ensuring a democratic outcome in the 2024 EU election.

Defining climate obstruction

Kristoffer Ekberg and colleagues, the authors of the book's chapter on Sweden, break down [climate obstruction into three distinct levels](#). Primary obstruction is defined as the “denial of the scientific evidence of human-induced climate change, and consequently, actions which undermine climate policy.” Secondary obstruction refers to instances where “science is at least tacitly accepted but meaningful climate action is delayed because of for example ideological, economic or political reasons.” Tertiary obstruction refers to “cultures, hierarchies and values, as well as, for example, infrastructures that stand in the way of necessary action.”

In recent years, primary obstruction in the form of climate denial has occurred less frequently and has given way to more subtle forms of secondary and tertiary climate obstruction. This takes place through a broad network of actors that work in coordination to push their agendas. Key actors include politicians, government institutions and fossil fuel companies, as well as industry associations and lobby groups. Think tanks, research institutes and academics produce material and reports to legitimise climate obstructionist messaging. Additionally, the media spreads climate delay and denial messaging and can play a role in politicising climate action or minimising the visibility of climate change.

Key obstruction strategies

In each country, the fossil fuel industry's network undermines the information ecosystems crucial for democracy, skewing governments towards corporate interests over citizens. As a result, the fossil fuel industry and its network of climate obstructionists have successfully prevented climate action in Europe for decades and show no signs of slowing their disinformation campaigns.

Table 1: Key climate obstruction tactics and messages

Tactic	Country	Key actors	Key messages
Climate denial	Italy	Giorgia Meloni, Brothers of Italy (Fdl)	Questioning the existence, causes and urgency of climate change, including claiming global warming is a ‘hoax’
		Istituto Bruno Leoni (IBL)	Framing concern for climate action and government interference as an ideological threat to freedom
	Czech Republic	Václav Klaus, Civic Democratic Party (ODS), Centre for Economics	Undermining climate data, claiming the science is ideologically driven

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		and Politics (CEP), Václav Klaus Institute (IVK)	
	Russia	Russian government	Framing action on climate change as 'Western tool of dominance'
Greenwashing	EU	EPICENTER	Falsely promoting fossil gas as a bridging technology
	Netherlands	Shell	Falsely promoting gas as a climate solution
	Italy	Eni	Misleading consumers by labelling automotive fuels as 'green'
Delaying action	Poland	Law and Justice party	Promoting unproven technologies as climate solutions, including 'clean coal'
	Germany	Academic council of the Federal Ministry of Economics, New Social Market Economy (INSM)	Attacking the RESA Act and claiming it promoted inefficient technologies, made the energy transition too expensive and threatened national competitiveness
		Europäisches Institut für Klima- und Energieforschung (EIKE)	Framing climate policy as an encroachment of freedoms, contributing to the polarisation of climate politics
Protecting industry		Irish Farmers Association	Redirecting responsibility, pushing non-transformative solutions, emphasising the downsides of climate policy
		Ireland	Irish Farmers Journal
	Scotland	Offshore Energies UK (OEUK)	Attempting to discredit the reliability of renewables, exaggerating energy security concerns
	UK	GMB Union	Exaggerating costs of action, underplaying climate threats, techno-optimism
		BP	Using the promise of new jobs to gain support for new fossil fuel developments
Culture wars	Sweden	Sweden Democrats	Pitching opposing ideologies against each other, framing climate concern as irrational and a class issue
	Spain	Vox	Creating culture wars, including around meat consumption, and

Outright climate denial

Resurgence of outright climate denial (Italy, Germany)

Outright climate denial is widespread in politics and the media in Italy and has seen a resurgence through the rise of the far right. Politicians in Giorgia Meloni's right-wing government have made statements that aim to [fuel the perception that the debate on the existence, causes and urgency of climate change is still ongoing](#). This includes reviving decades-old arguments such as pointing out colder temperatures to claim that global warming is a 'hoax'. These perspectives are featured on major TV shows and in mainstream newspapers and are ultimately reflected in government decisions. For example, in July 2023, [nearly EUR 16 billion earmarked for environmental regulations](#) within the Next Generation EU National Recovery and Resilience Plan was scrapped by Meloni's government.

US climate denialist think tanks and fossil fuel companies support and provide funding for their Italian counterparts such as the think tank IBL. With ties to the US climate-denialist Heartland Institute, IBL [portrays mainstream scientists and environmentalists advocating for government intervention as irrational and anti-progressive](#). Similar patterns of US influence via conservative think tanks are observed in the Netherlands, Spain and Sweden.

Germany has also witnessed a resurgence of climate denialism with the rise of the far-right AfD since 2017. The AfD, currently [the second most popular party in Germany](#), is the sole political entity opposing climate action. Its messaging is supported by think tanks such as EIKE, which claims to be the leading European 'institute' advocating 'climate realism' and [spreads the most denial and obstruction messages of all European think tanks](#). Both the far-right and neoliberal think tanks promote messaging that the energy transition will threaten German prosperity, however, unlike in Italy, these perspectives are not published in mainstream media outlets.

Winning by default (Czech Republic)

Researchers have labelled the coal-dependent Czech Republic as "[one of the most sceptical countries in Europe](#)" with regard to climate change. Former Czech prime minister and president, Václav Klaus, was a prominent climate denier and has normalised climate scepticism through his messaging since the 1990s. He has voiced uncertainty around climate data and the way scientists interpreted this data, claiming that the science was ideologically driven and represented the expansion of European ideals [that threatened freedom](#) and the free market economy.

These messages were spread through the Civic Democratic Party, founded by Klaus, and liberal-conservative Czech think tanks, such as CEP and IVK, which were [inspired by neoliberal think tanks that emerged in the US during the 1990s](#). Close ties between these think tanks and politicians to academics, and their presence in mainstream media, helped to legitimise and disseminate these messages "without directly promoting the agenda of climate obstruction themselves."

As a result, climate denial along with the delay and dismissal of effective climate policies is the established mindset of the Czech public. Interest and salience on the topic are low, with [only 39% of the Czech population interested in climate change, and only 42% believe](#)

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[the impacts of climate change will be all negative](#). Those wanting to obstruct climate action do not need to do much lobbying to have an impact, especially as politicians have maintained close relationships with the fossil fuel industry.

Authoritarian control over climate narratives (Russia)

Russia presents a different climate obstruction context. As there is little distinction between the state and private sector, some of the more well-known agents of climate obstruction such as conservative think tanks do not exist. Instead, the Russian state perceives action on climate change to be a “Western tool of dominance” or to represent foreign interests. The government uses labels such as ‘foreign agent’ and ‘undesirable organisation’ to shape public perception and [delegitimise the work of NGOs and media that highlight climate change as an issue](#). The public does not perceive climate change to be an important problem, which is reinforced by the state-controlled media, and as a result, the government feels little pressure to act on climate.

Greenwashing

Gas in the EU Green Taxonomy

The EU Green Taxonomy for Sustainable Activities was created to steer additional private finance into green investment. To meet the EU’s 2030 climate goal of reducing CO2 emissions by 55% compared with 1990 levels, [there is an estimated annual investment gap of EUR 300 billion](#). Fossil and nuclear interests have [successfully pushed for the inclusion of gas and nuclear projects in the taxonomy](#) under certain conditions, such as through the additional deployment of carbon capture and storage (CCS) technologies, even though this contradicted the scientific recommendations put forward by a technical expert group.

A study by the NGO Reclaim Finance [identified 189 nuclear and gas lobby actors, employing 825 lobbyists](#), which spent between EUR 71 million to 87 million a year and held over 300 meetings with the European Commission between 2018 and 2020. In addition to industry lobby groups, think tank allies objected to the Green Taxonomy. The EPICENTER think tank network, which has ties to the Italian gas industry, put forward the argument that fossil gas is bridging technology, which was ultimately adopted by the EU Commission. EU gas lobbying efforts have been extensive and long lasting. In 2013, the EU Climate Commissioner at the time [repeated BP’s phrase that natural gas was “an indispensable component” of the EU’s climate strategy](#).

Social licence to operate (Netherlands, Italy)

Shell is very visible in Dutch society and has invested heavily in promoting its image and building trust with the public to maintain its social licence to operate. Shell is represented by [prominent PR agency Edelman](#) which runs campaigns that boost its allegedly sustainable profile and sponsors relationships with cultural and educational institutions. For example, Shell funded the ‘Generation Discover Festival’ for children, which [promoted gas as a climate solution](#). Shell has also maintained [strong ties with universities and research institutes](#), such as the Dutch Research Council, by providing funding for science and serving on university boards.

Other large national fossil fuel companies, like Eni in Italy and BP in the UK, are closely associated with national identity and employ similar tactics to maintain their social licence to operate. Eni has portrayed itself as a “crucial facilitator of the energy transition,” for example by rebranding its utility services division [as ‘Eni Plenitude’ with a green logo in 2021](#). In 2020, Eni was fined EUR 5 million by the Italian antitrust authority for [misleading advertising messages](#) that labelled its automotive fuels as ‘green’.

Systemic obstruction (Netherlands)

In addition to its cultural and societal connections, Shell has close ties to the Dutch government that [go back to the 1920s](#). In the Netherlands, fossil fuel companies are given a seat at the table in the development of climate plans and there is a [revolving door between government and industry](#). This material and structural integration of fossil fuel companies in the state means climate delay messaging is more effective, or sometimes not even needed. Close ties between Shell and the Dutch Ministry of Economic Affairs have been a steady climate obstructor, with the ministry having actively opposed an energy tax and [“blindly assumed what was put forward by Shell”](#) and industry groups. A similar type of systemic obstruction is observed in the UK, where Shell and BP paid no corporation taxes or production levies on oil and gas production in Britain’s North Sea between 2020 and 2023, yet benefitted from billions of pounds in tax breaks and other forms of government support.

Delaying action

Delaying the transition (Poland)

Poland remains [Europe’s most coal-dependent economy](#). Coal miners wield significant political power, making [Just Transition a key government priority](#). For example, the southern coal mining region of Upper Silesia elects 12–13% of the parliament. Additionally, state ownership of energy facilities has blurred boundaries between public administration, politics and the energy sector. Much obstructionist messaging is focused on the unsustainable pace of the energy transition, with Poland instead calling for a more “realistic and considerate” transition. As a result, since Poland joined the EU in 2004, Polish governments have [vetoed ambitious climate policy initiatives and decarbonisation targets](#). Poland was the only member state that [did not commit to the EU’s 2050 net-zero emission target](#) in 2019 and was the [only EU member state to add new coal capacity in 2021](#).

Politicians and industry also obstruct climate action by acknowledging the scale of the issue and the need to respond, but delaying this to an unspecified future point in time when “silver bullet” technologies will solve the problem. These narratives increased in the media, [from 23% to 44%, after the 2015 election](#) in which the populist Law and Justice party won. In particular, the development of clean coal has been a priority that would allow Poland to maintain its coal sector in an energy transition.

Techno-optimism is also prominent elsewhere: in the UK through the pursuit of CCS, in [oil and gas companies like Eni](#), as well as in other industries, such as [Royal Dutch Airlines \(KLM\)](#). The belief in breakthrough technologies is also reflected in the European Green Deal.

Policy perfectionism (Germany)

Germany has positioned itself as a climate leader, but due to coordinated lobbying efforts from industry, it [is not projected to meet its climate targets](#). Some of the strongest lobbying efforts have been directed at the [Renewable Energy Sources Act \(RESA\)](#), passed in 2000 with the aim of providing financial stability and incentivising growth for renewable energy sources. However, industry and think tanks opposed the act’s guaranteed feed-in tariff for renewable energy. In 2004, a study published through the academic council of the Federal Ministry of Economics claimed that the RESA would [not be an efficient way to proceed in the long term and would cause unnecessarily high consumer prices](#). The ministry demanded that the RESA be cancelled and proposed that the government should instead incentivise innovation and competition between different types of renewables. Germany’s fringe climate denialists and think tanks, such as EIKE, also oppose the RESA.

Additionally, INSM – a lobby organisation funded by the German metal industry association – ran a dedicated media campaign with an annual budget of up to EUR 8 million, claiming that the act promoted inefficient technologies, made the energy transition too expensive and threatened national competitiveness. In 2014, the tariff was replaced with an auctioning system that benefited large-scale capital investment over decentralised renewable expansion and overall weakened the act. Obstructionists have pushed back against climate policies and renewables investment using similar messaging around their supposed ineffectiveness and costs in countries such as the UK and Sweden.

Redirecting responsibility (UK, Sweden, Italy, Spain)

Climate obstructionists often deflect responsibility for acting on climate change, arguing that it is the obligation of another country or of the individual to act. The UK has tried to downplay its role in the climate crisis, claiming that other countries with larger emissions, like China, should act on climate instead. Sweden positioned itself as a frontrunner on climate early on, and [leaned on policies that were progressive at the time](#), such as the Swedish carbon tax, to show that they had already “done enough” and it was the responsibility of other EU countries to act. Companies like Italian oil major Eni often run promotional campaigns that place responsibility for the environment on the individual. Individual offset programmes reinforce this messaging. For example, one of Spain’s biggest emitters, the oil company Repsol, launched the [Green Engine emissions-compensation project](#) in 2022, which allows citizens to calculate and offset their emissions by paying for reforestation projects.

Protecting industry

Protecting national competitiveness (EU, UK)

The number of lobbyists in Brussels is estimated at [around 25,000 with a budget of EUR 1.5 billion](#), with about twenty times more lobbyists working for grey industries such as oil and gas than for ‘green’ interest groups. EU industry lobby groups have repeatedly pushed back against proposed climate policies, arguing that self-regulation is more effective and that [industry regulation will result in carbon leakage](#), meaning that emission reductions in the EU will result in increased emissions in other countries, while threatening EU industry competitiveness.

The EU attempted to introduce a carbon tax in the 1990s, before the EU Emissions Trading System (ETS), which [failed due to strong resistance from European industrial lobby groups](#). In the UK, the coal lobby prompted the House of Lords’ EU Committee (chaired by a former chairman of British Coal), to produce a report highlighting their concerns about [the effect of a tax on the competitiveness of the UK coal industry](#).

While the EU ETS was ultimately adopted in 2005, industry groups weakened the design of the mechanism. The Alliance of Energy Intensive Industries [successfully pushed to include the concept of carbon leakage at every phase of the negotiations](#). Additionally, the industry has continuously [pushed for the allocation of free allowances](#), which has allowed companies to maintain existing business models and even make windfall profits. This in part explains why it has taken so long for the mechanism to become effective.

Political and cultural influence of the agrifood industry (Ireland)

Ireland has ambitious climate commitments but continues to have one of the highest rates of per capita greenhouse gas emissions in Europe. The agriculture sector – [which](#)

[accounted for 38% of national emissions in 2022](#) – presents a key stumbling block to achieving emission targets. In Ireland, the agriculture sector has historic significance and has a strong influence among policymakers as a key rural employer. It is among the most active lobbies in Ireland. For example, the Irish Farmers Association [met with public officials 212 times between 2015 and 2022](#). Extensive lobbying successfully lowered the legally binding emissions reduction target for the agricultural sector to 25% from 30%, under the 2022 Climate Action Amendment Bill.

A key argument used by the industry is that [attempts to cut agricultural emissions in Ireland will only result in carbon leakage](#). The industry also claimed that higher emission reduction targets would devastate the sector, compromise global food systems, and allow insufficient time for new technologies to be implemented.

The agri-food industry in Ireland [employs the well-known communications consulting agency Red Flag](#), which has represented Tobacco companies, Monsanto, and other agri-chemical companies in the EU. Messaging is pushed through the press as well as children's education, similar to the tactics highlighted by Shell above. The Irish Farmers Journal has been criticised for featuring disproven climate science, and Agri Aware, a primary school education programme funded by the agriculture industry, has [underplayed the biodiversity loss and methane emissions attributable to agriculture](#).

Protecting jobs and energy security (Scotland, UK)

In Scotland, new fossil fuel developments have been framed as part of a "[low-carbon journey that will support energy security, jobs, the economy and the net-zero future that everyone wants to see](#)." For example, oil and gas trade association OEUK Chief Executive Deirdre Michie said in 2022 that the controversial Cambo off-shore oil field in the North Atlantic, "[like all future UK oil and gas projects, is designed with lower-operating emissions in mind](#)."

GMB Union, the third-largest union in the UK by members, which represents many workers in high-emitting industries, has vocally supported the UK's domestic fossil fuel industry and has criticised the government's net zero programme [on the grounds of improving energy security and losing out to international competition](#). These messages align with the short-term prioritisation of business as usual by the fossil fuel industry. In 2023, the leader of the GMB Union publicly attacked the Labour Party's proposed policy of ending oil and gas licences in the North Sea, stating that the UK needs '[plans not bans](#)'. Unions also see the view that renewable energy could save on long-term operation and maintenance costs as a [cynical attempt to undermine good quality employment](#).

Energy industry employers, such as OEUK and BP, have used the promise of new jobs to gain support for new fossil fuel developments. For example, the OEUK has promised [tens of thousands of new energy jobs](#), many of which appear to be linked to as-yet untested and unproven technologies. In other countries with significant coal-mining regions, like Poland, the Czech Republic and Russia, the loss of employment has been used as a reason to delay the transition.

Culture wars through ideological conflict

Far-right as a climate countermovement ally (Sweden)

Sweden's approach to climate action has been described as the "middle way", which signifies a political compromise that acknowledges the importance of environmental concerns and climate change, but assumes they can be fixed incrementally with technical

solutions without challenging economic growth or implementing lifestyle changes. Since the 1970s, climate obstruction has been organised as a countermovement in response to demands for more transformative policies.

In 2010, the far-right Sweden Democrats entered the parliament and became a political ally to the Swedish climate countermovement. The party started spreading denialist arguments within the government and claimed that concern for the environment was “[nothing more than a thinly veiled project of ‘the new class’ to gain power.](#)” The Sweden Democrats pushed mixed messaging which included that there was no human-caused global warming and that Sweden’s carbon emissions were too low to matter. Like the climate counter-movement, the party claims to be a rational truth-teller and frames everyone else as alarmist. Both groups use similar arguments that defend outdated values of patriarchy, industrial capitalism and nationalism. Alternative digital media has helped to connect the organised Swedish climate change countermovement with the far-right.

In the 2022 national election, [Sweden Democrats received 20.5% of the vote](#) and became the biggest party in the winning nationalist-conservative block. Vocal climate denialist MPs were also elected into power. The Swedish Climate Council has said that new policies influenced by the party will increase Sweden’s emissions and [make it even harder to meet existing climate goals](#).

Dietary culture wars (Spain)

In Spain, due to polarised media and interest groups, climate action is a politicised cultural issue. The conservative People’s Party and the far-right party Vox, which has seen a recent rise in popularity, push against climate action most actively. For example, in the national elections in July 2023, Vox pushed for Spain to [abandon the Paris Agreement and receive an exemption from the Climate Change Law](#).

The biggest challenge for Spain meeting its climate targets is non-energy greenhouse gas emissions, especially from transport, diet and tourism, as they involve “important business interests and entrenched ideological stances.” Meat consumption has particularly been at the heart of culture wars. Spain has the highest per capita meat consumption in the EU and the industry accounts for 70% of all national agricultural emissions. Although meat consumption has been [slowly decreasing in Spain since 2008 \(except for 2020\)](#), the meat industry has lobbied to counteract the increasingly negative image of meat products, spreading a counter-discourse to [undermine the scientific evidence connecting meat consumption to health and climate issues](#).

When Spain’s Ministry of Consumer Affairs launched a campaign on reducing meat consumption, industry associations tried to distort the debate and the prime minister mocked the campaign, stating that steaks are ‘unbeatable.’ Spain was also the target of the widely criticised [‘Proud of EU beef’ campaign](#), which allocated over EUR 2 million to the Spanish lobby to enable consumers to again be confident about their consumption of red meat. Similar campaigns using millions of public funds were launched by the pork industry. Additionally, meat lobbies Provacuno and Interporc sued a vegan food company and forced it to [withdraw a campaign for vegan ‘hamburgers’ that highlighted the environmental impact of meat](#).

Looking forward

Although the book represents only a first glimpse into the complex networks of climate disinformation and obstruction in Europe, it is evident that these actors have a significant presence and impact in EU countries. Climate obstructionists, including fossil fuel

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companies and far-right political parties and think tanks, block action on climate by undermining science, pushing false solutions, exaggerating the costs of climate policies, and by framing environmental action as an ideological threat. Bringing visibility to these climate obstruction networks and identifying the ways they distort information to undermine climate action and democratic processes is important in the lead-up to the EU election in June and beyond. Climate obstructionists must be challenged if the EU is to meet its climate goals and avert a dangerous trajectory of global warming.

The book, coordinated by Brown University's [Climate Social Science Network](#) (CSSN) will be published by Oxford University Press, with physical copies available starting June 18. The book's findings will be accessible on the [CSSN homepage](#) and the [Climate Action Against Disinformation](#) website on May 30.