

## Green vs Green: Fault Lines Within Europe's Energy Transition

Article by Pablo Lapuente Tiana

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As the energy transition gathers pace, fault lines are emerging within the environmental movement between those who prioritise the rapid deployment of large-scale green infrastructure and those who emphasise local participation. With shifting political priorities at the European level, could these conflicts contribute to a fairer transition rather than slowing it down?

Until recently, a cautious consensus dominated energy politics in the Western world: broadly protective of the fossil status quo, yet nominally committed to decarbonisation. That consensus has now fractured, and energy policy is being increasingly shaped by open conflict. Political actors aligned with fossil interests are becoming more explicit in their opposition to the energy transition, a shift visible in growing resistance to renewable projects and electrification. In the EU, anti-renewables rhetoric is gaining ground, particularly on the far right, where wind and solar are framed as economically damaging, imposed from above, and detached from people's "real" needs.

Yet the rapid expansion of renewables is not only clashing with fossil fuel interests. It is also generating conflict among actors who, in principle, all support a green transition. At local and regional levels, environmental organisations have mobilised against specific transition-related projects. For example, in southern France, groups such as *France Nature Environnement* and the *Ligue pour la Protection des Oiseaux* have taken [legal action against wind farms](#) linked to the deaths of protected bird species in conservation areas. In southern Spain, *Ecologistas en Acción* [campaigns against a large solar plant](#), arguing that it would degrade soils and disrupt local flora.

These disputes are not straightforward cases of environmental justice or NIMBYism, although they can overlap with both. They are better understood as "green-on-green" conflicts: clashes between competing ecological priorities, where actors share broad commitments to decarbonisation and environmental protection but disagree over what should be built, where, at what cost, and under whose authority. Given their increasing visibility and political implications, these conflicts deserve to be explored on their own terms, which this article attempts to do.

### Competing priorities

The term "green-on-green conflicts" was coined in 2004 by the British geographer [Charles Warren](#), drawing on the military expression "blue-on-blue", meaning friendly fire. Warren used the term to suggest that such conflicts might foreshadow future environmental debates: "society has gone green, but what kind of green do we want?" Such conflicts often centre on siting decisions, species protection, and planning procedures. But they are also political in a broader sense, raising questions about who defines the public interest in the transition and what counts as acceptable damage.

Green-on-green conflicts are not new. They reflect long-standing tensions within environmentalism itself, particularly between actors who prioritise different dimensions of the ecological crisis. Most commonly in recent decades, one strand has placed climate mitigation at the centre, favouring rapid, system-wide

transformation through engagement with governments and industry, and the development of large-scale infrastructure. Another is rooted in local or regional contexts and emphasises biodiversity, land use, and resource protection. While this distinction should not be overstated, many green-on-green disputes do follow this pattern, reflecting a persistent clash between different political cultures within the environmental movement.

Although opposition to renewable energy projects is often entangled with other grievances, conflicts between environmental actors deserve attention in their own right. In the EU, the acceleration of the energy transition over the past decade has made these conflicts more frequent and visible. Each of these conflicts is rooted in specific local issues that do not always translate neatly into a broader picture, yet their recurrence across Europe points to a common logic. Whereas Europe's fossil energy system relies largely on distant extraction and concentrated infrastructure, the green transition depends on more spatially extensive and locally embedded forms of energy production, bringing energy systems into closer contact with territories.

Energy transition projects are usually framed as a common story in which decarbonisation is urgent, energy security is fragile, and energy sovereignty is essential. Opposition, however, rarely follows a single script. It tends to be more fragmented and situational, shaped by the details of individual projects and their local consequences. Even so, for all its variety, different energy sectors tend to generate different kinds of protests, rooted in their specific environmental impacts.

## **Sites of contention**

Wind power, which accounts for roughly 40 per cent of renewable electricity generation in the EU, is the most common and widely discussed source of green-on-green conflict. One reason is its visibility. Onshore wind farms reshape landscapes and local environments, bringing them into direct contact with long-standing forms of resistance to large infrastructure projects.

Galicia in northwestern Spain illustrates the point. Once the country's leading producer of wind power, the region has seen the expansion of onshore wind become a source of conflict. There, environmental groups opposed dozens of new onshore wind farms, filing hundreds of lawsuits and arguing that the rapid build-out was damaging landscapes and protected habitats. Many projects were temporarily paralysed as a result, sparking a wider public debate. The campaign did not reject wind power as such, which activists described as "essential to protect the planet in the face of the current climate crisis". Instead, it targeted what the activists called a "speculative and predatory model" of large-scale wind power, imposed from above in the interests of large energy firms. According to campaigners, this approach threatened "irreversible environmental, cultural, social, and economic damage". Similar conflicts around wind farms have emerged elsewhere in Europe, including in Germany, Sweden, and Cyprus.

Solar projects, which account for approximately one-fourth of Europe's renewable electricity generation, have sparked similar disputes. In Romania's county of Arad, plans for the Dama Solar project, expected to become Europe's largest photovoltaic park, were challenged in court by a conservation association. The group argued that the project's location within a Natura 2000 site posed risks to protected species. The legal challenge brought conservationists into direct conflict with developers and state authorities, who defended the project as essential to meeting renewable energy targets and strengthening energy security. The legal challenge – later suspended after the parties reached a negotiated agreement – reflects a broader pattern seen in parts of France, Spain, and Poland.

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Beyond wind and solar, other parts of the energy transition attract less public attention but are no less central. Across Europe, enabling technologies such as grid expansion and battery production are also giving rise to green-on-green conflicts. Among these, mining projects linked to critical raw materials have proven particularly contentious, triggering strong mobilisation in countries including [Serbia](#) and [Sweden](#).

In northern Portugal, plans to develop lithium mining near the municipality of [Covas do Barroso](#) were presented by authorities as a strategic contribution to Europe's green transition. Local residents and environmental groups reacted quickly, organising demonstrations and pursuing legal challenges. Protesters described the area under this project as a sacrifice zone, expected to absorb environmental damage so that decarbonisation could move forward elsewhere. Such a framing was directed at what protesters saw as top-down decision-making and the marginalisation of the local population. One of the groups organising the protests, *Unidos em Defesa de Covas do Barroso*, summed up the criticism by [arguing](#) that "an energy transition that sacrifices the environment and is imposed on communities, rather than being built with them, devalues local knowledge and experience in affected areas and sets troubling anti-democratic precedents".

## **From climate to territory**

The rise of green-on-green conflicts points to broader shifts within environmental activism. One of the most striking is a growing unease with "climate" as the main focus of environmental campaigning. In some strands of radical environmentalism, "climate" is increasingly viewed as too abstract, technocratic, and closely tied to establishment politics. This scepticism is often linked to frustration with mainstream climate governance, which many activists see as slow and ineffective. While such a critique is not new, it has gained traction following the decline of the 2019 climate protests, which many participants felt failed to translate mass mobilisation into meaningful political change.

There is no evidence of a generalised reorientation across Europe. Still, anecdotal cases suggest this dynamic is taking shape. A clear example is the French radical group [Les Soulèvements de la Terre](#), which brings together activists from different backgrounds, including former climate activists disillusioned with climate-focused mobilisation. The group has argued that climate politics remain too detached from lived realities, calling instead for territorially grounded struggles that "[bring environmentalism down to Earth](#)".

This reorientation overlaps with a resurgence of place-based forms of environmental activism. Opposition to energy transition projects often draws on long-standing local traditions, including anti-nuclear movements and struggles against dams, mining, or industrial agriculture. These movements tend to frame environmental conflict as a defence of territory and everyday life against distant centres of political and economic power. Historically, they have operated at some distance from the climate-transition agenda. As the energy transition accelerates, tensions between these traditions are becoming more visible and, in some cases, openly confrontational.

Another factor contributing to these developments is the growing weight of anti-capitalism within green activism. For many groups, the issue is not decarbonisation as such, but the way it is being pushed through market-led models. On this view, green industries appear less as a break with past models than a rebranding of extractive and accumulative logics. That framing complicates any alignment with governmental and corporate approaches to the energy transition, even where there is broad agreement on the need to move away from fossil fuels.

Taken together, these shifts help explain why parts of green activism are moving towards a more territorial form of environmentalism, alongside growing scepticism toward climate governance. They also help account for the emergence of new alliances linking radical environmental activists, conservation groups, and residents of rural and peri-urban areas.

### **Green conflict goes upstream**

Green-on-green conflicts are not confined to local protests, but increasingly register at the policy level. Although not always directly linked, these two levels often express the same underlying tensions, pointing to a fragmentation that goes well beyond specific sites. Among some pro-green parties, this has taken the form of resistance to decarbonisation initiatives involving any trade-offs.

While party discourse does not always map neatly onto the arguments advanced in local green-on-green conflicts, it often shares a similar underlying logic. Recent examples can be found across Europe. In Switzerland's Valais region, the Green Party has opposed the installation of solar farms in Alpine areas. In Portugal, the left-wing party Bloco de Esquerda has joined campaigns against lithium mining projects framed as environmentally destructive.

A different, but telling, case comes from Spain, where similar tensions have played out in parliament. Following a nationwide blackout in 2025, the government put forward a decree to strengthen grid stability while reinforcing support for renewable energy. The proposal was ultimately rejected, including by the left-wing party Podemos, which otherwise presents itself as pro-green. Podemos argued that the reforms did too little to expand public ownership or democratic control and instead risked consolidating the power of existing energy players. These concerns might not be unfounded. Yet the immediate outcome was political deadlock: the decree failed, and no alternative measures followed. Opposition to renewable energy projects framed as benefiting large energy companies has since become a feature of Podemos' energy discourse.

Taken together, these cases suggest a pattern: actors not directly responsible for delivering energy and industrial policy can more easily refuse trade-offs tied to energy transition projects, while those in government are structurally pushed towards defending them.

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### **An unavoidable tension**

Green-on-green conflicts in Europe are intensifying at a particular political moment. They are unfolding amid a global backlash against environmentalism, which in the EU has translated into growing efforts to sideline environmental activism. At the same time, and somewhat paradoxically, the EU is moving to accelerate the build-out of energy and industrial infrastructure, despite the many contradictions in its green agenda. Together, these dynamics raise pressing questions about the direction of European environmental governance.

One way to interpret this trajectory is through the consolidation of some sort of a European *raison d'état* for energy. Invoking climate goals and energy security, Member States and EU institutions increasingly frame large energy and industrial projects as matters of strategic interest, to be delivered quickly and with fewer obstacles. Recent policy shifts, from streamlined permitting to the prioritisation of strategic projects, reflect this trend. Within EU policy discourse, the energy transition is now framed less around protecting people and environments, and more around competitiveness and scale.

If this trajectory continues, through the weakening of environmental safeguards, spatial planning rules, or participation requirements, green-on-green conflicts are likely to intensify and become more polarised. Some disputes may be pushed beyond institutional channels and into more confrontational forms of contestation.

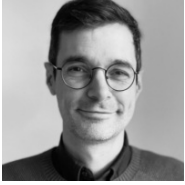
Fragmentation within the green movement carries real political risk at a time when environmental actors need broad and durable coalitions to resist the backlash. If the green camp is to achieve any substantive change, it requires at least a minimal alignment of demands among those who support a green transition, so that competing priorities can be negotiated rather than pulling in opposing directions.

At the same time, cohesion cannot simply be imposed. Many of the demands voiced in green-on-green conflicts are legitimate. Energy transition projects are often driven by actors whose primary concern is corporate benefit rather than environmental or social outcomes, and the harms they generate are real. Urgency and ambition are frequently invoked to sideline participation, inclusion, or justice claims raised by local actors. From this perspective, disputes between green camps may function as necessary tensions. They force centres of power to confront the territories and communities where the transition takes material form, and they underline a basic point: no transition can claim legitimacy if it undermines ecosystems, habitats, and local communities in the process.

At a deeper level, these divisions reflect the central dilemma of the climate crisis itself. Decarbonisation must happen quickly and at scale, yet the actors most capable of delivering it in a socially just and territorially sensitive way currently lack the political power to do so. Given the urgency and magnitude of the task, a frictionless energy transition is hard to imagine, even under the most favourable political conditions. For this reason, while building large coalitions around climate action remains necessary, green-on-green conflicts are likely to persist.

Such tensions are not a deviation from the green transition, but a sign of how deeply it cuts across different ecological and political realities. For this reason, a conflict-free transition is not only unrealistic but also not necessarily desirable. The real question is not how to stop pro-green actors from clashing, but whether those clashes can be channelled into forces that reshape the energy transition rather than paralyse it.

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