

Spain's VOX party and the rise of international environmental populism

Article by Lluís de Nadal

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With projections of climate science now indisputable, many of Europe's right-wing populist parties are abandoning responses of dismissal and denial in favour of a very different approach. The threat of climate change is increasingly appropriated and reframed to suit a nationalist political agenda. Lluís de Nadal explores what the evolving rhetoric of Spain's VOX party tells us about the emergence of an identity-based form of environmentalist ideology in Europe more widely.

The Spanish right-wing populist party VOX is a well-known climate change denier. This is why many analysts have interpreted its electoral success – the party is today the third largest in the Spanish parliament, having been founded in 2013 with the objective of defending the country's national unity from the Catalan secessionist threat – as more evidence that we live in a "post-truth" age, and age in which emotion carries more weight than objective facts. A close look at the development of VOX's climate change agenda, however, reveals a more complicated and troubling picture.

There is no question that, during most of its short history, VOX has spread misinformation about the severity of the threat of global warming, downplaying its dangers. Borrowing from the Trump playbook, the party has often cast climate change as a hoax and the environmental movement as a globalist plot against national sovereignty and prosperity. The justification of one of its MPs, Francisco José Contreras, for opposing Spain's first Climate Change Law encapsulates the party's dismissive attitude towards the issue. During a parliamentary session last April, Contreras remarked that global warming may turn out not to be such a bad thing because it will "reduce mortality caused by cold weather".

Unsurprisingly, VOX critics jumped at the opportunity to make fun of the party's doubt-mongering tactics. "Sure, and more droughts will reduce mortality caused by drowning," a Twitter user quipped. One of the major Spanish dailies joined the fray, with an [article](#) entitled "One, Great, and Warm", a play on Franco's nationalist motto "*Una, Grande y Libre*" (One, Great, and Free).

This kind of ironic humour from those with science-based beliefs is understandable given VOX's disdain for the environmental movement, and yet it runs the risk of diverting our attention from critical developments in VOX's climate agenda. This and similar attempts to delegitimise VOX by labelling it "post-truth" may lead us to miss the nuances of the party's complex engagement with climate science.

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VOX as a case of climate change denial?

It must be pointed out that VOX has rarely rejected climate science per se, as the label post-truth would suggest. More often, VOX's anti-environmental rhetoric has been directed at so-called "environmental elites" who it accuses of mobilising scientific expertise to avoid political contestation and legislate against the interests of "the people". As VOX leader Santiago Abascal put it, the main issue at stake is not the evidence of climate change, which his party accepts, but the "totalitarian" tendency to submit climate policy to the dictates of the scientific community. "Our concern," he insisted, "is with the rise of a climate religion with which one is not allowed to disagree."

We should also consider that VOX's stance towards climate change has undergone, if not a change of heart, at least a change in tune. Take, for instance, Abascal's speech in the failed motion of no confidence against the Spanish government in October 2020. After denouncing the hypocrisy of environmental elites who moralise about climate change but fly on their own private jets to international summits, he outlined VOX's alternative to the government's "job-destroying" climate policy. Two key proposals included in VOX's green agenda, which Abascal tellingly named "true ecology", were the creation of a national "energy autarchy" and the re-industrialisation of Spain towards a green economy. He prophesied that these policies would create no less than an "economic and environmental miracle", bringing about a "green Spain, clean and prosperous, industrialised and in harmony with the environment".

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Over the past few months, VOX has redoubled efforts to consolidate its environmental strategy in collaboration with its partners in the European Conservatives and Reformists Group (ECR) in the European Parliament. The development of an alternative to the EU's climate change agenda was one of the main topics of the ECR's meeting in Madrid in early July. Abascal forcefully conveyed the importance of this task by referring to it as "one of the main challenges facing the European conservative movement in the coming decades". In stark contrast with the perception that right-wing populist parties deny the reality of global warming, he placed the preservation of the "natural heritage" at the core of the group's "patriotic" solution to climate change.

VOX's shift from denialism to "conservationism" echoes recent developments in the European populist right's environmental agenda. As shown by a recent study by

environmental think tank Adelphi, a growing number of populist parties espouse a so-called green patriotism that, while critical of climate and energy transition policies, is strongly supportive of “environmental conservation”. Although many are hostile towards policies supporting multilateralism and international cooperation, they are “relatively positive about environmental topics”.

One of the main promoters of this shift is the French Rassemblement National (RN), formerly known as the Front National. Around the mid-2010s, when most of its European counterparts were still denying anthropogenic climate change, the RN began to move away from the old anti-environmental rhetoric towards an ideological discourse that places the protection of the local and national environment in a central position.

The rise of “green patriotism”

Since its inception in the early 1970s, the RN has acted as a role model to many European right-wing populist parties that came after it. Most notably, the RN initiated the process of cross-national diffusion of the ethno-nationalist and anti-political populist frame that gave rise to this family of parties. The RN also pioneered efforts to expand the populist right’s constituency by appealing to working-class voters who resented the rising tide of cosmopolitan liberal values and who, particularly in the wake of the 2008 economic crisis, felt abandoned by the traditional left’s embrace of deregulatory austerity policies. More recently, the RN has also acted as a catalyst for an ideological shift with profound implications for European society – this time on the issue of climate change.

For most of its history, the RN showed little interest in the environment. Its founder, Jean-Marie Le Pen, denied that climate change was human-made and famously ridiculed environmental concerns as a “bobo” (or Bohemian Bourgeois) pastime. Virtually no environment-related policy proposals can be found in the party’s platform for the presidential elections of 1995, 2002, and 2007, to name only a few recent electoral contests. As the issue of climate change has moved more and more to centre-stage over the past decade, however, the RN decided that it could no longer be ignored.

In 2014, RN leader Marine Le Pen launched *Nouvelle écologie* (“New Ecology”), an eco-nationalist movement dedicated to opposing international climate talks and to offering a “patriotic” and “realistic” response to climate change. She has since given several speeches proposing to make Europe the “world’s leading ecological civilisation” and promoting a nationalist, identity-based vision of environmentalism rooted in the right’s traditional idealisation of the land.

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Although the creation of *Nouvelle écologie* constitutes a radical break with the RN’s denialist past, it can also be seen as a natural extension of its traditional nationalist goals. It should

not escape us that key pro-environmental concerns, such as consuming locally grown products and developing a more organic relationship with the local environment, dovetail remarkably well with the RN's historical emphasis on strengthening borders and protecting French identity against globalisation's homogenising effects.

The artisan of the RN's identity-based environmentalist ideology is Hervé Juvin, a public intellectual who serves as a RN representative in the European Parliament and the French region of Pays de la Loire. Like Trump's former chief strategist Steve Bannon, Juvin embraces a vision of civilisational conflict between nationalist and globalist worldviews, between tradition and modernity. Against the so-called uniformisation of cultures and identities brought about by neoliberal globalisation, he advocates an identity-based and ecological "localism" that entails limiting trade agreements, supporting local industries, and restricting immigration.

In addition to weaving together current concerns about climate change with historical nationalist themes, Juvin's identitarian ideology harkens back to classic biologist formulas of the European far right. For instance, he portrays political opponents as "parasites" and draws on the myth of the nation as a "pure" space that must be protected from foreign invasions. One of the main achievements of this ideology is precisely its ability to integrate nationalist, biologist, and environmental themes into an apparently coherent framework. Disparate concerns such as preserving natural ecosystems, revitalising local industry, and protecting national identity coexist and interact in Juvin's ideological amalgam.

Again, it would be dangerously inaccurate to identify the RN's new ecology approach with the phenomenon of post-truth. For what Juvin rejects is not climate science but the use of science to support a neoliberal worldview that subordinates human values to technological development and endangers both cultural and biological particularism. At the core of Juvin's version of green patriotism is a repudiation of the philosophical underpinnings of the neoliberal model in favour of an "ecology-based science" that conceives of "collective diversity" as a "higher value" to which all other values, from development to human rights and individual freedoms, must be subjected.

International and transnational environmental populism

In recent years, the reclaiming of national sovereignty in environmental politics by European right-wing populist parties has become a subject of growing concern. The term "climate nationalism" has been coined to describe the use of climate change by these parties to support their nationalist agendas. Far less examined, but just as concerning, is the increasing "international" populist cooperation on climate change.

VOX's collaboration with its European partners to build a common environmental agenda exemplifies this emerging phenomenon. In addition to the meeting in Madrid mentioned above, the ECR group has held several seminars over the past few years looking for formulas to reconcile its historical commitment to economic development with the new concern to protect the environment. These seminars are part of the ECR's effort to devise a free-market alternative to the EU's current climate policy approach, which the group condemns for placing "unnecessary and costly burdens on businesses".

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Right-wing populist parties have historically been reluctant to work together, partly because of their conflicting nationalist agendas and their fear of being tainted by association. But over the past decade, in contrast, they have been working to expand and deepen their cooperation in several areas. This cooperative strategy has been motivated by the fact that longstanding key issues for the populist right, such as immigration and terrorism, are increasingly perceived by citizens across the continent as pressing European issues requiring international action. The growing salience of climate change in European society arguably explains why it has quickly moved to the top of their shared agenda.

Another closely related phenomenon that deserves our attention is the rise of “transnational” populism. The difference between international and transnational populism is a subtle one: the former describes the cooperation between nationally organised parties and movements, the latter the attempt to construct a “people” that goes beyond the nation state. An illustrative case of transnational populism is Hugo Chávez’s claim to not only act on behalf of “the people” of Venezuela but of Latin America more generally. Occupy Wall Street and the Indignados movement of 2011 are also said to fall into this category, as they constructed a collective identity – the 99 per cent – with the potential to transcend national borders.

This phenomenon of transnational populism can also be observed in the context of the European Parliament. A recent study on populist cooperation at the EU level shows that many parties mix international populism and transnational populism by presenting themselves as saviours not only of their nation but of Europe itself. The study shows that, to the familiar defence of national “peoples” from outsiders and corrupt elites, these parties have added the defence of a “European ‘people’ from elites and ‘dangerous others’ at a continental level”.

So far, no dangerous other has been more vilified by the European populist right than Muslims, who have been portrayed as the main threat to the sovereignty, identity, and security of (Christian) Europeans. In the coming years, however, we should expect global warming to join Islam as one of the major threats from which European people need to be “protected”. Juvin’s rhetoric of civilisational conflict and his attempt to tie together environmental concerns with the defence of Western values already point in this direction.

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Climate change - the next culture war?

As more Europeans come to view climate change as a pressing threat, the denialism that once characterised the European populist right is likely to recede into the background. If the cases examined in this article teach us anything, it is that the members of this family of parties will not resign themselves to see their support decline as the reality of climate change becomes more and more widely accepted. On the contrary, they will in all likelihood try to hide their past as climate change deniers and recast themselves as the “true” environmentalists.

Following in the footsteps of the RN and VOX, which themselves draw on the far right’s idealisation of rural life, they will emphasize the affinity between their nationalist agenda and the protection of the local and national environment. They will present their deep-rooted attachment to the land and tradition as the best safeguard against environmental destruction and blame globalist elites for formulating the vision of society – based on free trade, geographical mobility, and unfettered growth – that paved the way for global warming.

It is thus fundamental that progressive forces take note of the developments described in this article and let go of the “myth” that right-wing populists uniformly and unreflectively deny climate change. Articulating an effective political alternative to green patriotism, in addition to strengthening international cooperation to combat the growing threat of international and transnational environmental populism, are among the major strategic challenges facing the Left in the years and decades to come. The Left cannot let its guard down in the face of the “culture climate war” that is already underway.

Lluís de Nadal (PhD, Columbia University) is a researcher working on populism and social movements. Since 2018, he has been teaching Political Communication at CELSA-Sorbonne, Paris, where he was the 2018-19 Graduate Student Fellow

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