

## **“The European divide on climate change: The Fridays for Future movement in Poland and the future of Europe”**

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*This essay was originally written for the Dahrendorf Programme for the Study of Freedom at St Antony's College, University of Oxford. The main research question asks what the main drivers behind the West-East-European divide on climate change are and whether this divide also exists within the Fridays For Future movement.*

*In a first step, the essay discusses this divide on a country level, consulting data from the Eurobarometer as well as polling from the Dahrendorf programme. The second part focuses on the Fridays For Future movement in Poland and how its strategies and aims might differ from its counterparts in Western Europe. Three semi-structured interviews with Polish Fridays For Future activists were conducted for this essay, followed by an explorative thematic analysis.*

*The main conclusion is that the aims and strategies of the Polish FFF movement (MSK) are indeed different, but the FFF movement's international structure is flexible enough to account for such differences. MSK differs from its Western counterparts in six key ways: it is a) smaller, b) focuses more on the national level, c) is more politically diverse, d) distances itself more from anti-capitalism, e) is more likely to be pro-nuclear energy and f) mainly focuses on breaking the political and discursive void surrounding climate change. However, there are signs the strategy is changing, with MSK supporting the ongoing women's strike in Poland, as well as considering actions of civil disobedience, and therewith potentially converging with Western FFF movements, and, more broadly, contributing to the increasing polarisation in Polish society.*

### **Introduction**

In September 2019 the Swiss Young Green party organised a panel discussion on the future of the European youth climate action movement. The panel was made up of a recently elected Dutch Green MEP, a representative of the German green youth party, and a representative of the French Fridays for Future movement. Whereas just a few days earlier, during the ‘Global Week for Future’, there had only been limited activity in Eastern Europe,<sup>1</sup> the panellists in Switzerland emphasised how the movement spanned Europe and were advocating for increased cross-national cooperation. The reality of a significantly weaker climate change discourse, as well as a relatively small Fridays for Future (FFF) movement in Eastern Europe, seemed distant to them.

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<sup>1</sup> Fridays For Future, ‘Fridays For Future – Strike Statistics: Countries’, [fridaysforfuture.org](https://fridaysforfuture.org), 7 November 2020, <https://fridaysforfuture.org/what-we-do/strike-statistics/list-of-countries/>; Jost de Moor et al., ‘Protest for a Future II: Composition, Mobilization and Motives of the Participants in Fridays For Future Climate Protests on 20-27 September 2019 in 19 Cities around the World.’, 2020, <https://sh.diva-portal.org/smash/record.jsf?pid=diva2%3A1397070&dsid=9234>.

However, seeing regional differences and a potential divide on the issue of climate change in Europe is not necessarily an intellectual feat. What appears to be missing, especially from more public conversations, is the inclusion of scholarly research going beyond brief mentions of en vogue cleavages and basic economic reasoning. To what extent, for example, are there any historical preconditions that are contributing to this seemingly new divide? And does the divide also exist among one of the main movements leading the renewed emphasis on climate change as an issue of urgency – the Fridays for Future movement? And how could this affect European cohesion?

This essay will deal with the European division on climate change in two steps. After a short introduction to key research on the politics of climate change in Eastern Europe,<sup>2</sup> which also discusses the historical preconditions, the essay will outline the current divergence in Europe. What do Europeans think of climate change and climate change measures and are there any developments which are specific to the post-communist region? Secondly, the Polish Fridays for Future movement will be discussed. What does it focus on? How is its Polish version shaped by this country's recent history? Are there lines of divergence between the Polish and the Western European FFF chapters? And how do these align with the recently emerging narrative of a European division on climate change? And finally, albeit briefly, I am interested in the significance of the European division on climate change for the social cohesion of the European Union and European society. Special attention is given to the case of Poland, since it is highly influential in the Central and Eastern European part of the EU and generally seen as the 'enfant terrible'<sup>3</sup> of EU climate politics.

## **Eastern Europe and Climate Change**

Ever since Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic<sup>4</sup> refused to back the setting of a net zero carbon-emission goal (by 2050) in June 2019, more and more news outlets began reporting on the “new political divide”<sup>5</sup> in Europe, often arguing that the increasing demand for climate action is creating a similar divide to that already caused by the issue of migration and that two

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<sup>2</sup> In this case meaning Slovenia, Hungary, Estonia, Poland, Czech Republic, Lithuania, Slovakia, Romania, Croatia, Latvia and Bulgaria (in order of concern for climate change, see Eurobarometer 490, 2019).

<sup>3</sup> Piotr Arak, '[Opinion] Why Poland Can't and Won't Hit 2050 EU Green Deal Target', EUobserver, 24 July 2020, <https://euobserver.com/opinion/148996>.

<sup>4</sup> And to some degree, Estonia.

<sup>5</sup> Shaun Walker, 'Migration v Climate: Europe's New Political Divide', *The Guardian*, 2 December 2019, sec. Environment, <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2019/dec/02/migration-v-climate-europes-new-political-divide>.

main polarized camps are emerging: the populist, anti-migration camp which also denies the urgency of climate action and the non-populist, pro-climate-action, pro-migration camp.<sup>6</sup> The general argument is that, whereas the issue of climate change is very susceptible to populist rhetoric, since it creates “the same fundamental cleavages as migration”,<sup>7</sup> the divide is mainly driven by financial concerns.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, it is observed that the “European Green Deal”, spearheaded by the president of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, which is supposed to speed up the process of becoming the world’s first major climate neutral economy by 2050, is, initially at least, going to come at considerable financial costs, steering less economically developed EU countries, like the Czech Republic, Poland or Hungary, away from greater commitment.

This implicitly references Ronald Inglehart’s work who argues that societies start to worry about post-materialist issues, such as environmental challenges, only once the more pressing materialist issues are of less concern.<sup>9</sup> According to this theory the concern for climate change and the protection of the environment should have risen in the post-communist region along with its economic progression during the 2000s. However, Chaisty and Whitefield show that, whereas economic development does lead to increased support for environmental issues, it does not explain the differences between post-Communist countries and advanced democracies (this gap has increased between 1993 and 2010, thereby weakening the argument of convergence through EU accession).<sup>10</sup> Instead, the experience of Communism appears to have led people to see environmental issues through a distinctly post-communist lens, similarly to how legacies of communism have been shown to influence most Eastern European societies in many other areas.<sup>11</sup> Several aspects, such as the “stickiness” of individual values (i.e. the Communist experience still shaping how individuals see various issues), a generally low

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<sup>6</sup> Frédéric Simon, ‘La ligne de fracture entre l’Est et l’Ouest persiste sur le climat’, *www.euractiv.fr* (blog), 21 March 2019, <https://www.euractiv.fr/section/climat/news/summit-leak-reveals-eu-rift-on-climate-change/>; Iñaki Martín Pérez, ‘La lucha contra la crisis climática, nueva fractura europea’, *Nius Diario*, 29 October 2019, [http://www.niusdiario.es/internacional/europa/lucha-crisis-climatica-fractura-europea\\_18\\_2842620326.html](http://www.niusdiario.es/internacional/europa/lucha-crisis-climatica-fractura-europea_18_2842620326.html); Anna Sauerbrey, ‘Opinion | How Climate Became Germany’s New Culture War’, *The New York Times*, 18 April 2019, sec. Opinion, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/04/18/opinion/germany-climate-cars.html>.

<sup>7</sup> Sauerbrey, ‘Opinion | How Climate Became Germany’s New Culture War’.

<sup>8</sup> Walker, ‘Migration v Climate’; Stephen Pope, ‘Climate Change Divides Europe’, *Forbes*, 7 July 2019, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/stephenpope/2019/07/07/climate-change-divides-europe/>.

<sup>9</sup> Ronald Inglehart, ‘Public Support for Environmental Protection: Objective Problems and Subjective Values in 43 Societies’, *PS: Political Science and Politics* 28, no. 1 (March 1995): 57, <https://doi.org/10.2307/420583>; Ronald Inglehart, ‘The Silent Revolution in Europe: Intergenerational Change in Post-Industrial Societies’, *American Political Science Review* 65, no. 4 (December 1971): 991–1017, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1953494>; Ronald Inglehart, *The Silent Revolution: Changing Values and Political Styles among Western Publics* (Princeton University Press, 2015).

<sup>10</sup> Paul Chaisty and Stephen Whitefield, ‘Attitudes towards the Environment: Are Post-Communist Societies (Still) Different?’, *Environmental Politics* 24, no. 4 (4 July 2015): 598–616, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09644016.2015.1023575>.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 612.

salience of the topic of climate change as an attitudinal dimension, the lack of integration of this topic within the left-right dimension, or within political competition, most likely mutually reinforced each other and contributed to the post-communist effect, which gained additional strength through the negative experiences during transition (e.g. corruption, the teething problems of democracy etc.).<sup>12</sup> .

At this point it is important to note that there was ample support for pro-environmental movements in Communist Eastern Europe during the 1980s. Whereas the environment played a minor role under communist rule, with the communist ideology perceiving nature as something which provided resources and/or served as a decorative element, it was the alarming state of the environment, as well as increasing health concerns after the Chernobyl catastrophe, that lead to new pro-environmental movements across the communist space, and especially in Central Eastern Europe.<sup>13</sup> After decades of a central planning economy, the negative environmental impacts (e.g. on air quality and river pollution) were impossible to ignore. However, with transition, the movements lost some of their appeal. They no longer stood for the “deeper failings” of the system Eastern Europeans lived in.<sup>14</sup>

After EU accession, some countries, such as Poland, started to incorporate some of the movements’ demands into state policy and adapted some of the EU’s environmental standards. What followed was an increasing divergence between centrists and radical environmentalists, as well as an increased professionalization of pro-environmentalist institutions, leading to a loss of societal support. This only changed when conservative politicians with an anti-environmental agenda took over the political landscape. The environment became part of a larger pro- and anti-government debate, regaining support among liberals, but losing its non-partisan appeal. However, not all “environmental issue areas” are created equal. For example, the matter plays out quite differently when looking at climate policy.<sup>15</sup>

Following the plea of Jordan and Huitema<sup>16</sup> to acknowledge the level of the nation-state in

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 613.

<sup>13</sup> Barbara Jancar-Webster, ‘Environmental Movement and Social Change in the Transition Countries’, *Environmental Politics* 7, no. 1 (March 1998): 69–90, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09644019808414373>; Julia Szulecka and Kacper Szulecki, ‘Between Domestic Politics and Ecological Crises: (De)Legitimization of Polish Environmentalism’, *Environmental Politics*, 21 October 2019, 1–30, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09644016.2019.1674541>.

<sup>14</sup> Adam Fagin, ‘Environment and Transition in the Czech Republic’, *Environmental Politics* 3, no. 3 (September 1994): 479–94, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09644019408414156>.

<sup>15</sup> Szulecka and Szulecki, ‘Between Domestic Politics and Ecological Crises’.

<sup>16</sup> Andrew Jordan and Dave Huitema, ‘Policy Innovation in a Changing Climate: Sources, Patterns and Effects’, *Global Environmental Change* 29 (November 2014): 387–94, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.gloenvcha.2014.09.005>.

climate governance research, Marcinkiewicz and Tosun look at the case of Poland in greater detail.<sup>17</sup> Whereas there was some support for environmental policies post-89, the 2000s were first characterised by the Polish government negotiating exceptions from EU standards, and then by an increasing opposition towards EU climate policies. And even the implementation of the climate policies which Poland wasn't exempted from was still lacking. Almost in implicit agreement with Chaisty and Whitefield, the authors emphasise, however, that it is rather the way an issue enters a political debate, that influences how it is dealt with in the future, than purely the economic costs of an issue, and that the same holds true for the issue of climate change in Poland. Some theories also stipulate that externally introduced issues<sup>18</sup> can be internalised and add to the political divergences across parties, or that externally promoted normative issues<sup>19</sup> become adopted internally because of how convincing the argument is. Marcinkiewicz and Tosun do not find support for these theories in the case of Poland and climate change. Instead, most likely due to low levels of public attention, it merely became an issue of the opposition-government divide and even then the discussion was centered on who would take responsibility for the costs which would be generated by adapting EU regulations. Climate change did not become an element of party competition and the majority of parties stayed critical of the need to implement extensive measures against it.

However, it is important to note that the authors expect the political situation to change and parties to gain a clearer and more diverse stance on climate change once public demand increases. And once this happens, Chaisty and Whitefield also expect the “post-Communist effect” to disappear.

As of 2020 the world is rather different from the one in 2015, when these two studies were published, with Donald Trump promoting right-wing populism and climate change denialism, the right-wing party PiS winning the Polish parliamentary and presidential elections and Greta Thunberg leading a “next generation”<sup>20</sup> to the streets to protest against the inaction on climate change. It would be an omission not to question whether research looking at the issue of climate change in Eastern Europe, in this case Poland, is not in need of an update. On top of that, Covid-19 is clearly both an opportunity and a risk to climate recovery. On the one hand governments are pressed to release more economic recovery funds than ever, and people have learned what

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<sup>17</sup> Kamil Marcinkiewicz and Jale Tosun, ‘Contesting Climate Change: Mapping the Political Debate in Poland’, *East European Politics* 31, no. 2 (3 April 2015): 187–207, <https://doi.org/10.1080/21599165.2015.1022648>.

<sup>18</sup> Such as how the EU pushed for the issue of climate change.

<sup>19</sup> Such as the EU propagating what they believe is ‘the right thing to do’.

<sup>20</sup> Suyin Haynes, ‘How Teen Climate Activist Greta Thunberg Got Everyone to Listen’, *Time*, 16 May 2019, <https://time.com/collection-post/5584902/greta-thunberg-next-generation-leaders/>.

they are willing (or unwilling) to sacrifice to tackle global crises. On the other hand, COVID-19 doesn't just potentially create a stronger sensitivity to global problems, but also puts new items on the list of global challenges: increasing unemployment and inequality, economic downturn, and long-term negative health effects.<sup>21</sup> There is a danger, that the coronavirus pandemic will push the issue of climate change into the background. And depending on the current dynamics of the European divergence on the issue, the pandemic could increase such a divide. This could be true for the general political climate, as well as for public opinion and grassroots activism, such as the now re-organising Fridays for Future movement.<sup>22</sup>

The Eurobarometer of 2019 shows that there has been an increase in how concerned Europeans are about climate change in recent years.<sup>23</sup> In 2014, 16% of Europeans mentioned climate change as the single most pressing issue facing the world. In 2019 it was 23%. Additionally, the Eurobarometer numbers show how most of this increase occurred between March 2017 and April 2019. Interestingly enough, this was true in all EU-member states, even in those where the concern decreased from 2011 to 2017, hinting towards a relatively recent surge. However, there still exists a clear divide. Whereas in Sweden, 50% of respondents considered climate change the most serious problem facing the world as a whole, the Eastern European country with the highest percentage of respondents thinking the same was Slovenia, with 19%. And this is by far not the lowest percentage in the EU (that spot goes to Bulgaria). In the 11 Eastern European countries of the EU<sup>24</sup> an average of 13% of the population<sup>25</sup> regarded climate change as the most important problem facing the world as a whole. The average for the remaining 17 countries was about double that, at 27%. The Eastern Europeans' main concern for the world was poverty or international terrorism. The latter is especially remarkable since it was an important but never the most pressing concern in Western European countries. Similarly, looking at the institutional level, the 'Green Wave' which flooded the shores of many West-European countries (leading to a strong increase in the numbers of Green MPs in Germany, Austria and Switzerland, and yielding strong results in France and the UK) has not reached

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<sup>21</sup> Michael Marshall, 'The Lasting Misery of Coronavirus Long-Haulers', *Nature* 585, no. 7825 (14 September 2020): 339–41, <https://doi.org/10.1038/d41586-020-02598-6>; Juan C. Palomino, Juan G. Rodríguez, and Raquel Sebastian, 'Wage Inequality and Poverty Effects of Lockdown and Social Distancing in Europe', *European Economic Review* 129 (October 2020): 103564, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.euroecorev.2020.103564>.

<sup>22</sup> Many Fridays for Future branches tried to mobilise online during the international public health "lockdowns" in spring 2020. They failed to gain much attention from the public sphere, however, and Polish FFF interviewees reported a decline in new membership.

<sup>23</sup> 'Climate Change', Special Eurobarometer 490 (European Commission, April 2019).

<sup>24</sup> In this case meaning Slovenia, Hungary, Estonia, Poland, Czech Republic, Lithuania, Slovakia, Romania, Croatia, Latvia and Bulgaria (in order of concern for climate change).

<sup>25</sup> Taken as the average of the rate of all separate countries.

Eastern Europe.<sup>26</sup> There are also barely any Eastern European Green party members in the European Parliament, and not just because most Eastern European countries are smaller and therefore can't claim as many seats.<sup>27</sup> This does, of course, not mean that inhabitants of Eastern European countries do not care about climate change. Polling questions which don't ask for *the most* important issue facing the world but for *one* of the most, or several most important ones, show that in 2018/2019 roughly 45% of Eastern European respondents were concerned about climate change (compared to 65% in the remaining EU-countries). And polling from our Europe's Stories team at the University of Oxford shows that 72% of Poles support banning short-haul flights which can be replaced by train journeys of up to 12h and only 19% believe national airlines should receive unconditional state support during times of economic losses due to Covid-19.<sup>28</sup>

This makes clear that what kind of policies are supported is most likely also highly dependent on the cultural and economic context. The barely present discussion on climate change in public media, the low popularity of Green parties and an unwillingness to reduce one's meat consumption (as our poll showed for Poland), does not equal not being concerned about climate change (as the interviews I conducted with Polish youth climate activists also showed – more on this further below). Whether the recent increasing public concern is enough to change the dynamics of climate change politics in Eastern Europe, as the work of Marcinkiewicz & Tosun and Chaisty & Whitefield suggests it could, remains to be seen. The recovery fund debates in summer 2020 suggested that this 'threshold' has not been crossed yet on the level of institutional politics. On the one hand the debates made it clear that the Eastern European member states should not be treated as one uniform group, with Latvia being one of the signatories of the open statement that the European Green Deal should be at the centre of the recovery plan.<sup>29</sup> On the other hand, the Polish government managed to evade having to support the EU's net-zero-by-2050 goal in order to access the recovery fund. Poland is the only

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<sup>26</sup> Nick Ashdown, 'Why Europe's Green Wave Slows to a Trickle in the East', POLITICO, 2 August 2019, <https://www.politico.eu/article/europe-green-wave-struggles-in-east/>; n.a., 'The Guardian View on France's Green Wave: Seizing the Moment | Editorial', the Guardian, 2 July 2020, <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/jul/02/the-guardian-view-on-frances-green-wave-seizing-the-moment>.

<sup>27</sup> Six out of 69 Green MEPs represent Eastern European EU states. Three of those represent the Czech Republic and are members of the Czech Pirate party (meaning that their focus lies on digitisation and digital rights), 2 represent Lithuania and one represents Poland. Sylwia Spurek, the Polish Green MEP, only just recently switched from the left S&D group to the Green/European-Free-Alliance.

<sup>28</sup> The rest opted for state support conditional on environment friendly actions or were against any form of state support.

<sup>29</sup> n.a., 'European Green Deal Must Be Central to a Resilient Recovery after Covid-19', climatechangenews.com, Climate Home News, 9 April 2020, <https://www.climatechangenews.com/2020/04/09/european-green-deal-must-central-resilient-recovery-covid-19/>.

remaining EU country which does not yet officially support that goal.

Such, diverging, national contexts matter, as Jordan and Huitema also argue,<sup>30</sup> because whereas it was the EU which called for 30-40% of the “Next Generation” budget (750 billion Euros) to be dedicated to climate projects, national governments will be the ones in charge of the spending, based on national plans they will first present to the EU in order to access these funds.<sup>31</sup> In true EU-fashion this is to give nations the flexibility to react according to their political situation and the local demands, but this also leads to a lot of leeway in deciding how exactly to spend the money. On top of that the EU commission reportedly categorises all investments with an above zero per cent “green content” as ‘40 % green content’, making “greenwashing” not just an attractive but also an incredibly easy endeavour.<sup>32</sup>

The involvement of 27 member states and the need for unanimity in the Council can lead to less ambitious goals and less stringent measures than climate activists would have hoped for – as happened in 2019 with the 5-year plan of the European Parliament and in early 2020 with the new EU Climate Law.<sup>33</sup> To also leave room for national interpretations and vague measurements of 40%, might be pragmatic considering the limited power and limited resources of the EU in comparison to the nation states,<sup>34</sup> but it does little to foster the activists’ confidence in the EU.

## **The Fridays For Future movement**

The Fridays for Future movement has its origins in Greta Thunberg’s school strikes for climate, which started in August 2018 in Stockholm. As the weeks went by, her strikes gained more and more international attention and pupils from around the world started following her example

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<sup>30</sup> Jordan and Huitema, ‘Policy Innovation in a Changing Climate’.

<sup>31</sup> Frédéric Simon, ‘2021: Another Decisive Year for Europe’s Climate Ambitions’, *Www.Euractiv.Com* (blog), 28 December 2020, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/energy-environment/news/2021-another-decisive-year-for-europes-climate-ambitions/>.

<sup>32</sup> Wolfgang Münchau, ‘Beware of Smoke and Mirrors in the EU’s Recovery Fund’, *The Financial Times*, 20 September 2020, <https://www.ft.com/content/0ba23192-5f43-402d-8f26-6fce0ab669f3?shareType=nongift>.

<sup>33</sup> Pauline Bock, ‘Greta Thunberg Says EU Law to Tackle Climate Change Is “surrender” | Euronews’, *www.euronews.com*, 3 May 2020, <https://www.euronews.com/2020/03/04/greta-thunberg-in-brussels-as-eu-unveils-green-deal-plan-for-carbon-neutrality>; Milan Schreuer, ‘E.U. Leaders Fail to Strengthen Climate Target (Published 2019)’, *The New York Times*, 20 June 2019, sec. Climate, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/06/20/climate/europe-carbon-neutral.html>.

<sup>34</sup> Directorate-General for Budget (European Commission), ‘Fact Check on the EU Budget’, Text, European Commission - European Commission, May 2020, [https://ec.europa.eu/info/strategy/eu-budget/transparency/fact-check\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/info/strategy/eu-budget/transparency/fact-check_en).

by striking and protesting on Fridays.<sup>35</sup> Since then, the strikes have evolved into a ‘global movement’ capturing the concerns and demands of ‘the young generation’. This movement is often referred to as “Fridays for Future” but actually carries different names depending on the country the activists operate in. Fridays for Future is widely seen as a fairly homogenous group of young, educated (and often female) students.<sup>36</sup> But whereas the movement is an international one and communication across borders definitely exists, its impact and organisational structure is different depending on the regional context within which it is situated – which, for some, means adapting to public spaces with less exposure to the climate change debate.

Whereas the movement started with school strikes, many FFF branches, such as FFF Germany or FFF France,<sup>37</sup> have recently started to consider forms of civil disobedience.<sup>38</sup> In some cases, this tactic has already been put into action. In Switzerland, for example, FFF activists occupied the parliamentary square (“Bundesplatz”) in September 2020. In their mobilisation video they had argued that this was the consequence of the existing “system” not providing answers to the climate crisis – politicians from the right insulting and making fun of FFF Switzerland, left wing parties ‘using’ them and businesses making marketing claims but not implementing any real changes – and all this even though the movement had been demanding change for almost 2 years.<sup>39</sup> The publicly available discussion posters from the international FFF SMILE conference, the first international summit of its kind, show that the FFF movement has been considering the possibility of civil disobedience for a while now but, in line with their

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<sup>35</sup> Note, that Greta Thunberg went on strike every day. For more on this, see de Moor et al., ‘Protest for a Future II: Composition, Mobilization and Motives of the Participants in Fridays For Future Climate Protests on 20-27 September, 2019 in 19 Cities around the World.’

<sup>36</sup> Inky Vos, ‘Who Runs the Movement? : A Feminist Empirical Analysis of Gender Dimensions of the Climate Movement in Sweden’ (Master’s Thesis, University of Lund, 2020), <http://lup.lub.lu.se/student-papers/record/9012844>.

<sup>37</sup> Paul Hockenos, ‘Shifting Gears: The Climate Protest Movement in the Age of Coronavirus’, Yale E360, accessed 6 November 2020, <https://e360.yale.edu/features/shifting-gears-the-climate-protest-movement-in-the-age-of-coronavirus>.

<sup>38</sup> Note, that some commentators and researchers already see FFF’s activism as “civil disobedience”, arguing that some of them (usually the younger members) are breaking the law by not attending school. Additionally, it is argued, FFF activists don’t “skip school” out of enjoyment or “for fun” but to appeal to a political cause, which, together with breaking the law, puts it into the category of activism. The FFF movement itself, however, does not consider their usual activism “civil disobedience” as their new emphasis on it, in contrast to the school strikes, shows. Similarly, when asked about civil disobedience in the interviews, they do not reference the school strikes. For more on how FFF could be considered ‘civil disobedience’ see Nikolas Mattheis, ‘Unruly Kids? Conceptualizing and Defending Youth Disobedience’, *European Journal of Political Theory*, 21 April 2020, 147488512091837, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1474885120918371>.

<sup>39</sup> Climatestrike Switzerland, *Rise up for Change 20.-25. September* (YouTube, 2020), [https://youtu.be/7T4xmu\\_djKc](https://youtu.be/7T4xmu_djKc).

international structure, it must have been left up to national and regional branches to decide.<sup>40</sup>

As the movement is decentralised, the activists' strategies, as well as their main concerns, are allowed to differ as long as the main demands remain the same. This also became clear at "SMILE (for future)", where the 3 main demands of the movement were first summarised: 1. keep the global temperature rise below 1.5°C compared to pre-industrial levels, 2. ensure climate justice and equity, 3. listen to the best united science currently available.<sup>41</sup> The brevity of the list of demands in combination with the 5 day-long conference seem to indicate that where there is unity there is also divergence. In order to find out how much divergence there is, especially focusing on Europe, and what the specifics are of the Fridays for Future movement in Poland, I interviewed three Polish climate activists and discussed their movement's goals, hopes and strategies with them.

The three activists were all between 18 and 25 years old, had been involved in Fridays For Future Poland since 2019 and answered to an internal call to participate in this research. The online interviews were conducted in October 2020, after they had received a list of instructions, which included potential questions and topics to discuss, a consent form informing them of their rights to the data and a reminder that they could always decide not to answer a question, interrupt the interview or withdraw at a later stage. The identities of the participants are not revealed, even though the interviewees had agreed to making their names public if needed. For reasons of long-term privacy, the interviewees' real names are not used. Due to the limited number of interviews and the explorative nature of this essay, the discussion below should be considered a preliminary insight. What follows is an inquiry into the activists' involvement in the Młodzieżowy Strajk Klimatyczny (MSK) (or "Youth Strike 4 Climate", as they translate it) and how they would characterise MSK's work, as well as whether they see potential divergences between them and other FFF branches, especially in Germany and France. Finally, and briefly, I touch upon their personal relationship to the EU, focusing on climate change action. In order to be able to highlight the differences between them, as well as put them into the context of their life-experiences, when needed, a short introduction of the interviewees seems appropriate:

Jan was the first interviewee. He lives in Płock, a small town around 100 km away from Warsaw, which is known for being home to the headquarters of PKN Orlen, a Polish petrol and

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<sup>40</sup> n.a., 'SMILE: Civil Disobedience (Sic!)', Discussions (SMILE for future, Lausanne: Fridays For Future, 2019), <https://www.smileforfuture.eu/discussions/>; Working Group 'Strategy and Operational Goals', 'Strategic Goals and Structure' (SMILE for future, Lausanne: Fridays For Future, 2019), <https://smileforfuture.eu/results/>.

<sup>41</sup> Fridays For Future, 'Lausanne Climate Declaration.', 8 September 2019, <https://smileforfuture.eu/results/>.

oil retailer and the largest company in Central Eastern Europe. Jan is 18 years old and is currently in his last year of high school. Krzysztof, the second interviewee, is 25 years old, originally from a small-town in the South West of Poland, and studies and works in Wrocław, the 4th largest city in Poland. Finally, Anna, who is 19 years old and from Gdańsk, where she helped found the local MSK chapter. She now studies in the UK but is still involved in her MSK chapter. Whereas all three of them are quite active in MSK, their roles and type of commitment differ, with Jan having the most international FFF experience.

### **Młodzieżowy Strajk Klimatyczny**

Generally, the MSK movement appears to be smaller and less developed than its more Western counterparts in Germany and France. This is not only documented by a study on the composition of the Fridays For Future protests in September 2019,<sup>42</sup> but also something which especially Jan, who attended the SMILE conference in 2019, highlights, noting that the size and developmental stage of FFF Germany took him by surprise. Other than that the interviewees mainly pointed to differences in political positioning and strategy, the main four of which shall be discussed below.

The first is their general concern about the lack of public engagement on climate change. Climate change, they maintain, is not a mainstream topic in the Polish public discourse in terms of media and political debate. This is despite some polls, as outlined above, indicating substantial public awareness. It is not, they argue, that the Polish public isn't concerned about climate change, but climate action is not necessarily a priority. Two of the interviewees compared the discourse around climate change to what they perceive as its exact opposite – the discourse around LGBT-“ideology”. In recent years the incumbent right-wing populist government has politicised questions surrounding the LGBT community in Poland, such as same sex marriage, inheritance rights and adoption laws, and has turned them into a proxy question – who (i.e. what kind of society, political party, but especially “ideology”) do “you” support? Whose side are you on? Climate change, on the other hand, still takes up limited time and space in public discourse, and there are also no clear sides to the argument. MSK therefore focuses on gaining more public recognition and placing the topic of climate change higher up on the public agenda.

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<sup>42</sup> de Moor et al., ‘Protest for a Future II: Composition, Mobilization and Motives of the Participants in Fridays For Future Climate Protests on 20-27 September 2019 in 19 Cities around the World.’

Because of this, the movement builds its strategy around curating an inclusive public image, which is attractive to Polish residents of different political “couleur”. Climate change, they argue, concerns everyone and is a scientific fact and security concern, rather than an ideological position. Anna summarised this the following way:

And we were trying to tell people that climate change is not something that is left or right, it is something that [...] we all experience and we should [be] working together. Because it's not like an opinion of what we want, or what we don't want. It's like a thing that we, we would like to survive. I think that everyone would like to survive [it]. So I think, I think we are trying to make it less opinion based.

And whereas the activists’ comments suggested that some of them might be open towards non-violent civil disobedience, they emphasise that their membership is politically diverse and being associated with civil disobedience would harm their inclusive public image, as they aim to recruit members from across the political spectrum and also students below 18. On a similar note, the movement consciously excludes all anti-capitalist notions from their statements. Whereas, again, some of them might be anti-capitalist, the movement itself is not. The main argument for this, and this was raised by all of them independently, is that anti-capitalism is equated with communism, which in turn is mainly associated with life under Soviet influence. This, they all make clear, is not a positive association and, they imply, to be avoided if the target is to make climate change action palatable to the general public.

Relatedly, MSK has also decided not to include any statements or plan any activities unrelated to climate change, such as expressions of solidarity with the LGBT community. Shortly after the interviews, however, the official MSK Facebook page implied their solidarity with the rising protests against the new anti-abortion laws by declaring that the climate crisis was also a crisis of women’s rights. Since these protests were reportedly the largest protests in Poland since 1989<sup>43</sup> and the new law wanted to ban a widely supported form of abortion,<sup>44</sup> it is probably fair to assume that their endorsement was slightly less risky than if they had endorsed other, more controversial issues. Nevertheless, the post was accompanied by Facebook users discussing the pros and cons of the post in the comments, with some arguing that it distracted

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<sup>43</sup> Anatol Magdziarz and Marc Santora, ‘Poland’s Abortion Ban Spurs Largest Protests in Decades - The New York Times’, *nytimes.com*, 30 October 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/10/30/world/europe/poland-abortion-women-protests.html>.

<sup>44</sup> Namely, the act of abortion on the grounds that the foetus is disabled or incurably ill (the two other, but less common, legal reasons are a) when the pregnancy is the result of a crime and b) when the mother’s health or life is at risk). More on this here: Edyta Bieńczak, ‘Niemal co 4. Polak popiera prawo do aborcji, gdy kobieta po prostu nie chce mieć dziecka [SONDAŻ]’, *rmf24.pl*, 11 March 2020, <https://www.rmf24.pl/raporty/raport-strajk-kobiet/news-niemal-co-4-polak-popiera-prawo-do-aborcji-gdy-kobieta-po-pr,nId,4830949>.

from the main message MSK wanted to project and would make the still unconvinced, presumably more right-leaning users, turn away from them (this was maybe also argued because the post marked the word “women” with an asterisk to explain that they were referring to everyone who biologically had a uterus). This again underlines how MSK consciously steers its public image, but is sometimes unable to conceal its inner divergences on how to position itself politically.

Thirdly, due to the looming threat climate change poses, education is seen as a primary priority. The MSK members interviewed are not very optimistic about reaching their goal of creating a society which is concerned about climate change and a political landscape which aims for net zero by 2040 (or 2050). They are determined, however, to at least combat what they see as an educational gap in Polish society regarding climate change. All interviewees made an effort to point out that their surroundings, be it their family, friends, or inhabitants of their city, aren't necessarily climate “deniers”, but have not been exposed to enough climate education to have internalised the magnitude or the urgency of the matter, nor to be able to differentiate between climate change activism and environmentalism. This is also why, at the same time, they make an effort to distance themselves from ‘environmentalism’. Anna emphasises: their activism is not about de-polluting the waters or forests, reducing the effect of blue light on the environment, eating less meat or recycling plastics, but about achieving net zero.

More recently, besides climate change education, MSK has mainly been focusing on the topic of energy source transition. Unlike other European FFF branches most MSK members are, according to the interviewees, very open to nuclear energy, arguing that time is running out and that a transition to alternative energy sources will be especially difficult for a country like Poland, considering how dependent Poland still is on coal energy. They acknowledge that any form of transition away from coal energy will have substantial effects on the coal mining industry and the miners, and are in favour of subsidies or training programmes for those who would potentially lose their employment.

What is clear to all of them, whether they are leaning towards the left or towards the centre, is that the energy transition will be costly and that Poland alone will not be able to finance it completely. Instead, (all) financial hopes are put in the EU. It is unclear when and how this hope originated and whether the COVID-19 recovery package had a role in this, as none of the interviewees mentioned it. The European Green Deal, however, was highlighted as a programme which gave them hope. Generally, none of them were particularly critical of the EU, with Anna arguing that the EU's lack of action can be attributed to every member state

having the same rights (clearly referencing Poland and Hungary's vetoes for each other) and Krzysztof suggesting that it could be used against the EU if they intervened too much. The EU brings hope and is necessary to bring about the transition towards net zero but the activists' expectations are sprinkled with realism. Real change, they believe, will happen on the national, rather than on the supranational level. The next national elections, in 2023, Krzysztof suggests, will determine the date by which Poland will reach net zero – ranging up to 2070, if the incumbent government manages to stay in power. Joining in on the disbelief about the PiS-government's 2070 proposition, Anna specifies that the Polish FFF movement's focus is very much on the national, rather than the international level, also explaining that the slogan "system change, not climate change", for her, is more about having a political (and economic) system which cares about climate change, than completely replacing the existing system with something new, as other FFF branches might be suggesting. Relatedly, Jan notes that MSK should avoid notions of "no growth", since Polish public opinion is still dominated by the idea of having to close the economic gap between Poland and the West, especially Germany.<sup>45</sup>

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

What becomes clear in all of this, is that MSK's focus lies very much on the national level. This is not necessarily the result of the decentralised approach of the FFF movement, but more likely the cause of it and potentially due to a) the grassroots democratic nature of the movement, b) the movement being made up of young people under the age of 18,<sup>46</sup> who are potentially less mobile and c) due to the severe lack of debate on climate change in Poland. There are some signs that the times are changing and that climate change is becoming a more recognised issue in the Polish public debate. This cannot be attributed to the MSK movement exclusively but it could have played a part in it, considering that, as one of the interviewees pointed out, the (liberal) TV station TVN invited MSK to a debrief of the 2020 presidential elections. During these elections the environment also featured as one of the main topics in a presidential TV debate and one of the (less promising) candidates for President had worked climate change into his main campaign.<sup>47</sup> Additionally, the same interviewee reported an increase in online hate messages against the MSK movement and another interviewee mentioned how he had been approached to help organise a party conference. Climate change and MSK, it seems, are slowly

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<sup>45</sup> In Jan's understanding this has been an ongoing issue in Polish history. However, he points out the Communist experience, implying that it has contributed to this economic gap.

<sup>46</sup> de Moor et al., 'Protest for a Future II: Composition, Mobilization and Motives of the Participants in Fridays For Future Climate Protests on 20-27 September 2019 in 19 Cities around the World.'

<sup>47</sup> Szymon Hołownia later registered his political movement as a party. In March 2021 "Polska 2050" scored 22% on national voting polls. See Ben Stanley, 'Latest Estimates', Tweet, @BDStanley, 10 March 2021.

being taken more seriously, both by their opponents and their supporters. However, interviewees reported a still prevalent confusion of the terms “climate change” and “environmentalism” in Polish public discourse. And MSK’s work sometimes gets misrepresented accordingly. MSK activists want to achieve net zero and identify as fact-oriented activists with a predominantly centrist-liberal approach to society and a concern for their nation’s future. However, they are often, and sometimes deliberately, depicted as leftist radicals or volunteer educators on the environment. It is likely, that this need to distance themselves from leftist activism and environmentalism is connected to Poland’s history of pro-environmental movements.

To conclude, the European divisions on climate change are not a particularly new phenomenon and cannot be explained by different levels of economic development. This is the opposite of what many news reports on recent inner-EU disputes on climate change have been claiming. It is more likely that the experience of Communism has led people to see environmental issues through a distinct post-communist lens, similarly to how legacies of communism have been shown to influence Eastern European societies in other areas as well.

Whether or not there will be an increasing divergence on climate change on the level of the nation state and to what degree COVID-19 will change this, remains to be seen. What makes the situation in Poland different is that the topic of climate change has not yet become an established issue in Polish public discourse. The negative socioeconomic and public health effects of COVID-19 could halt the recent improvements in this regard and increase this divergence. The difference between “West” and “East”, or “West” and “post-Communist”, is potentially also visible in the new “global” youth climate movement. Whereas Poland is not necessarily representative of all of Eastern Europe, the interviewees pointed towards several divergences they, in their subjective experience as members of FFF Poland, have noticed: MSK, they argue, is a) smaller, b) focuses more on the national level, c) is more politically diverse, d) distances itself more from anti-capitalism, e) is more likely to be pro-nuclear energy and f) mainly focuses on breaking the political and discursive void surrounding climate change. In order to achieve this, they are very aware of how they portray themselves to the public and take great care to appear as neutral and pragmatic as possible by, for example, emphasising scientific facts or their concern for individual safety. Of course, not all of this is necessarily just a strategy. The activists themselves are embedded in the society they are active in and Eastern European, post-Communist societies have previously been shown to address environmental questions

from a stronger materialist perspective,<sup>48</sup> which generally also includes questions of security and survival. Whereas they are not very optimistic that they will manage to reach their goal and help Poland get on path towards net-zero until 2040 or 2050 (especially if the incumbent government is re-elected in 2023) the MSK activists are very determined to “at least” educate the wider public on climate change. This is not to say that they are not ambitious with their goals, but climate activism, they make clear, works differently in a societal context such as the Polish one.

Finally, there currently seems to be little risk of further division, at least within the European Fridays for Future movement. Their decentralised structure is built to allow for national and even regional divergences, depending on the different cultural and socio-economic contexts. The movement sets final end-goals and describes the general dos and don'ts of how to achieve them, without making the list too exhaustive. Additionally, their international decision-making is highly democratic,<sup>49</sup> meaning that even when there are larger interregional differences, such as their stances on anti-capitalism, they get vetoed out of the international programme. All of this allows for great flexibility in organising the international movement. Their respect for “the other” is also visible in how the interviewees approached questions surrounding the EU. They do not expect the EU to achieve the unimaginable – they are too aware of the unfavourable political landscape in their own country, as well as the unanimous vote rule in the EU and recognise that every EU country has the same rights to intervene. Additionally, potentially due them having seen the EU intervene (only moderately successfully) before, such as in cases of judicial reform, their comments on the EU are occasionally accompanied by a sense of disillusionment. However, the activists are generally pro-EU and the European Green Deal gives them hope.

In a more recent development, a member of MSK Poland contacted me shortly before completing this research to inform me that the recent abortion protests in Poland had led to discussions within MSK regarding their climate-only policy. Some members wanted to support the nationwide women's strike (OSK: Ogólnopolski Strajk Kobiet) but this obviously went against MSK's strategy of presenting themselves as a neutral, single-cause movement. Ever since OSK added a climate-related point to their list of demands this has become slightly less of an internal struggle for MSK, but as of November 2020 the debate was still going on. Additionally, public gatherings have been restricted again since the end of October 2020 due to

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<sup>48</sup> Alan Frizzell and J. De Bardeleben, eds., ‘Environmental Consciousness and Economic Development: Some East-West Comparisons’, in *Shades of Green: Environmental Attitudes in Canada and around the World*, International Social Survey Programme Series 2 (Ottawa: Carleton Univ. Press, 1997), 147–68.

<sup>49</sup> Jan described the vetoing process at SMILE as similar to the one at the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth Sejm.

the COVID-19 pandemic, making all MSK protests and strikes during this period illegal. This has reignited the internal debate around MSK's main pillars of activism, and reintroduced the question of whether or not they should be using methods of civil disobedience (the interviewee mentioned strong anti-government slogans and "direct action" as examples). Whereas this research project ended in autumn 2020, social media posts in December 2020 hinted that some progress had been made towards supporting OSK.<sup>50</sup>

This potential move towards civil disobedience and away from their climate-only policy could be interpreted as the result of frustration with the political class, similarly to FFF Switzerland, but potentially also as a sign of progress regarding the salience of climate change in Polish society. With MSK moving away from its original goal, climate change might be on its way to becoming an established issue of political contention in Poland. On the other hand, the incorporation of the issue of climate change into political debates might be accompanied by increased polarisation. Similarly to the issue of LGBT-ideology-free zones and abortion rights, climate change could become yet another element of current polarisation of Polish society. In any case, as the interviewees emphasised, the MSK movement is here to stay.

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<sup>50</sup> For example, Fridays For Future Poland live streamed an OSK press conference and organised a webinar on the intersection between non-heteronormativity and climate change.

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