

Through the territorial lens: How EU green policies shape green discontent?

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Extended abstract

The costs and effects of climate change have been increasing over the last few decades (IPCC, 2023). Over the last 40 years, it is estimated that weather- and climate-related extreme events caused economic losses for more than EUR 800 billion in the European Union (EU) (European Environmental Agency, 2025). Projections of future macroeconomic damage arising from climate change are even more dire, although estimates vary depending on the scenarios considered and the methodologies employed (Tol, 2025). To fight climate change, EU countries have been implementing various policy measures under the umbrella of the European Green Deal – the EU roadmap launched in 2019 to achieve climate neutrality by 2050. The resulting decarbonization of the economy is especially affecting the energy, transport, industry and agriculture sectors (Giannakis and Zittis, 2021). It also has marked distributional implications along various dimensions, both social and spatial (Vona, 2023). Policies like carbon pricing and other climate-related regulations aimed at prompting economic shifts from fossil fuel dependency to a clean energy economy are generating winners and losers (Rodríguez-Pose and Bartalucci, 2024). This is raising discontent, especially in some regions and among some social groups which are more exposed to – or less equipped to absorb – the negative externalities associated with these policies. Such ‘green’ or climate discontent may stem from two diverging sources: on the one hand, resistance to the policy and measures implemented to combat climate change; on the other, dissatisfaction with a perceived timidity or insufficiency of these policies (Bourdin et al., 2025). The first form is illustrated by the Yellow Vests movement in France and farmers’ protests in

several EU countries in recent years. There are also prominent examples of the second form of climate discontent, such as the Fridays for Future movement or the demonstrations following the Dana floods in Valencia. These two reactions are related to the different spatial and interpersonal distribution of both costs and benefits from mitigation and adaptation measures, and to the spatial misalignment between costs and benefits, as the present paper is going to show.

This paper examines the territorial drivers of green discontent across European regions. We conceptualize green discontent as emerging from the interaction between locally experienced costs and globally distributed benefits of environmental policies. While climate action generates collective gains, its economic and social costs are often concentrated in specific places. This territorial asymmetry shapes how citizens evaluate whether “too much” or “not enough” is being done for the environment.

To account for potential spatial interdependencies in these perceptions, we estimate a spatial autoregressive model. This allows us to capture both region-specific determinants and cross-regional spillovers. We relate regional perceptions to green policy intensity, socioeconomic conditions, and levels of regional development.

The results reveal two distinct patterns. First, the perception that “not enough” has been done is negatively associated with the strength of green policies, measured through EU investments in green-related projects and government expenditures in environmental domains. In regions where public authorities invest more in environmental action, dissatisfaction among those demanding stronger action declines. This suggests that visible policy commitment can mitigate one dimension of green discontent.

By contrast, the perception that “too much” has been done is primarily associated with policy stringency, particularly where environmental regulation imposes explicit or implicit costs on polluting activities. In these regions, stronger constraints tend to increase backlash. At the same time, higher government spending in non-environmental domains appears to reduce this perception, possibly by offsetting perceived trade-offs.

The spatial distribution of these two perceptions further highlights their distinct logics. The “not enough” sentiment is geographically concentrated and exhibits cross-border spillovers, indicating that it spreads beyond regional boundaries and shares a relatively consistent socio-demographic profile. The “too much” sentiment, in contrast, is more widely dispersed but does not exhibit significant spillover effects. It appears more locally rooted and less structured by a common set of predictors, making it harder to capture through a single explanatory variable.

Taken together, these findings suggest that the two dimensions of green discontent reflect different underlying dynamics. While the “not enough” perception aligns with identifiable socio-demographic and policy-related factors, the “too much” perception is more consistent with a place-based form of resentment, particularly in regions that may perceive themselves as economically or socially left behind. Green backlash, in this sense, is not simply the mirror image of pro-environmental dissatisfaction, but a territorially embedded reaction shaped by local experiences of cost and marginalisation.