

REPORT

# A FERTILE GROUND FOR **DISINFORMATION**



From Spreading Climate Change Misinformation to Undermining Climate Action: How the Farmers' Protest Were Used to Influence Audiences.

Elaborated by



In alliance with





# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Farmers' protests in Europe in 2024 have been weaponized by a wide array of actors to spread climate misinformation and narratives undermining climate action.

The effectiveness of these influential manipulations has been felt throughout the European Union, as we identified anti-climate action narratives in the most interacted social media posts across all languages analyzed. Simultaneously, false claims related to the protests, verified by 24 EU-based fact-checking organizations, overwhelmingly fuel deep-seated distrust towards the EU. These included narratives that falsely accused the EU of promoting lab-grown meat and alleged that governments were deliberately destroying water infrastructure. These inaccuracies did more than just obscure the actual demands of the protesters; they also amplified existing skepticism and suspicion towards the EU and its climate policies.

The analysis reveals that narratives specifically opposing EU climate policies are significantly more engaging or resonant with the audience than broader anti-climate action sentiments. As the protests evolved, specific anti-EU climate action narratives identified attracted three times more interactions than broader, general critiques of climate action.

The actors using such narrative are mostly politicians affiliated with the far-right. We found that 81.6% of the total posts featuring narratives against climate action and the EU in the most popular posts about the farmers' protests were published by far-right politicians.

Initially sparked by a variety of local issues and diverse demands, approximately half of which were related to climate<sup>1</sup>, the representations of these protests have now converged towards a single meta-narrative, advocating for a substantial redirection or termination of European climate policies.

Ultimately, the European Commission<sup>2</sup> and many member-states<sup>3</sup> backtracked on several measures linked to climate and biodiversity following the farmers' protest, providing confirmation to some of these narratives.

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.carbonbrief.org/analysis-how-do-the-eu-farmer-protests-relate-to-climate-change/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.ft.com/content/00b344d9-8ff9-4a71-ae31-a76daecb96ab>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.euractiv.com/section/agriculture-food/news/snapshot-of-farmers-protests-and-its-not-over/>

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# INTRODUCTION

In recent months, farmers' protests strongly emerged in various parts of Europe. These demonstrations have been fueled by a range of motivations, including concerns over agricultural policies, environmental regulations, and economic pressures. Farmers across France, Spain, Germany, and the Netherlands, have taken to the streets, demanding fair pricing for their produce, greater support from government authorities, and a more sustainable approach to farming practices, among others. The protests have highlighted the challenges faced by farmers and the need for policy reforms to ensure their livelihoods and the future of farming communities.

However, amidst the fervor, misinformation also permeated the discourse, adding new layers of complexity to the narratives surrounding the protests, and potentially shaping public perception and influencing public responses.

New, more radicalized transnational protest groups tied to the far-right have also emerged or gained influence out of this crisis. Distancing themselves from the first demonstrations, the Farmers Defence Force from the Netherlands, Landwirtschaft verbindet Deutschland (known as LSV, or Agriculture Unites Germany), and the Institute of Agricultural Economy from Poland plan to reverse the EU's Green Deal and protest together on June 4, 2024, in Brussels.

This report aims to identify these narratives supported by disinformation claims surrounding the farmers' protests across Europe and their correlation with the European Union, focusing on assessing their potential impact on the European elections.

# 1/ GENERAL STATE OF CLIMATE MISINFORMATION **BEFORE THE PROTESTS**

Climate misinformation remains a significant issue, undermining public understanding and response to one of the most pressing global challenges.<sup>4</sup> Persistent myths about the existence and causes of global warming continue to circulate, despite being contradicted by robust scientific evidence. Common misinformation topics include the broad claims that:

- Global warming is not happening, and
- Climate change is natural and not human-caused.

In recent years, however, new forms of misinformation have emerged. According to an investigation by the Center for Countering Digital Hate,<sup>5</sup> climate misinformation is now largely relying on claims denying the impacts, solutions, and credibility of those advocating for climate action rather than denying the scientific reality of global warming or its anthropic origin. Common claims of this kind of misinformation include:

- The impacts of global warming will be beneficial or harmless,
- Climate solutions won't work,
- Climate science is unreliable.

Such claims do not function solely on their own anymore. The strategy of spreading misinformation involves more than distorting facts; it's about influencing readily available audiences and shaping compelling misinformation that resonates with public values and emotions through narratives.

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.ipcc.ch/report/ar6/syr/resources/spm-headline-statements/>

<sup>5</sup> [https://counterhate.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/CCDH-The-New-Climate-Denial\\_FINAL.pdf](https://counterhate.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/CCDH-The-New-Climate-Denial_FINAL.pdf)

A narrative is a purpose-driven story used by actors to persuade and coordinate individuals and groups, making sense of events and themes with a plot and characters (Bevan, Colley, & Workman, 2020).

Misinformation narratives are complex and multifaceted, often transcending simple 'true' or 'false' categories. They interlace facts, beliefs, emotions, and cultural values, which can make certain narratives particularly efficient in spreading misinformation as they tap into deeper, more emotive layers of public discourse. Examples of narratives used by those talking about climate change, as identified by the Narratives Observatory combatting Disinformation in Europe Systemically (NODES),<sup>6</sup> include:

1. 'Resist the Green Dystopia', which argues that green activism threatens our traditional way of life and imposes excessive control over personal freedoms.
2. 'Green policies block progress', which argues that fossil fuels have driven prosperity, and green policies hinder development.
3. 'Let's not panic', which claims that climate policies are based on exaggerations of climate effects and ignore costs, defending that there is no climate emergency.
4. 'Crisis as an opportunity', which sees climate change as real, with green tech offering solutions.
5. 'The apocalypse is coming', which predicts imminent, catastrophic climate events.
6. 'Rebellion against greed', which attributes climate change to the ultra-rich and multinationals.
7. 'We need to act together', which emphasizes local action and urgent collective efforts.

<sup>6</sup> <https://nodes.eu/climate-change-seven-dominant-narratives-organise-the-public-debate>

## 2/ THE SIGNIFICANCE OF AGRICULTURE IN EU CLIMATE STRATEGY

Farming and agriculture are critical to addressing climate change for several reasons:

- It is a major source of greenhouse gas emission: Agriculture is a significant contributor to global greenhouse gas emissions, generating between a quarter and a third of the total, depending on the scope of the estimates.<sup>7</sup> Annually, this amounts to a range of 10.8 to 19.1 billion tonnes of CO<sub>2</sub>-equivalent,<sup>8</sup> which is close to or exceeds the combined emissions from all the world's heat and electricity production.<sup>9</sup>
- It has untapped potential for climate impact: The agrifood sector represents a largely untapped opportunity for low-cost climate change mitigation. Through practices that draw carbon from the atmosphere into ecosystems and soils, agriculture can have a large effect on reducing atmospheric carbon levels.
- Cost-effective investment opportunities exist in this field: For instance, an increase in annual investments to \$260 billion could halve agrifood emissions by 2030, with estimated benefits of up to \$4.3 trillion in health, economic, and environmental improvements by 2030—a return of 16 times the investment costs.<sup>10</sup>

Agriculture is consequently at the core of the European Green Deal, which encompasses the Zero Pollution Action Plan, the EU Biodiversity Strategy for 2030, and the European Climate Law.

The European Climate Law enshrines the goal established in the European Green Deal for Europe's economy and society to become climate-neutral by 2050. Although agriculture is not specifically mentioned in the European Climate Law, proposals for legislative tools to achieve these targets encompass both agriculture and land use, land use change, and forestry (LULUCF) sectors.

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<sup>7</sup> <https://ourworldindata.org/greenhouse-gas-emissions-food>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.ipcc.ch/srccl/>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/agriculture/publication/recipe-for-livable-planet>

<sup>10</sup> Idem.

The Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) is also being increasingly redesigned not only to ensure a stable food supply and safeguard farmers' incomes but also to protect the environment and adapt agriculture to climate change.

With more than 40% of the EU's landmass dedicated to agriculture, of which nearly 60% is dedicated to arable land use, this sector is also significantly impacted by climate change.<sup>11</sup>

Europe's agricultural sector is exposed to increased risks of crop failure and diminished pasture quality due to climate change, according to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC).<sup>12</sup> Scientists have found in their latest report that this exposure is predominantly due to the increased probability of simultaneous extreme heat and drought conditions, as well as other extreme weather events. Such events will intensify, particularly affecting Western Central Europe, Eastern Europe, and Southeastern Europe, reports the IPCC with high confidence.

Projections show that with a temperature increase to 2.7°C above pre-industrial levels, these risks will not only become more frequent but also more geographically widespread, eventually affecting nearly all parts of Europe. This scenario is likely to trigger shifts in agricultural zones, precipitate the early onset of heat stress, and result in substantial crop yield losses, such as up to 28% in maize across the EU's 27 member states and the United Kingdom. These conditions could lead to broader ecological disruptions, including reductions in grassland biomass and pollination, and an exacerbation of weed growth, thereby compounding the challenges faced by the agricultural sector.

Although future risks are clearly stressed by scientists, they also note that Europe has already experienced climate change impacts of moderate severity through multiple crop failures in the last decade.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>11</sup> [https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/agriculture-and-food/agricultural-policy-monitoring-and-evaluation-2023\\_b14de474-en](https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/agriculture-and-food/agricultural-policy-monitoring-and-evaluation-2023_b14de474-en)

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.ipcc.ch/report/ar6/wg2/chapter/chapter-13/>

<sup>13</sup> Idem.

In fact, every heatwave analyzed so far in Europe in recent years (2003, 2010, 2015, 2017, 2018, 2019, 2023) was found to be made much more likely and more intense due to human-induced climate change by scientists from the World Weather Attribution initiative.<sup>14</sup>

Between 2000 and 2021, on average, 76,873 square kilometers of cropland were annually affected by droughts across the 38 European Economic Area members and cooperating countries. This area is roughly equivalent to the size of Czechia.<sup>15</sup>

The summer of 2022 also saw Europe experiencing its worst drought in 500 years, profoundly affecting agricultural outputs. Maize and soybean yields across the EU were significantly below average, with maize at 75% and soybeans nearly 10% lower than the 2017–2021 averages. In Italy, the drought led to a 45% reduction in corn and animal feed yields and a 30% reduction in wheat and rice production. In Spain, the olive yield, crucial for the global olive oil market, was halved compared to the previous year and marked the worst yield in a century.<sup>16</sup>

Without human-induced climate change, these heat events would however have been extremely rare. For instance, maximum heat like in July 2023 would have been virtually impossible to occur in Southern Europe if humans had not warmed the planet by burning fossil fuels.<sup>17</sup>

With 3°C of global warming in 2100, drought losses could be 5 times higher compared to today according to the European Commission's Joint Research Centre.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> [https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/agriculture-and-food/agricultural-policy-monitoring-and-evaluation-2023\\_b14de474-en](https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/agriculture-and-food/agricultural-policy-monitoring-and-evaluation-2023_b14de474-en)

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.worldweatherattribution.org/human-contribution-to-the-record-breaking-july-2019-heat-wave-in-western-europe/>

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.eea.europa.eu/publications/responding-to-climate-change-impacts/>

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.worldweatherattribution.org/extreme-heat-in-north-america-europe-and-china-in-july-2023-made-much-more-likely-by-climate-change/>

<sup>18</sup> <https://publications.jrc.ec.europa.eu/repository/handle/JRC118585>



# METHODOLOGY

In this context, this report aims to identify the narratives surrounding the farmers' protests across Europe and their correlation with the European Union and climate action, focusing on assessing their potential impact on the European elections. To achieve this, we employed a content analysis methodology of fact-checks published by various European fact-checking organizations.

This approach examines the different narrative types prevalent over the past months, paying particular attention to regional, linguistic, and platform-specific characteristics. Narratives are understood as collective disinformation content referring to the same idea or story (Dawson, 2021; Suau & Puertas-Graell, 2023). Previous studies have explored how organized disinformation campaigns exacerbate societal polarization and distrust through strategic narratives (Dawson, 2021). Both content analysis and narrative analysis have proven effective in assessing the scope and potential impact of specific disinformation (Strand & Svensson, 2022; Herman & Vervaeck, 2019).

## **FACT-CHECKS ANALYSIS**


To achieve our objectives, we developed a search strategy to retrieve relevant fact-checks from the Elections24Check, complemented with EDMO reports<sup>19</sup> and entries from EUvsDisinfo.<sup>20</sup> This strategy involved employing keywords, boolean operators, and search filters to refine our search results and annotate them.<sup>21</sup>

We searched for 'farmers' protests,' gathering 978 preliminary results, including debunks, fact-checks, and prebunks. After a manual review,

<sup>19</sup> <https://edmo.eu/resources/reports-and-analyses/>

<sup>20</sup> <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/disinformation-cases/>

<sup>21</sup> <https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1dsvSon4m278DpnDhMiMDI4KQ5k18AmxZ>



we selected 130 relevant articles that met the criteria of being focused on the farmer protests. We screened for relevance, removed duplicates, and extracted data. Subsequently, we analyzed this data, categorizing fact-checks based on narrative themes, dissemination strategies, sources, and potential impact to identify patterns, trends, and commonalities among disinformation narratives.

To analyze articles related to farmers' protests and explore the emerging narratives of misinformation, we followed two parallel processes. Firstly, we conducted manual scrutiny, extracting initial conclusions on the most common types of misinformation and endeavoring to categorize the main lines of fact-checks around a predefined list of categories. Concurrently, we automated this process. Both Science Feedback and Newtral conducted an analysis of claims using ChatGPT to cluster them and measure the volume of each. In this instance, our focus was solely on fact-checks, excluding prebunks, which do not contain a verified claim. Once we obtained both lists, we conducted a comparative analysis to refine the statements and endeavor to specify the groups for categorization more accurately. In this process, we also benefited from the guidance of the ECF team, who provided us with some of the narratives they had identified during the protests. This allowed us to compare whether there were any indications of these narratives in the articles within our database.

Recognizing the iterative nature of the content analysis process, we continuously refined and adjusted our methodology and validated our findings through peer review and consultation with subject matter experts.

## **SOCIAL MEDIA POSTS ANALYSIS**

A second analysis was conducted using social media data to examine how farmers' protests were referenced and which narratives they conveyed about climate action, specifically relating to the EU and conspiracy theories about institutions. This investigation also aimed to explore national differences among six European Union countries and to understand the cumulative dynamics of narratives across a significant portion of the EU.

Facebook was selected for this analysis as it remains one of the most widely used social networks. The platform's accessibility to research tools for collecting posts and data was a decisive factor in choosing Facebook over other more restrictive social media platforms.

The timeframe for this analysis began on 01/12/2023, coinciding with the onset of farmers' protests in Germany. The endpoint for data collection was set as late as possible due to ongoing protests, on 10/05/2024.

The types of accounts from which data was retrieved using CrowdTangle included Facebook Pages, Public Groups, and Verified Profiles.

Using CrowdTangle, we extracted the 100 Facebook posts with the highest interaction rates (likes, comments, shares, and all other reactions) that contained keywords related to the farmers' protests, separately, for each of the six languages.

A list of keywords was developed according to words widely used on social media to discuss the farmers' protests for each of the six countries studied. This list was reviewed by a third party with expertise in the affairs of each country. Alternative keywords for each country were then tested using CrowdTangle to select the most relevant keyword for the national context. This selection was based on comparing the total number of interactions recorded by CrowdTangle for each keyword in the date frame.

Keywords selected include:

- German: "Bauernproteste"
- Spanish: "Tractorada"
- French: "Colère des agriculteurs"
- Italian: "Protesta dei trattori"
- Dutch: "Boerenprotesten"
- Polish: "Protesty rolników"

After data collection, each of the 100 most interacted-with posts featuring the selected keyword was annotated based on the narratives they contained. The text of the posts was extracted from the spreadsheet and analyzed independently of the post's author or any content attached to the text. Discourse analysis was employed to identify the presence of relevant narratives within the scope of our research. A subsequent analysis was conducted to detect elements of political campaigning in the posts. This analysis relied solely on the texts extracted from the posts, and ambiguities were resolved by verifying whether the author was a politician.



# FARMERS' PROTESTS AND **CLIMATE CHANGE NARRATIVES**

False claims arising from farmers' protests reveal a landscape of deep-seated distrust towards the European Union, manifesting in various narratives such as assertions about EU policies promoting lab-grown meat and allegations of governments destroying water infrastructure. These falsehoods not only underscore the real demands of agricultural protests but also resonate with broader themes of skepticism and suspicion regarding EU authority.

These false messages tap into underlying notions of the EU's perceived control over what individuals eat, grow, and even do, suggesting that institutions wield authority even over natural phenomena like the weather. Such narratives reflect a broader atmosphere of skepticism and mistrust towards governance structures, highlighting the need to address misinformation and foster trust in public institutions.

The subsequent table categorizes the primary types of false claims stemming from the farmers' protests, drawn from our database analysis. We consolidated them into 14 distinct categories (Table 1).

Table 1. Fact-checked Claims Arising from Farmers' Protests

Summary	False Texts
The EU is promoting lab-grown meat.	Lab-grown meat, produced from animal cells and utilizing 3D printing technology, is emerging as a solution to combat the significant environmental pollution attributed to traditional livestock farming practices. The EU is promoting its consumption.
The EU wants you to eat bugs.	The EU wants you to eat bugs. Europe has recently approved the sale of insects as alternative proteins.
Food products from countries outside are contaminated or do not meet the standards.	Food products from countries outside of the EU are contaminated or don't meet the standards. For example, Moroccan strawberries are under scrutiny for possible contamination, or the entering of Ukrainian grain into Poland without meeting European standards.
Institutions are banning home-grown food.	Institutions such as the WHO or the EU are banning the cultivation of food at home, destroying the working class.
The EU is destroying crop fields.	The EU's agricultural policies are causing distress among farmers, with forced reductions in production, such as spilling milk and ceasing olive production due to market saturation. European Union is also destroying crop fields.
Governments are destroying water infrastructure.	The destruction of water infrastructure, including the demolition of dams and reservoirs, even despite droughts and water scarcity, is being used to justify climate change.

The government is attempting to control the weather.	Revelations on Chemtrails, Climate Change, and Globalist Agendas in the EU. Climate change and environmental interventions such as geoengineering and chemtrails are being conducted secretly.
Farmers are protesting against the Green Deal.	Farmers are protesting against the Green Deal
Police used unnecessary violence against farmers.	Police brutality against farmers, police charges, and arrests at farmers' protests.
Supporting Ukraine has impacted our agriculture.	Attacks on Ukrainian embassies by farmers, blaming Europe's support for Ukraine. Particularly, French farmers are actively protesting against the Ukrainian embassy by dumping manure as a response to Ukraine's request to cease their protests.
Farmers are at risk of being replaced by AI.	Farmers are going to be replaced with artificial intelligence robots.

Source: own elaboration from the fact-checks on Elections24Check.

After categorizing the claims checked by fact-checkers into different categories, we endeavored to extrapolate the underlying messages or themes that emerge from them. Some of the false content included multiple messages simultaneously, aligning with various narratives.

In total, we identified approximately eight primary narratives. Among them, four were directly associated with climate issues, focusing on European climate change mitigation and adaptation policies.

This doesn't mean that these narratives are false on their own, but it highlights that fact-checked claims reflect these ideas. The narratives we identified are listed on the following pages. In the subsequent sections, we will explore each of these narratives in detail.

# 1. Control over what you eat.

Climate change measures are used as a pretext to exert unnecessary control over individuals' dietary choices and livelihoods. This narrative portrays environmental regulations as a means for institutions to dictate and manipulate personal freedoms.

# 2. Threat to farmers' livelihoods.

Environmental protection initiatives are depicted as threats to the livelihoods of farmers and ranchers. This narrative highlights the perceived conflict between sustainability efforts and agricultural practices, framing environmental regulations as detrimental to farmers' economic interests.

# 3. Weather manipulation.

Conspiracy theories suggest that governments are secretly manipulating weather patterns. This narrative fuels distrust in governmental institutions, portraying weather events as artificial interventions rather than natural occurrences.

# 4. Protests are against the Green Deal.

Farmers are portrayed as protesting against the Green Deal, reflecting opposition to European Union environmental policies aimed at addressing climate change and transitioning to a greener economy. This narrative underscores resistance to environmental regulations perceived as detrimental to agricultural interests.

## 5. Unfair competition.

Allegations suggest that unfair competition promoted by the EU exacerbates challenges for farmers, harming their economic viability, including different conditions or controls for food imports. This narrative highlights concerns over trade policies and market dynamics that disadvantage local farmers in favor of larger corporations.

## 6. Aggressive protests.

The farmers' protests are depicted as aggressive, implying violence and unrest among protestors. This narrative may seek to motivate stronger pressure by encouraging participants to engage in more disruptive actions.

## 7. Excessive law enforcement.

Law enforcement's response to protesters is deemed excessively aggressive, suggesting disproportionate use of force against peaceful demonstrators. This narrative raises questions about control tactics and political interests in silencing the protests.

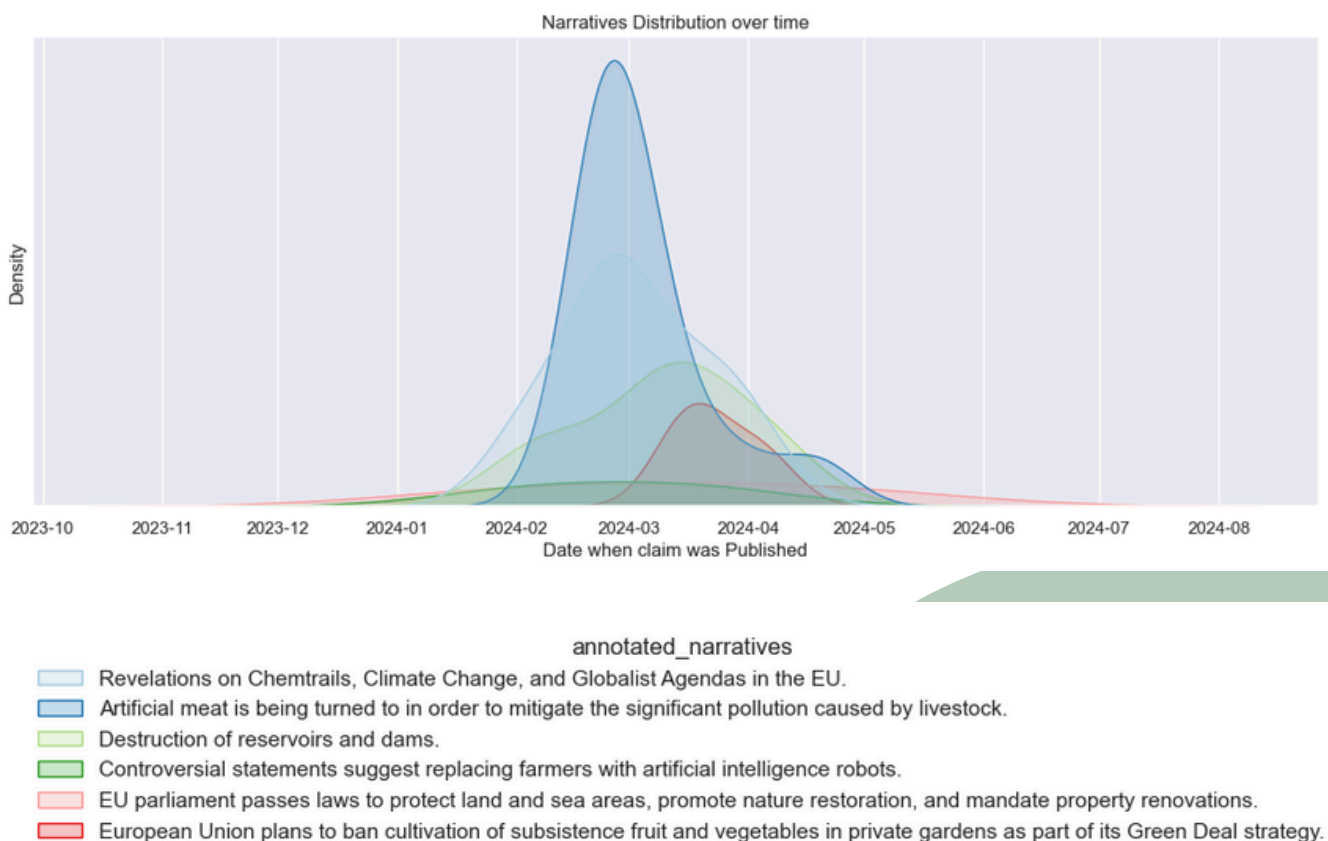
## 8. Impact of support for Ukraine.

Support for Ukraine is depicted as resulting in the wasteful disposal of food, adversely impacting local farmers. This narrative links international geopolitics to domestic agricultural issues, framing support for Ukraine as detrimental to the interests of local farmers.

# CLIMATE-RELATED NARRATIVES ARISING FROM FARMERS' PROTESTS

As in any protest or mass movement, in the European Union's 2024 farmers' protests, disinformation narratives emerged that, in many cases, were similar among several of the participating countries. In this study, we focus on those related to climate change, either by spreading scientific misinformation about the phenomenon or about the climate policies supported in the European Union, which in many of the messages that circulated were framed as an "excuse" to control citizens.

Graphic 1. Climate disinformation narratives automatically detected distributed over time



Source: own elaboration from the automated analysis of the fact-checks on Elections24Check.

One of the most widespread claims was that artificial meat is being pushed to mitigate the significant pollution caused by livestock. This can be seen in Graphic 1, generated by the automated narrative detection, which was later codified in conjunction with human analysis. According to the articles on Elections24Check, there were 15 articles from different fact-checkers from Hungary, Poland, Bulgaria, Romania, Serbia, Austria, Greece, Slovenia, and the Czech Republic.

Another false claim that was spread was that the institutions, mainly the EU and the World Health Organization (WHO), were banning food cultivation at home because they allegedly “contribute to climate change”. The database built from Elections24Check included five verification articles from France, Spain, and Poland.

In some countries, claims circulated about supposed “revelations” on chemtrails and a “globalist agenda” to control the weather and cause droughts, along with general climate misinformation against the anthropogenic origin of climate change. A total of 14 articles were found about these topics, published by verifiers from Poland, North Macedonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Italy, and Spain.

Also in Spain, a false claim circulated that said that the droughts were caused by the Government demolishing dams, a narrative found in five fact-checks on Elections24Check.

There were also false messages that claimed that the EU parliament passed laws to protect land and sea areas and adapt fields to climate change that would destroy crop fields. A total of six articles were found about this topic, from Italy, Portugal, Poland, Sweden, and North Macedonia.

## **NON-CLIMATE-RELATED NARRATIVES ARISING FROM FARMERS' PROTESTS**

Apart from disinformation narratives specifically related to climate, more general narratives about farmers' protests have also circulated in several countries. Some of the most widespread are those that used

images generated by Artificial Intelligence, found in twelve articles published in Elections24Check, from Portugal, North Macedonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia, Turkey, Austria, Poland, Greece, Hungary, and Spain. Most of the articles fact-checked an AI-generated picture that depicted the Eiffel Tower surrounded by straw bales.

There were also eight articles that verified out-of-context videos of old protests and claimed that they corresponded to current demonstrations. They circulated in Spain, Poland, The Netherlands, and Germany.

Messages also circulated in Spain and Romania regarding alleged police brutality against the farmers in different situations, with a total of eight articles.

Other well-spread messages that circulated falsely referred to that French President Macron would have faced backlash from farmers as protests escalated. Eight articles were found from Spain, Turkey, Georgia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Poland, Serbia and Greece. Another four articles from Spain, Croatia, Austria, and Portugal were found about farmer representation in the media and false supporters of the protests.

Messages also circulated claiming that an alleged unfair competition promoted by the EU is detrimental to farmers, exacerbating their challenges. In this sense, false claims about Ukraine were common. For example, a video spread in several countries claiming that French farmers in the protests had attacked the Ukrainian embassy by dumping manure, blaming Europe's support for Ukraine, with a total of twelve articles from Bulgaria, the United Kingdom, Lithuania, Germany, Spain, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia, Poland, Romania, and The Netherlands. There were also messages that spread misinformation about the quality of Ukrainian products in Italy,

In this sense, there were also other claims about food products from countries outside of the EU that are contaminated or do not meet the standards. For example, in Spain, it was spread that strawberries from Morocco were contaminated with norovirus. A total of six fact-checks were in Elections24Check.

Also, a false claim circulated that stated that farmers would be “replaced by AI robots”, with two verification articles from Spain and Slovenia.

## **COMMON THEMES IN THE PORTRAYAL OF THE FARMERS’ PROTESTS IN SOCIAL MEDIA**

A total of 76 Facebook posts, among the 100 most popular in all six languages, displayed narratives using the farmers' protests to oppose climate action in general or EU climate policies, and to promote conspiracy theories about institutions or the EU (see Annex 1).

The narratives identified were then categorized into three narrative clusters.

### **1. Narratives Against the EU's Climate Action**

This cluster includes narratives that specifically criticize the European Union's climate policies, portraying them as detrimental to the agricultural sector. For example:

- In German, posts claim that "EU policies impose unreasonable demands on farmers; agriculture is a victim of climate policy."
- In Italian, there is a recurrent theme that "The EU's policies kill off local agriculture," and "The EU creates disasters out of pseudo-Green ideology against farmers."
- Similarly, in Polish, narratives express opposition to the EU Green Deal, labeling it as a policy that will "destroy Polish agriculture."

These narratives suggest a direct conflict between EU climate policies and the interests of farmers, framing these policies as existential threats.

## 2. Narratives Against Climate Action

This cluster encompasses broader opposition to climate action in general, without directly attributing blame to EU policies. Examples include:

- German narratives state that "Farmers are fed up with CO2 rip-offs and green energy policies."
- In French, sentiments are echoed with statements like "Farmers need to resist scam eco policies full of taxes and absurd regulations."
- Italian posts argue that "Europe must not pursue green madness that risks killing agriculture."

These posts often discuss climate action in terms of economic burden and perceived ineffectiveness, suggesting a skepticism toward the overall benefits of combating climate change.

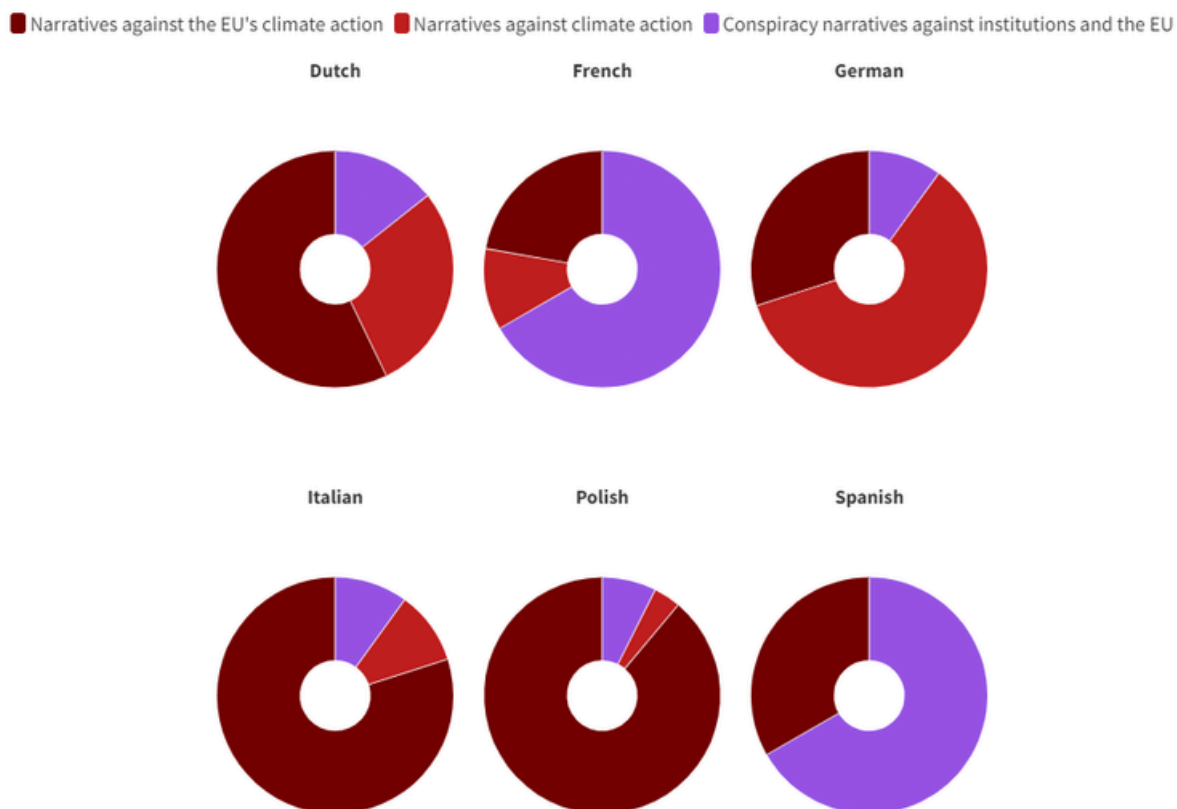
## 3. Conspiracy Narratives Against Institutions and the EU

This cluster captures narratives that include elements of conspiracy, suggesting malign intent or manipulation by the EU or other institutions toward farmers. For instance:

- In German, there's a narrative that "Politicians from traditional parties don't care about the farmers" and that "Climate terrorists' actions are supported by the left and green parties, but the farmers are not."
- The French language posts are rife with conspiracy, as seen in "Farmers are protesting because they have been lied to by the government and backstabbed by the EU."
- In Polish, extreme views are articulated through narratives like "The EU Green Deal is a communist plot," and "Farmers are protesting because they don't want migrants and the EU federation."

These narratives often blend factual grievances with speculative or unfounded claims, enhancing the emotional appeal of the posts and potentially increasing their viral nature.

Graphic 2. National proportions of narrative clusters from the social media analysis



Source: own elaboration from the social media analysis.

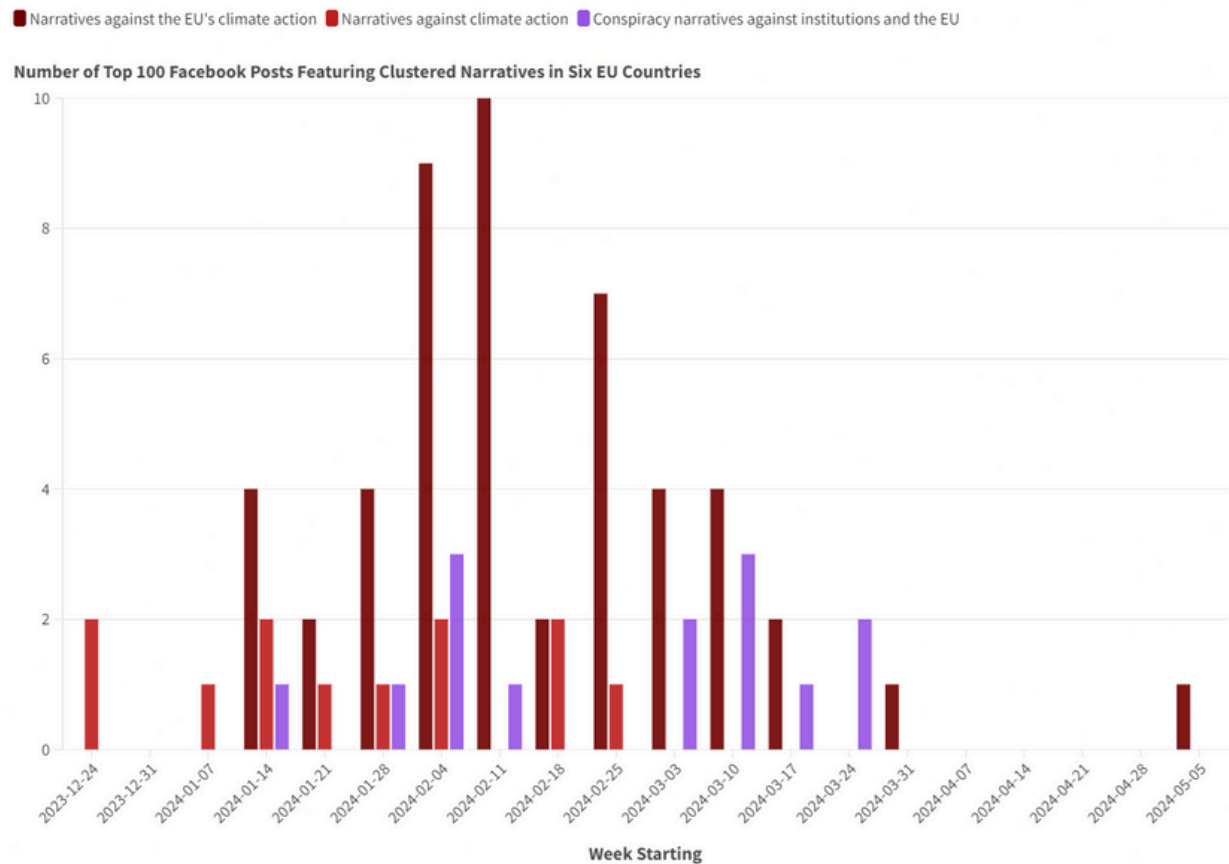
The analysis of social media narratives related to farmers' protests across various EU countries underscores distinct linguistic and regional variations in the distribution of narrative clusters.

In the narrative against climate action, German discourse leads with 60% of the posts within this cluster, indicating a strong focus on climate skepticism. Dutch also shows considerable proportions of posts on this topic, accounting for 28.57% of its narratives, while Polish, Italian and French are relatively lower, with Spanish not engaging at all on the topic.

Regarding the narratives against EU climate policies, Italian and Polish languages exhibit the highest proportions of posts, with 80% and 88.89%, respectively, of their narrative focused on this theme, demonstrating a significant concern over EU policies. The Dutch language also shows a notable proportion at 57.14%. In contrast, the French and Spanish languages have lower proportions, and German displays a moderate focus at 30% of posts on this topic.

Conspiracy narratives against institutions are most prominent in the French and Spanish discussions, each comprising approximately 67% of their narrative clusters. This highlights a deep-seated mistrust towards institutions. On the other hand, Dutch, German, Italian, and Polish show lower proportions in this narrative cluster, with German and Polish featuring the least.

### Graphic 3. Evolution of clustered narratives over time



Source: own elaboration from the social media analysis.

The chart tracking Facebook posts from December 2023 to May 2024 reveals how their number evolved during the period, regardless of engagement and interactions.

The data shows that posts feeding narratives opposing EU climate action were consistently more prevalent, particularly peaking in mid-February. This peak likely reflects intensified criticism of EU climate policies coinciding with key moments in the farmers' protests.

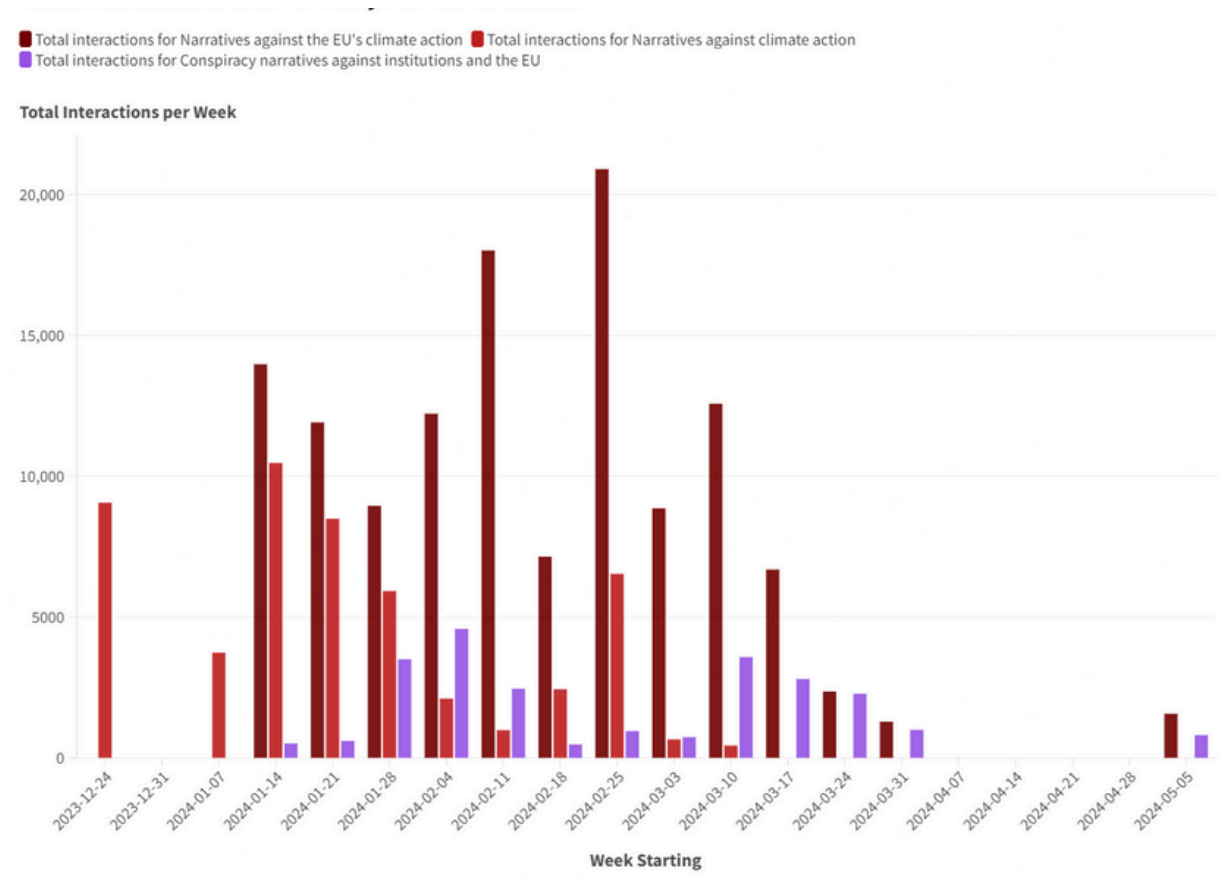
In contrast, although less dominant, the general anti-climate action narrative maintained a substantial presence throughout the period, suggesting that social media users writing about the farmers' protests showed persistent skepticism or resistance to broader climate initiatives.

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Graphic 4. Total interactions for posts by narrative cluster



Source: own elaboration from the social media analysis.

The chart displayed on Graphic 4 presents data on Facebook posts from December 2023 to May 2024, illustrating the evolution of the engagement around narratives over this period. 'Total interactions' represent the sum of engagements, including likes, shares, and comments on all posts, for each narrative cluster, providing insight into the changing levels of popularity of the different narratives.

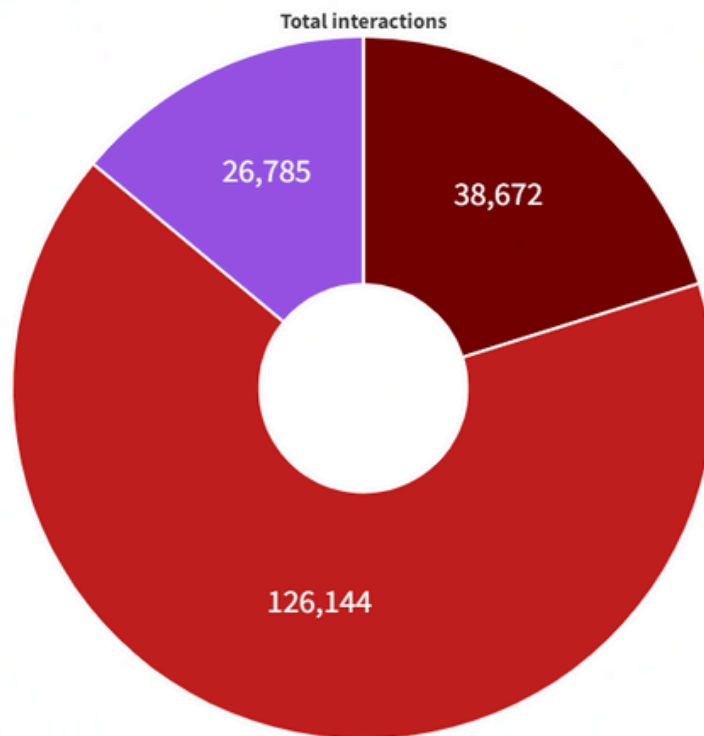
Despite the relatively small number of posts featuring narratives against climate action, they attracted proportionally higher attention from Facebook users (see Graphic 3 for comparison). Then, as the farmers' protests intensified, there was a noticeable shift in focus from general anti-climate action to more specific opposition against EU climate policies. This transition might indicate that narratives became more targeted toward EU climate policies and intensified as the protests evolved.

Narratives opposing the EU's climate policies saw an increase, reaching peak activity around February 2024. This trend highlights significant periods of intense engagement, which coincide with the height of the farmers' protests.

Additionally, conspiracy narratives against institutions and the EU exhibited a steady increase in popularity, peaking in early March 2024. This shows that engagement with such narratives grew over time, further fueled by the ongoing farmers' protests.

## Graphic 5. Total interactions by narrative cluster

■ Narratives against climate action ■ Narratives against the EU's climate action ■ Conspiracy narratives against institutions and the EU



Source: own elaboration from the social media analysis.

Graphic 5 illustrates the distribution of total interactions across different narrative clusters related to climate action from December 2023 to May 2024 across the six languages studied.

## THE ROLE OF **FAR-RIGHT POLITICIANS** IN SHAPING FARMERS' PROTEST NARRATIVES

An analysis of the narratives posted reveals that far-right politicians are not only active participants but often leading voices in the discourse related to farmers' protests against climate action and the EU. Out of a total of 76 identified posts featuring identified narratives (see Annex 1), 62 were posted by far-right politicians, representing approximately 81.6% of the total.

In Germany, the influence of far-right politicians is particularly pronounced, with 90% (9 out of 10) of the posts authored by these figures, all affiliated with Alternative for Germany (AfD). A similar trend is evident in France with Les Patriotes and Rassemblement National and in the Netherlands with Farmer–Citizen Movement, where far-right figures shaped 88.9% (8 out of 9) and 85.7% (6 out of 7) of the posts, respectively. Although Spain has fewer total posts featuring identified narratives, a substantial 66.7% (2 out of 3) still originate from far-right politicians affiliated to the VOX party.

Italy presents a different scenario, with 55% (11 out of 20) of its posts showing identified narratives influenced by the far-right, mainly coming from the League for Salvini Premier. In contrast, Poland shows the highest engagement by far-right politicians, with 96.3% (26 out of 27) of the posts displaying identified narratives authored by politicians from political parties Confederation Liberty and Independence, Sovereign Poland, and Confederation of the Polish Crown.



# CASE STUDIES

Diverse disinformation narratives emerged, reflecting unique national contexts. While the majority of themes prevailed in all the analyses, we have also paid attention to subtle differences across the countries that experienced the larger protests, seeking to understand their particularities and how they shaped disinformation within each nation.

## ● **Misinformation Regarding Land Grabs, Climate Change, and Ukrainian Wheat in Italy**

False claims involved the Emilia-Romagna region, where it was erroneously reported that local authorities were paying farmers to abandon their lands. This claim was debunked, clarifying that no such payments were made.<sup>22</sup> Misinformation about climate change was also prevalent, including misleading statements about the percentage of CO<sub>2</sub> in the atmosphere.<sup>23</sup> These claims inaccurately suggested that human activity is not a significant contributor to climate change, contradicting established scientific consensus.

Additionally, misinformation was not limited to local issues. For example, claims spread suggesting that birds in Poland had died from consuming Ukrainian wheat, which lacked evidence and was subsequently disproven.<sup>24</sup>


## ● **Damns, Water Shortage and Misinformation in Spain**

The water shortage experienced by some regions of Spain coincided with the farmers' protests and became a major argument for those promoting misinformation about their demands. Reviving an earlier falsehood that has had a significant impact in Spain, partly due to its repeated use in the political sphere, the protests reignited the notion

<sup>22</sup> <https://facta.news/antibufale/2024/02/06/emilia-romagna-agricoltori/>

<sup>23</sup> <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/disinformation-cases/>

<sup>24</sup> <https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1dsvSon4m278DpnDhMiMDI4KQ5k18AmxZ>



that the Spanish government was destroying dams during a drought.<sup>25</sup> These messages even claimed that the government was "dumping water into the sea"<sup>26</sup> to exacerbate the water shortage and gain political advantage, or that the price of water was rising<sup>27</sup> due to the supposed destruction of dams and river barriers.

In addition, another distinctive narrative in Spain revolves around arguments against importing products from Morocco<sup>28</sup> or maintaining relations with this neighboring country.<sup>29</sup> Among other claims, the misleading messages targeted traditional import products, such as strawberries<sup>30</sup> and green beans<sup>31</sup>, attributing various problems to them.

### ● **Misinformation Tied to the War in Ukraine and Russian Propaganda in Poland**

The geographical proximity to Ukraine and the impact of the war between Ukraine and Russia have also been reflected in the disinformation narratives in Poland. Unlike in other countries, a significant number of falsehoods spread around the agricultural protests in Poland are related to its neighboring country.

Specifically, several claims in the political discourse were related to the number of pesticides used in each country, the agricultural land allocated on both sides of the border, and the amount of grain produced by each state.<sup>32</sup> Underlying these comparisons are narratives about the impact of supporting Ukraine, such as the "uncontrolled entry" of goods from that country or the lack of pesticide use controls,<sup>33</sup> suggesting the idea of unfair competition.

### ● **Misinformation Regarding Lab-Grown Meat, Ukraine, and False Images in Germany**

Notable examples of misinformation circulating in Germany include incorrect claims about lab-grown meat, asserting that such products from animal cells are approved and available within the EU, which is not the case.<sup>34</sup> Additionally, a video purportedly showing farmers targeting the Ukrainian embassy in Paris with manure was debunked, as it did not depict the event claimed.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> <https://factual.afp.com/doc.afp.com.34LE6PG> and <https://maldita.es/clima/20240405/gobierno-vox-destruye-infraestructuras-hidricas/>

<sup>26</sup> <https://maldita.es/clima/20240308/agua-pedrogao-febrero-desembalse/>

<sup>27</sup> <https://verifica.efe.com/precio-agua-espana-embalses/>

<sup>28</sup> <https://www.newtral.es/fresas-marruecos-norovirus/20240220/>

<sup>29</sup> <https://maldita.es/clima/20240314/desaladoras-potabilizadoras-gobierno-espana-marruecos/>

<sup>30</sup> <https://verifica.efe.com/fresas-marroquies-microscopio-video-manipulado/>

<sup>31</sup> <https://maldita.es/alimentacion/20240315/judias-verdes-origen-marruecos-espa%C3%B1a/>

The public understanding of the events was complicated by a video falsely presented as current footage from the protests, which actually originated from a 2015 protest in Belgium.<sup>36</sup> Similarly, images claiming to depict farmers' protests in France were found to be misleading,<sup>37</sup> including one such image that was generated by artificial intelligence,<sup>38</sup> inaccurately representing the situation.

<sup>32</sup> <https://demagog.org.pl/wypowiedzi/ile-zboza-produkuje-polska-a-ile-ukraina-sprawdzamy/>

<sup>33</sup> <https://demagog.org.pl/wypowiedzi/zuzycie-pestycydow-polska-na-tle-ukrainy-i-zachodniej-europy/>

<sup>34</sup> <https://faktencheck.afp.com/doc.afp.com.34JA8R9>

<sup>35</sup> <https://faktencheck.afp.com/doc.afp.com.34JQ979>

<sup>36</sup> <https://dpa-factchecking.com/germany/240207-99-905333/>

<sup>37</sup> <https://apa.at/faktencheck/irrefuehrende-bilder-zu-bauernprotesten-in-frankreich/>

<sup>38</sup> <https://faktencheck.afp.com/doc.afp.com.34HL3CJ>

# IMPACTS AND IMPLICATIONS

The use of farmers' protests to spread anti-climate action narratives and misinformation during the 2024 European farmers' protests is not just a phenomenon observed recently in 2024. This trend has been developing over time, with significant precedents set in earlier events, notably the 2022-23 Dutch farmers' protests against the national nitrogen policy.

When the Dutch government proposed cutting nitrogen emissions by half, which included reducing livestock by up to one-third, misinformation proliferated. Posts containing climate misinformation garnered about 500,000 likes, shares, and comments across various platforms according to Ripple Research.

Researchers identified eight major peaks in misinformation predominantly centered around four main narratives: The Great Reset conspiracy, The Agenda 2030 conspiracy, the land-grabbing of private property conspiracy, and the "Climate Tyranny" narrative, all aimed at undermining climate action. Moreover, every peak in misinformation, regardless of the specific topic, was intertwined with core conspiracy themes associated with far-right ideology. This shows a clear parallel between the climate misinformation narratives that spread during the Dutch farmers' protests and those during the 2024 European farmers' protests.

Such continuity needs to be taken into account in order to effectively address and mitigate the influence of misinformation on public opinion and policy debates.



# CONCLUSION

The 2024 farmers' protests in Europe have demonstrated how effectively misinformation can be weaponized to influence public opinion and policy. This analysis has shown that anti-EU and anti-climate action narratives, particularly those propagated by far-right politicians, as well as disinformation that portrays climate change measures as a form of control over personal freedoms have resonated deeply with the public, significantly shaping the discourse around climate policies.

Many false claims revolve around perceived European Union control over various aspects of life: what people eat (lab-grown meat, insects), what they grow (pesticides, home-grown production), and even weather manipulation (through chemtrails or destroying dams). These narratives often link to broader accusations about Agenda 2030 and economic interests involving imports. Additionally, a significant portion of the disinformation targets the representation of farmers' protests, including their size, the violence involved (both by farmers and against them), and the political response or lack thereof.

The proliferation of disinformation and narratives concerning climate issues during the agricultural protests in Europe shows the complex interplay between environmental policies and public perception. These narratives, often rooted in conspiracy theories and economic concerns, can significantly influence election outcomes and future climate actions, especially in regions where agriculture is a key economic sector. The depiction of environmental regulations as intrusive to personal liberties or economically damaging can erode trust in governmental institutions and their climate initiatives.

As climate misinformation continues to evolve and spread, it is crucial for policymakers to implement robust strategies to enhance transparency, build trust, and counter false narratives to safeguard the integrity of climate science and ensure informed public discourse. Implementing effective fact-checking and rapid response mechanisms to counter false claims is essential for maintaining the integrity of public discourse and ensuring informed decision-making.

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# ANNEX 1. ANALYSIS OF TOP 100 FACEBOOK POSTS ON FARMERS' PROTESTS

Narratives	Language	Narrative cluster
EU policies impose unreasonable demands on farmers; agriculture is a victim of climate policy.	German	Narratives against the EU's climate action
The EU is fighting against small and medium-sized farmers, as seen in the 2030 agenda and the CO2-free utopia, which benefits only billionaires.	German	Narratives against the EU's climate action
Farmers are fed up with CO2 rip-offs and green energy policies. Farmers are protesting peacefully, contrary to climate movement ecoterrorists.	German	Narratives against climate action
We pump billions into so-called climate protection. Conservation, climate, and soil policies have been hurting farmers.	German	Narratives against climate action
We pump billions into so-called climate protection and Ukraine, everything except our population.	German	Narratives against climate action
The EU is not on the farmers' side with its ideological climate policy. Farmers suffer from climate policy.	German	Narratives against the EU's climate action
Farmers are peaceful, but the greens are eco-terrorists. The mainstream media is defaming the farmers' protests.	German	Narratives against climate action
Unlike the climate movement, farmers enjoy widespread popular support.	German	Narratives against climate action

Politicians from traditional parties don't care about the farmers.	German	Conspiracy narratives against institutions and the EU
Climate terrorists' actions are supported by the left and green parties, but the farmers are not.	German	Narratives against climate action
Farmers are threatened by Moroccan agriculture.	Spanish	Conspiracy narratives against institutions and the EU
Farmers are threatened by Moroccan agriculture.	Spanish	Conspiracy narratives against institutions and the EU
Farmers are protesting against the EU's rural policies.	Spanish	Narratives against the EU's climate action
Farmers need to resist scam eco policies full of taxes and absurd regulations.	French	Narratives against climate action
The Green Deal leads to reduced yields and fewer livestock.	French	Narratives against the EU's climate action
We need to leave the EU to save French agriculture.	French	Conspiracy narratives against institutions and the EU
The EU is the farmers' problem	French	Conspiracy narratives against institutions and the EU
The EU should be rejected, we are burning the EU flag with angry farmers.	French	Conspiracy narratives against institutions and the EU
Farmers are protesting because they have been lied to by the government and backstabbed by the EU	French	Conspiracy narratives against institutions and the EU
Farmers are protesting because the government lied to them and the EU keeps making decisions to kill them.	French	Conspiracy narratives against institutions and the EU
The president does not have control over the issue; it's Europe that decides.	French	Conspiracy narratives against institutions and the EU

EU norms and regulations are destroying our agriculture.		
The farmers' anger is due to the European Union's actions or policies.	French	Narratives against the EU's climate action
Farmers' protests are a fight for Italian identity, traditions, and roots of culture	Italian	Conspiracy narratives against institutions and the EU
The EU's policies kill off local agriculture.		
The EU has money for Ukraine but starves small farmers.	Italian	Narratives against the EU's climate action
The EU creates disasters out of pseudo-Green ideology against farmers.	Italian	Narratives against the EU's climate action
Green policies are a religion for the EU, collapsing the economy.		
The EU immediately reversed back on climate policy because it was flawed from beginning.	Italian	Narratives against the EU's climate action
EU farmers are like the farmers massacred by Stalin for collectivization.	Italian	Conspiracy narratives against institutions and the EU
EU bureaucrats humiliate and impoverish farmers with the eco-terrorist Green Deal.	Italian	Narratives against the EU's climate action
The EU is criminalizing agricultural workers for being responsible of <a href="#">climate change</a> .	Italian	Narratives against the EU's climate action
The farmers' protests are against EU policies.	Italian	Narratives against the EU's climate action
Farmers march against the eco-madness of Europe.	Italian	Narratives against the EU's climate action
<a href="#">Farmers protests</a> are against crazy EU policies.	Italian	Narratives against the EU's climate action
The farmers' protests are against EU policies, which erase farmers and devastate the agricultural sector.	Italian	Narratives against the EU's climate action

The farmers' protests are against EU policies.	Italian	Narratives against the EU's climate action
The climate targets that Europe predicts will only bring us industrial crises, social protests, layoffs, and we will be slaves to China.	Italian	Narratives against the EU's climate action
The EU is attacking farmers; it wants to make them fail.	Italian	Narratives against the EU's climate action
Farmers' protests are against an absurd and anti-economic Green Deal.	Italian	Narratives against the EU's climate action
The farmers' protests fight against misleading green policies pushed by hypocritical elites who pollute more and harm the working class and consumers.	Italian	Narratives against the EU's climate action
The European Commission has implemented an ideological transition that has criminalized and brought our agricultural production to its knees.	Italian	Narratives against the EU's climate action
Europe must not pursue green madness that risks killing agriculture.	Italian	Narratives against climate action
Farmers are not the polluters	Italian	Narratives against climate action
Farmers protest against the EU's crazy policies, such as eating insects and leaving land fallow.	Italian	Narratives against the EU's climate action
Local people prefer farmers' protests rather than climate protests.	Dutch	Narratives against climate action
It's actually possible to make the European Commission scrap the EU's detrimental emissions reduction targets!	Dutch	Narratives against the EU's climate action
It is in the interests of the farmers not to have EU nature and climate regulation.	Dutch	Narratives against the EU's climate action

Farmers' protests are about fighting the globalists who want to control you and what you can do with a carbon budget.	Dutch	Conspiracy narratives against institutions and the EU
Farmers' wellbeing and future are hindered by climate and environmental regulations.	Dutch	Narratives against climate action
Brussels is making life impossible for farmers.	Dutch	Narratives against the EU's climate action
EU environmental regulation is harmful to farmers.	Dutch	Narratives against the EU's climate action
The farmers and their supporters fight against sick EU climate policies.	Polish	Narratives against the EU's climate action
The murderous EU climate policy will ruin Polish agriculture.	Polish	Narratives against the EU's climate action
EU climate policy will destroy the economy.	Polish	Narratives against the EU's climate action
Farmers protest to express opposition to the sick EU climate policy.	Polish	Narratives against the EU's climate action
The EU Green Deal is a crazy policy.	Polish	Narratives against the EU's climate action
Harmful EU climate policies make it difficult to find any benefits for farmers in the Green Deal.	Polish	Narratives against the EU's climate action
Farmers are protesting against EU climate policy.	Polish	Narratives against the EU's climate action
Farmers are protesting against EU climate policy.	Polish	Narratives against the EU's climate action
The EU has a sick ideology of destroying agriculture in the name of the climate.	Polish	Narratives against the EU's climate action

Farmers' protests across Europe are against EU climate policies undermining agricultural competitiveness and risking the industry's decline.		
The EU is a flawed crazy utopian project.	Polish	Narratives against the EU's climate action
Farmers' protests are against the sick EU climate policy.	Polish	Narratives against the EU's climate action
Farmers' protests are against the sick EU climate policy.	Polish	Narratives against the EU's climate action
Farmers are protesting against the Green Deal, fearing increased energy prices and threats to food security.	Polish	Narratives against the EU's climate action
EU climate policies, particularly the European Green Deal, are threatening food sovereignty and the economy.	Polish	Narratives against the EU's climate action
Murderous EU climate policy will ruin Polish agriculture.	Polish	Narratives against the EU's climate action
The EU Green Deal is a communist plot.	Polish	Narratives against the EU's climate action
EU climate targets and policies are not feasible; they will destroy agriculture and industry.	Polish	Narratives against the EU's climate action
Farmers are fed up with the green revolution.	Polish	Narratives against climate action
Farmers are protesting because they don't want migrants and the EU federation.	Polish	Conspiracy narratives against institutions and the EU
The EU opening up to Ukrainian agri-food products will kill Polish agriculture.		
Farmers demand agriculture to be withdrawn from the Green Deal, Farm to Fork, and the CAP.	Polish	Narratives against the EU's climate action

The EU opening up to Ukrainian agri-food products will kill Polish agriculture.		
Farmers demand agriculture to be withdrawn from the Green Deal, Farm to Fork, and the CAP.	Polish	Narratives against the EU's climate action
Farmers are protesting against the sick EU climate policy.	Polish	Narratives against the EU's climate action
The EU's Green Deal will make us lose our food security.	Polish	Narratives against the EU's climate action
Talks of NATO sending troops to Ukraine are a deliberate distraction from the farmers' protests ahead of the European elections.	Polish	Conspiracy narratives against institutions and the EU
The EU's Green Deal will destroy Polish agriculture.	Polish	Narratives against the EU's climate action
Terminating the EU's Green Deal will save Polish agriculture.	Polish	Narratives against the EU's climate action
Farmers are protesting against the EU's climate policy, which targets farmers and their families, leading to a collapse in food security.	Polish	Narratives against the EU's climate action