The East-West divide in European climate change mitigation: liminal identities and discursive construction

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ABSTRACT

This thesis investigates the East–West divide the EU's decarbonization space. By mobilizing liminality and adopting a postcolonialist and poststructuralist lens, it explores how policy experts and Hungarian media outlets position Eastern Europe within the hierarchy of Europe, both in term of identities and knowledge. Drawing on semi-structured expert interviews and an argumentative discourse analysis (ADA) of two Hungarian media outlets, I show that while some policy actors often downplay intra-EU divisions, the difference is discursively salient. Both analyzed media outlets, in different ways, but nevertheless reproduce the East–West hierarchy in discussing various visions for climate change mitigation. The findings suggest that decarbonization approaches carry discursive patterns about who belongs to the EU and on what terms, and that media play a crucial role in shaping who gets to define legitimate climate futures.

Keywords: East–West divide, decarbonization, EU, liminality, media discourse, Hungary, argumentative discourse analysis

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ABBREVIATIONS

ADA	Argumentative discourse analysis
CCPI	Climate Change Performance Index
CEE	Central and Eastern Europe
EE	Eastern Europe
EGD	European Green Deal
EU	European Union
EU ETS	EU Emissions Trading System
GHG	Greenhouse gases
NECPs	National Energy and Climate Plans
NGO	Non-governmental organization
NIMBY	Not In My Backyard
RES	Renewable energy source
V4	Visegrád Group (Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia)

1. INTRODUCTION

Realizing the eminent need to combat climate change, the European Union (EU) considers decarbonizing the continent as a strategic priority and positions itself as a global leader in efforts to halt global warming (Gumbau 2024). The Commission's flagship initiative to streamline European climate policy, the European Green Deal (EGD), has been presented in 2019 to transform the Union into the first climate-neutral continent by 2050, with an interim target of reducing greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions by at least 55% 2030 compared to 1990 levels (European Commission 2019).

For its normative and strategic power in the field of climate policy, however, maintaining internal coherence is crucial (Braun 2014, 446). The idea of having to 'present a united European front', may that be with regards climate negotiations (Fisher 2022) or the ambition of environmental policies (Petrequin 2023; Dennison 2021) has been restated many times. One of the Commission's long-standing objectives has been to 'speak with one voice' in climate and energy policy (Bocquillon and Maltby 2017, 99). Yet, both academically and politically, ideas about regional disparities prevail. More precisely, Central and Eastern Europe (CEE)[23] has been described as displaying resistance against the EGD (Witajewska-Baltvilka et al. 2024, 1) or only embracing the supranational green agenda through 'lukewarm adoption' (Drieschova 2024, 299). This leads to what has become to be known as the 'two-speed decarbonisation approach' in both academia (Piris 2012) and beyond (Keating 2019; Mazur et al. 2025), referring to a multi-speed approach of different (groups of) member states in achieving EU-wide climate goals.

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[2] CEE countries, following Drieschova (2024): Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia.

[3] While some authors refer to the region as Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), I will denote it as Eastern Europe (EE) to avoid reaffirming nesting orientalism, see 2.4.

This thesis sets out to investigate the East-West divide within European climate change mitigation, not as a fixed geographical or policy split, but as historically contingent, politically charged, and discursively produced. The aim here, therefore, is not to refute or confirm the accounts of Eastern Europe (EE) as climate policy laggards. Rather, I wish to invite reflection about the political designation of the East-West divide, that is, why and how we construct the East of Europe differently from its West beyond material differences and more along socially constructed and imagined hierarchies pertaining to 'development' and 'responsibility' as tied to climate action. Concretely, the following objectives guide my research:

1. To examine the role of liminality and coloniality in shaping the (environmental) positioning of EE member states

2. To uncover how 'Easternness' is as a signifier of difference – of inferiority – within the seemingly united Europe

In achieving these objectives, I strive to answer the following question:

In what ways is the East–West divide in EU climate governance constructed, sustained, or challenged both by policy actors and national media discourses?

Sub-questions:

1. Is the East-West divide reflected in EU decarbonization policy expert perspectives, and is so, how do they position EE member states vis-à-vis the West?

2. How do emerging decarbonization storylines in the Hungarian media discourse reflect and relate to notions of Western superiority and Eastern inferiority?

3. In what ways does the concept of liminality help interpret narratives about the East's place in European climate governance?

Throughout the inquiry, I strive to present EE's (climate) politics not as a deviation from 'Europe' as essentialist and colonial narratives would have it, but rather as a reflection of deeper

contradictions in collective identity formation. Shifting our gaze to EE and engaging with its position of both 'within yet at the margins of Europe' allows us to open up experiences different both from the Global North and the South (Pungas et al. 2024, 85). This stands in strong contrast to the scholarly tradition of studying 'post-socialist peripheralized places' from a negative point of view; as 'places of bare survival and postindustrial decline' (Sattler 2024, 2). Although when Sattler poses the question of 'what is to be done in the periphery' (ibid., 9), his analysis is occupied with the Caucasus, I posit that the lens holds merit for Europe's internal other too. For the core's teachings on the preconditions of Europeanness, modernity, development, civilization or innovation must be questioned and unlearned and deconstructed if necessary, so that EE – and all othered and peripheralized group and people for that matter – can start entertaining imaginaries of themselves as knowledge producers with agency instead of sites of knowledge production for others to examine 'catch-up development' (ibid.). This research is thus also a political project to dismantle the 'epistemological invisibility' of the region (Pungas et al. 2024, 83), or as Müller put it; 'it writes against the demi-othering of the East in the North and the silence about the East in the South, thus seeking to make the experiences of people in the East count and dislodge eurocentrism' (2020, 16).

The thesis proceeds according to the following structure. In chapter 2, I review how the scholarly community has looked at the East-West divide and the role of the East in it more specifically. I examine how (European) Eastness is constructed to be inferior to Westness, predominantly in the climate and energy space but also beyond. By the end of chapter 2, I demonstrate the lack of looking at climate performance through the critical-conceptual lens of liminality and cognitively and discursively shaped identities, which is precise the gap that my thesis aims to fill. Chapter 3 presents the research design and illuminates how mobilizing liminality as a concept in building upon poststructuralist ideas on the importance of language and discourse allows me to critically assess the East-West divide in decarbonization discussions.

Thereafter, in chapter 4, I present the findings from the expert interviews and present two different Hungarian media storylines, with a focus on how they relate the Hungarian path to 'Eastness', 'Westness' and 'Europeanness'. In discussing these findings, chapter 5 demonstrates how liminality is mobilized to serve competing political agendas and how the East–West divide is discursively both sustained and contested by experts and Hungarian media. Lastly, the concluding 6th chapter revisits the research questions and argues for recognizing the negotiated and symbolic nature of being European and of belonging. I close by discussing some theoretical and normative implications of my findings and by calling for reimagining European margins and climate futures.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

In the literature review below, I first begin by introducing the dominant technocratic and macroeconomic approaches to decarbonization, pointing out the omission of softer variables that are nevertheless essential to understand the East-West divide. My aim is not to present a nuanced and holistic overview of determinants of decarbonization; rather, I use this section to contrast its line of thinking with the consequent ones. That is because I then move on to examine EE as oftentimes framed to be laggards of climate change mitigation. Here, it is important to clarify that the intention of this section is not to determine whether an East–West divide in EU climate governance is empirically justified, nor to assess the validity of specific claims regarding performance or convergence. Rather, the section maps out how a particular framing of EE as different, deficient, or lagging persists across scholarly and policy accounts. My goal is not to affirm these claims as accurate, and I also do not suggest that the literature I draw upon dominates the field or that it remains uncontested. On the contrary, I also refer readers to accounts that wish to critically assess the East-West divide and move beyond it. By foregrounding representations that are at times arguably based on sweeping generalizations, the

literature review lays the groundwork for exploring how Eastness and its negative connotation may shape positionalities and dynamics in the EU climate field.

Showing how the East is othered to be inferior in decarbonization discussions paves the way the subsequent section where I open up the question of whether it is analytically sound to group EE countries together. I examine based on what characteristics accounts tend to do so, including – inter alia - outdated infrastructure, energy inefficiency, lack of technological innovation. Yet, to contrast, towards the end of the section I bring into play scholarly contributions that problematize the overgeneralizations that result from grouping EE member states together. At the end, I outline the position that inspires my research too, namely that of strategic essentialism. In section 4, however, I introduce the practice of nesting orientalism in Central Europe as a contradictory political and intellectual project to the strategic essentialist unification of the East. Exploring how Eastern others internalize but also voluntarily co-create hierarchies in European identities to position themselves closer to the West, in turn, allows me to incorporate contributions of scholars working on postcolonial, identity-related and racial dynamics in the East. Therefore, by the end of chapter 2, by having shown a way in which European regional identities are constructed (and contested), the need for an analytical framework that is attentive to Europe's internal asymmetries, especially the liminal, in-between status of its Eastern member states becomes evident.

Throughout, I aim to not just review the literature, but to also position my own research in relation to it, hence the references to my analytical focus throughout.

2. 1. Decarbonization in technocratic terms

Research on decarbonization drivers and performance conventionally approaches the topic through quantitative, macroeconomic analyses that focus on structural variables. These accounts by and large treat the energy transition primarily as a technical or developmental matter. Pirlogea and Cicea (2012), for example, investigate the energy-growth nexus and find

that results are both fuel- and country-specific (cf. Topolewski 2021). Similarly, Bengochea-Morancho et al. (2001) conclude that the relationship between GDP growth and CO_2 emissions differs significantly between higher-income and lower-income countries, as emissions increase much more sharply in lower-income countries as their economies grow. Also contributing to the understanding of differences between advanced and emerging economies, Sadorsky (2014) argues that the latter category should focus on affluence, energy intensity, and population growth to tackle climate change. Regarding factors influencing emission reduction, Halicioglu (2009) identifies income to be more of an influential factor than energy use and trade in Turkey's decarbonization, while Sahoo et al. show that economic growth, urbanization, and oil consumption are the main source of CO_2 emissions (2022, 48715). Balogh and Jambor (2017) focus rather on the that the size of a country's industrial sector plays in pollution. Along the same lines, Friedl and Getzner (2003) explore how structural changes in a country's economy away from industrial production towards a growing services sector affects emissions.

2. 2. The East-West divide: real or alleged?

Yet, these accounts omit how notions such as 'development' and 'transition' are defined in historically and politically embedded contexts. Power asymmetries underlie our understandings of what the green transition means, who leads and who lags behind and on what grounds, and whose pathways are legitimized as normative or desirable. Even when national differences enter the conversation, they tend to do so though depoliticized metrics and comparisons. Conversely, I argue that while the above contributions contribute valuably to macroeconomic-technical framings of sustainability transitions, it is crucial to inspect the uneven positionalities of member states within the EU in the fight against climate change. Consequently, in the next section of the literature review, I look at the recurring image of EE as the EU's decarbonization laggard and compound evidence for both and against it to show that narratives matter.

The EU's eastern enlargement rounds of 2004, 2007 and 2013 brought in a new group of countries. The enlargement was the most ambitious one in terms of territory incorporated, the number of citizens admitted and, notably, the geopolitical and socio-economic heterogeneity introduced (Epstein and Jacoby 2014, 1). Scholars note that while 1995 enlargement of the EU by Austria, Finland and Sweden worked in favor of the Union's environmental momentum, the addition of Eastern members has opened up a cognitive East-West divide in environmental policy issues (Wurzel, Liefferink and Di Lullo, 2019, 260), wherein Eastern member states are described as climate and energy policy regards, slowing the EU's decarbonization (Drieschova 2024, 294; Ćetković and Buzogány 2019, 125).

Accounts that reinforce the image of the East as inferior in decarbonization performance, hoverer, extend beyond academia. To illustrate, the Climate Change Perfomance Index (CCPI), a standardized framework that allows for the comparative analysis[4] of national climate performance also depicts a stark East–West divide in recent scores and an Eastern laggard positionality, as Figure 1 below shows. Figure 2 illustrates that Eastern member states rank one or even two tiers below their western counterparts in their CCPI scores. Note that the CCPI has been widely utilized in academic research to assess state performance (see, for example, Torney 2020; Puška et al. 2024; Schaffrin et al. 2015; Sönmez 2024). Furthermore, its results are publicized every year at UN Climate Change Conference of the Parties (COP), informing and influencing policy makers and delegates (Surminski and Williamson 2014, 280). While the divide between older and newer member states is not always clear-cut, the point here is the general pattern showing Eastern member states tendentially underperforming Western ones.

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[4] Based on its annual review of current levels and targets for GHG emissions, renewable energy, energy use and climate policy (CCPI, 2024).
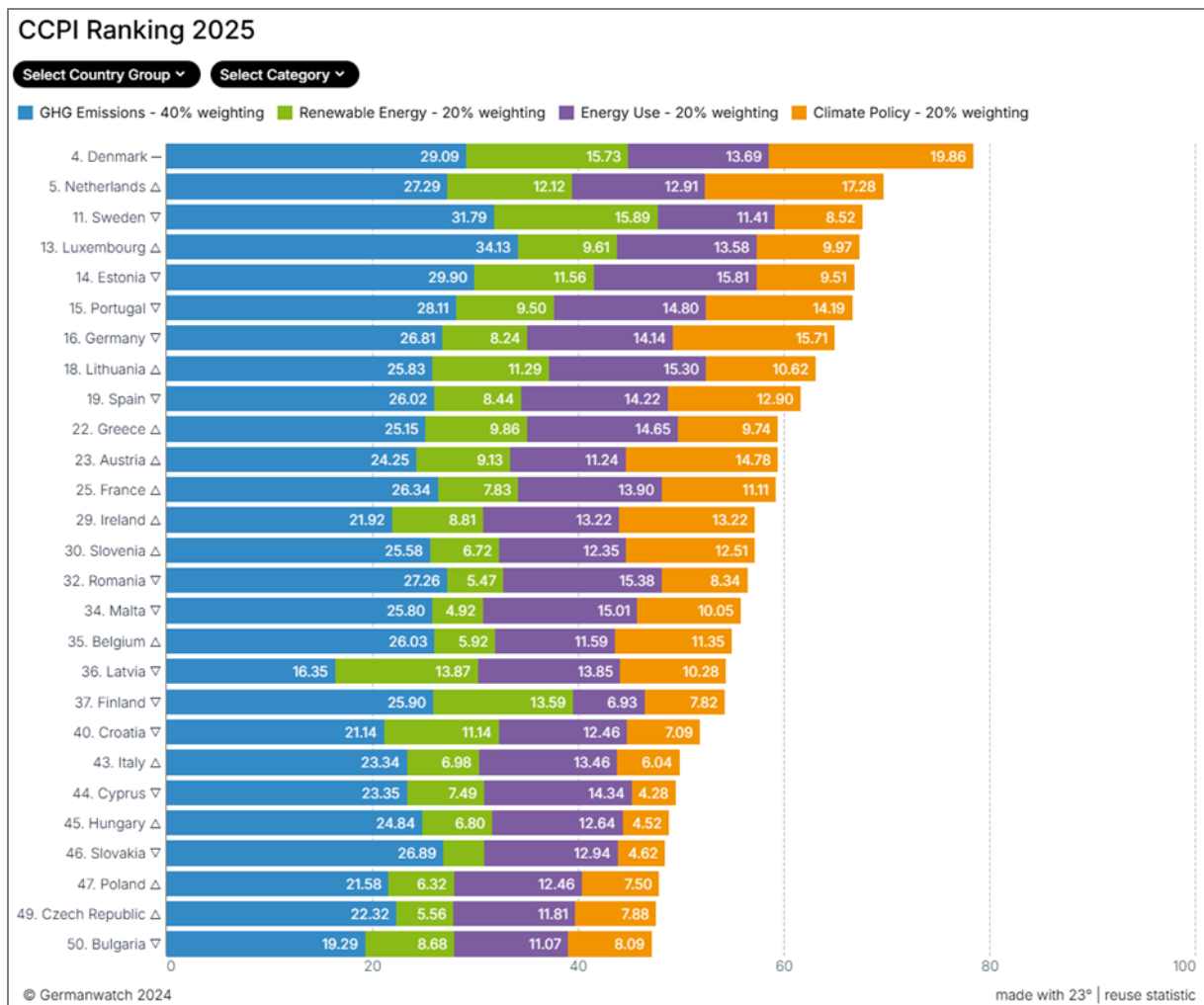
Figure 1: EU27 CPPI ranking of the 2025 edition (CCPI, 2025)
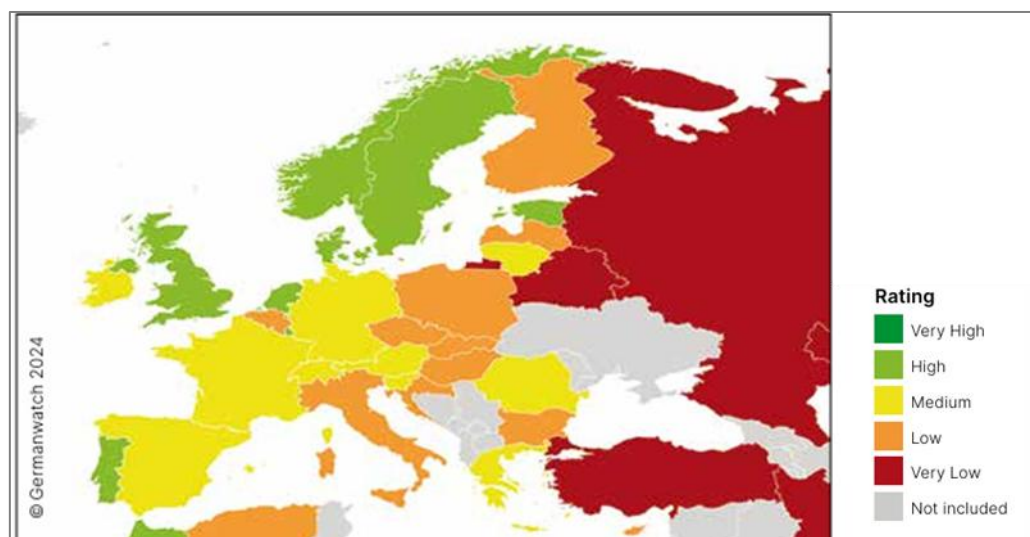
Figure 2: 2025 CCPI scores illustrated visually (Bruck et al. 2024, 6)

The argument holds that newly joined member states actively weakened European climate and energy packages, with some of them, for example, pushing for the free distribution

of emission allowances under the EU Emissions Trading System (EU ETS) for their power plants and more generous intra-EU solidarity mechanism to secure funding for their low-carbon transition (Braun 2014, 450-451; see Bocquillon and Maltby 2017 and Ellison 2008 on burden sharing). EE states have also set 'comparatively low targets for both energy efficiency and renewable energy' that leave the technological potential to curb climate change untapped, accompanied by weak and lacking adaptation policies (University of Cambridge Institute for Sustainability Leadership 2019, 4).

Moreover, Drieschova compounds the issue by adding that on average, CEE member states produce 5% more per capita emissions than Western Europe; that they have only managed to meet their Kyoto protocol targets for 2008-2012 because of the economic downturn after the fall of communism and that some of them[5] are unlikely to meet their 2024 ones, meaning that their emissions cuts significantly behind their Western counterparts (2024, 294). In correspondence, Eurostat, the statistical office of the EU, points out that whereas in the period between 2010 and 2022, 20 EU countries managed to reduce their per capita GHG footprint, with significant reductions from Malta (37%), Sweden (36%) and Finland (35%), Eastern member states such as Bulgaria, Romania and Croatia only increased their footprint by 30%, 21% and 17% respectively (2025). The outlook is similar when looking at emissions measured in terms of GDP instead of per capita, as becomes evident from the European Environment Agency's data repository, shown in Figure 3 below.

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[5] Bulgaria, Slovenia, Croatia and Latvia (Drieschova 2024, 294).

Total greenhouse gas emissions per GDP in 2023
(kt CO2 equivalent)
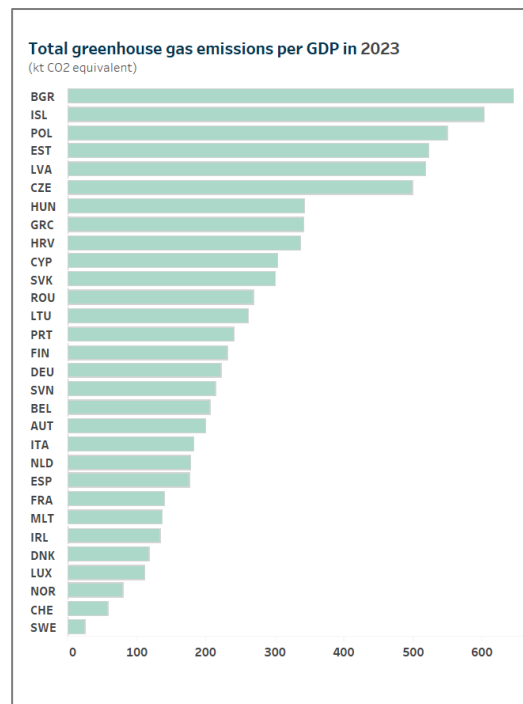
Figure 3: Total GHG emissions per GDP, 2023, adopted from EEA (2025)[6]

Further, Czyzak and Fox point to the outdated nature of the Eastern countries' energy strategies, meaning that whereas Hungary, Slovakia, Bulgaria, Czechia and Poland aim for 20% of renewable power by 2030 according to their 2019 national energy and climate plans (NECPs), older members of the union such as Germany, Denmark, the Netherlands, Portugal and Austria are all aiming for at least 80% (2023). Even if there is will for renewable energy projects, Eastern countries often block those through regulatory barriers, continuing to leave technical bottlenecks such as grid capacity unaddressed, instead choosing to rely on polluting fossil fuels (Climate Action Network Europe 2024, 4). What is more, the Eastern lag is not just a policy issue, it also comes down to societal differences between the East and the West of the Union; a 2019 Eurobarometer report shows that whilst 50% of Swedes regard climate change as the most important issue facing the world, the figure for Bulgaria stands at only 10%, indicating a lack of climate-change activism in the East (Anghel 2020, 195). Furthermore, while Eastern economies are generally smaller and may hence use less energy than older member

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[6] Figure displays total net emissions of all GHG gasses as per UNFCCC submissions.

states, Derewenda (2023) affirms that they are ranked the lowest in terms of implementing measures to reduce energy consumption. This argument is reiterated by the European Environmental Bureau (EEB) in its comparative analysis on member states' energy saving measures, as seen in Figure 4 below.
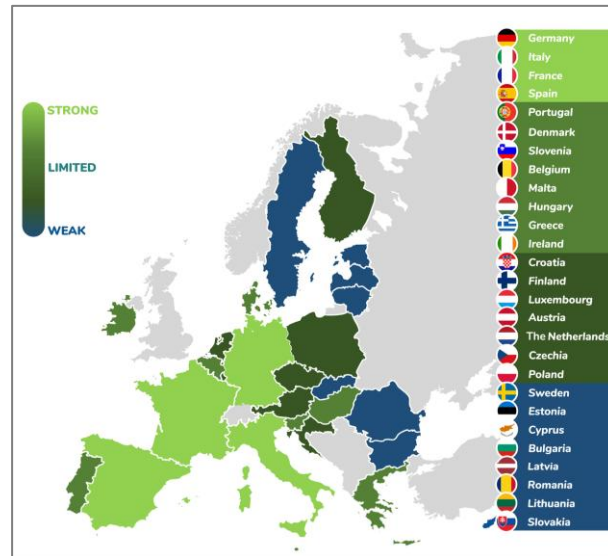
Figure 4: Measures to reduce gas consumption in EU states, adopted from EEB (2022)

Therefore, although in varying voting coalitions, Eastern member states have been shown to form the 'coalition of the unwilling' (Ćetković and Buzogány 2019, 128), leading to what Drieschova calls 'outright resistance or lukewarm adoption' towards the EU's decarbonization ambition (2024, 299). In either case, the lack of decarbonization efforts in the East risks compromising the whole region's energy security and competitiveness (Czyzak and Fox 2023). The addition of Eastern member states is, in this light, argued to represent a 'general malaise the EU brought upon itself' – and the dysfunctionality is most evident in the EU's environmental decision-making capacity (Ćetković and Buzogány 2019, 125), along with other salient issues such as migration policy (Toshkov 2017). Whereas arguably, there are other intra-EU divides, such as North-South, euro vs non-euro, Schengen vs non-Schengen, the East-West divide, a pillar of which is the decarbonization gap, is claimed to be the most dramatic (Bârgăoanu et al. 2019, 105-106).

Some argue that it is the poverty (Bart 2018), the mixed environmental record and the lack of interest in environmental protection (Bocquillon and Maltby 2017, 88) in the East that that explains why newer member states would aim to block or water down supranational decarbonization initiatives. Others contend that the East conceives decarbonization as a threat to its economic development (Skjærseth 2018) and does not consequently believe in green business opportunities and jobs (Braun 2014). Eastern member states have also been claimed to 'justify the lack of climate agenda' through pointing to their 'technological delay' compared to older member states (Climate Action Network Europe 2024, 5).

Yet, we also find accounts that either outright reject or critically assess the East-West divide and the (perceived) reluctance of Eastern member states to accelerate pan-European climate action. On the one hand, Toshkov (2017), for example, finds no evidence in support of the institutional gridlock and loss of decision-making capacity that many feared the eastern enlargement would cause. Szép et al. (2022) show that while the East-West division in energy analysis was pronounced, by today, the division has changed, and the differences are unclear. On the other hand, some contribute by looking at the divide through a critical lens. Volintiru et al. (2024) reevaluate the East-West divide, questioning whether it is 'persistent, intractable or transitional' and wondering about the political consequences of such divisions. In a similar vein, Bârgăoanu et al. (2019) inspect how the civilizational ('cultural backwardness' of the East vs 'moral superiority' of the West) underpinning of the divide conceals more systemic factors. On the climate division more specifically, Bocquillon and Maltby (2017) uncover that the EU'S reduced climate policy performance after the eastern enlargement has less to do with the addition of new member state and may be more accurately accountable to some of the EU15[7] countries and the economic context. Vukelić and Sircar (2024) refute the weakness of

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[7] The composition of the European Union from 1 January 1995: Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, and the UK. (Statistics Netherlands, n.d.)

environmental attitudes and practices of the East, foregrounding much of the work on 'quiet sustainability', the 'exuberant, appealing and socially inclusive, but also unforced, forms of sustainability' typical in the East and often overlooked by the West (Smith and Jehlička 2013, 148). While these authors look at the practice of food self-provisioning, Jehlička later returns to the theme in a collaboration with Jacobsson, broadening the argument to advocate for a more positive perspective on Eastern environmentalism. They call for the incorporation of all Eastern traditional practices and informal outdoor activities motivated, that, on a marginal note, display striking similarity to 'post-postmaterial' environmentalism recently promoted by Western-based political theorists (2021, 1).

What I wish to engage with here is not whether the East–West decarbonization divide exists or not, in the manner that the first group of scholars in the above paragraph do. Rather, my focus is on exploring the pillars upon and the process through which the othering of the East happens. To this end, I now turn to characterizations of the East that establish and reinforce its inferiority, in the climate space and beyond.

2. 3.   The discursive making of the Eastern European region

Our thinking about the East-West divide, whether perceived or real, would be incomplete without defining the two sides that are claimed to display structural differences vis-à-vis each other. In our case, that means looking at what EE means, or more precisely, based on what criteria we bind certain member states together in that group, or in other words, what the reoccurring characterization of the East are. This inquiry in and of itself exposes a foundational disagreement between scholars on whether EE member states can be understood to display common features and structural positions enough to be grouped together, or whether such accounts are overly generalizing and miss out on dynamics that actually shape member states responses to climate action.

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On the one hand, some argue that EE countries can be treated as a cohesive group, to a certain extent at least. For instance, although Drieschova's attempt (2024) to conceptualize a model that explains the lagging position of EE member states with regard to climate policy acknowledges the interstate differences, it nevertheless suggests that due to certain shared historical developments such as the transition from communism to market democracy and the accession to the EU, the EE can be treated as one analytical group. In his analysis on national responses to the EU's 2030 climate and energy framework, Skjærseth also differentiates between a collective termed the Green Growth Group, compromising climate and environment ministers predominantly from the West in favor of the Commission's position, contrasted with the opposition led by Poland and joined by other CEE member states pushing for – inter alia – national sovereignty, protection of coal and more EU subsidies for their own green transition (2018, 508).

Therein, the construction of the East in terms of inferiority in the energy and climate domain takes shape through multiple claims. In the Climate Action Network's briefing Eastern member states are politically different, as they perceive themselves as 'lonely island' striving for energy sovereignty and energy independence (2024, 5). Moreover, Eastern societies have limited trust in decentralization and are reluctant to become active energy market participants (ibid., 6). It might, moreover, face social backlashes to stringent climate policies (Energy Policy Group et al. 2025, 1). And while below, I dedicate whole sections to tracing colonial dynamics in the East, building upon scholars that have also done so (see, for example, Owczarzak 2009), Bart declares that the region lacks a colonial past, which he translates into a lack of 'historical precedent of taking responsibility for global affairs', i.e. no guilt or moral responsibility towards the world (2018).

Notably, EE's historical ties to the Soviet Empire continue to shape its present-day positioning. The region still devotes high importance to state owned utilities in energy systems

and perceives energy security as security of supply instead as a matter of diversification of sources through renewables, for example – views that are outdated and too fixed (Climate Action Network (CAN) Europe, 2024, 6). Connectedly, the state's prevalent role in the energy system gives rise to concerns about the lack of competition, of oversight, of incentive schemes for increasing quality of services or of private funding (see Jar 2024; Grieveson, Wieser and Holzner 2024).

There is also a call for fostering domestic innovation in place of 'industries shaped by technology transfers and low labour costs' (industriAll European Trade Union 2024, 4), which, however, should not take the form of 'the state simply picking winners' as one would expect from a post-soviet country but follow suit of Western Europe which triumphs R&D collaborations and accelerators (Grieveson, Wieser and Holzner 2024, 16).

Industrially, Eastern member states continue to be characterized by inefficient and carbon-intensive industries. For example, the University of Cambridge Institute for Sustainability Leadership (CISL) points out that '[i]t takes nearly three times more energy to produce one unit of GDP in the Czech Republic than in Austria, with severe implications on air quality and health (2019, 4). Therefore, EE must take the decarbonization of its heavy industry more seriously (Energy Policy Group et al. 2025, 1) and transform its industrial policy into a 'modern ecosystem' and 'aim to emulate what already happens – and works – in the most advanced EU member states of Western Europe' (Grieveson, Wieser and Holzner 2024, 16). This will plausibly prove a difficult task, seeing that on the on hand, Eastern industry is highly reliant on corporate investment from multinational companies, meaning that profits leave the countries without re-investment to modernize and to decarbonize (industriAll European Trade Union 2024, 5) and on the other hand, due to 'the anaemic nature of the national capital markets' which will likely fail to provide the necessary funding (Grieveson, Wieser and Holzner 2024, 15).

Perhaps this leads some to conclude that 'those regions that today are lagging behind economically are at least as far behind in their green transition' (ibid., 16).

Additionally, both the housing and transport sectors of EE are more energy intensive than in older member states (Maucorps et al. 2023, 17). The region is, furthermore, characterized as the 'army of poor homeowners' due to the mass transfer of former state-owned building stock and the lack of social housing, which means that regulation cannot be used as effectively to, for example, oblige housing providers to improve energy efficiency (University of Cambridge Institute for Sustainability Leadership (CISL) 2019, 5).

On the other hand, there also exists a group of academics that problematize the very grouping of EE member states. Bocquillon and Maltby, similarly to Drieschova, recite EE countries' shared communist past to highlight structural resemblance in their socio-economic features, political structures and positions in European negotiations, but they underline that 'national specificities endure' and conclude that we cannot claim a unified block (2017, 90). Likewise, Mišík (2021) recognizes differences and argues against homogenizing diverging CEE preferences. Their positions vis-à-vis the EU's renewable targets, he contends, have rather been shaped by what he calls 'post-accession automatic compliance', the legacy of which fades away once newer member states find their footing and begin articulating domestic political priorities. Pungas et al. further develop efforts to resist the generalization of EE into one block, highlighting not just the 'plural legacies of multiple socialism*s* but also vast differences within post-socialist' countries (2024, 81, emphasis added). The authors draw attention to internal cores and (semi-) peripheries within EE that create conducive environments for local injustices, as well as to the different 'geographical and symbolic distance from 'the West'' that EE countries 'enjoy' (ibid., 91).

In this thesis, my attempt at a regional-level analysis necessities a sense of consolidation, even if I find calls to avoid the 'homogenizing gaze on postsocialism' (Cima and Sovová 2022,

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1373) valuable. While I recognize the post-soviet condition as 'plural, hybrid, radically openended [sic] and non-teleological' (Stenning and Horschelmann 2008, 323 in ibid. 1371), as well as the ensuing need to view it as a geographically and socially embedded experience, my concern lies more with their shared identity and positionality as non-Western, as not-as-Western and thus not-as-European as older member states of the EU. In this vein, I fall back on Müller's influential work on the *Global East* (2020). His proposition of viewing EE through the lens of strategic essentialism, the same way pleas from feminist, post-colonial or Global South voices are articulated entails temporarily setting differences and inconsistencies aside to allow for the expression of political demands vis-à-vis a hegemonic discourse (ibid., 11). Constructing the 'East' in such relational terms, hence, becomes a political practice, but from an emancipatory point of view – it is to facilitate the union and mobilization of heterogeneous marginalized groups, even in the face of apparent differences. Afterall, it is often easier to define CEE 'by what it is not, than by what it is' (Batt 2007, 7 in Marinković and Ristić 2018, 166) – and what I underline here is that it is not the West.

2. 4. *Central* and Eastern Europe: nesting orientalism

Somewhat paradoxically, the enhanced collective force that a strategic essentialist reading would lend to the region has neither been recognized nor internalized in the East of Europe – quite the opposite. Revisiting Pungas et al.'s argument on the spatial and symbolic distance between the 'West' and various EE member states that gives some of them a head start in the race of catching up to older member states (2024, 91) provides a useful entry point to explore the issue further.

Historically, the idea of Hungary, the Czech Republic, Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia forming a distinct group as 'Central Europe' is rooted in credentials that trace 1000 years back, encompassing shared chronicles with the Holy Roman Empire, the forceful Christianization of the Slavs and the rule by the Habsburg (Raviv 2008, 304). The invocation of common history,

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however, is only one of the structural remarks on the discourse Central European. Attempts to 'represent Westernization, secular government, liberalization' in term of Central European regimes' conformity with European structures or what Neumann calls 'regime homogeneity' has been outlined in domestic politics (1998, 408). Additionally, and maybe most importantly, this type of integration with the West is spelled out in terms of exclusion of the East; Central European states are not just European, but – necessarily – the next to the East is not European (ibid., 406-407). This 'moral appeal to Western Europe on behalf of an imagined community' (ibid., 405) is what paves the way for Milan Kundera posing the question in his immensely impactful 1983 essay titled *The Kidnapped West, or the Tragedy of Central Europe* whether 'it is the fault of Central Europe that the West hasn't even noticed its disappearance?' (1984 in Marinković and Ristić 2018, 152), reaffirming that the true destiny of Central Europe was 'to be an integral part of the liberal, democratic West' (Auer 2023). Lawday, aligned with Kundera, testifies that then-EU candidate Central European states will be '[…] not so much joining Western Europe as coming home to it' (Lawday 1995, 5 in Raviv 2008, 304).

Therefore, differentiating between Central *and* Eastern Europe can be read as a Central European struggle to disassociate from the East, from all the backwardness and otherness associated with it, thereby 'reproducing the teleological horizon of Europe and lapsing into eurocentrism' by merely shifting the eastern boundary further east and 'locating the Other elsewhere' (Müller 2020, 10). Bakic-Hayden defines this practice as nesting orientalism (1995 in Kuus 2004, 479): a process whereby Central Europe becomes the 'most European of Europe's internal Easts', while less European and therewith more outsider others such as Russia or Slavic countries are the most oriental. Eastern Europe is thus reproducing orientalist assumptions (Kuus 2004, 479); the Europe that has been divided into a West and an East by the West is further subdivided into Central and Eastern Europe by Central Europe. It is a move that detaches

Central Europeans from their fellow Easteners to move themselves into Europe, a framing of oneself as 'the eastern outpost of Europe' precisely to escape the East (ibid., 480).

What this reveals is that the 'East' is a 'floating signifier, a signifier without a fixed signified', which Müller also captures when writing that 'The East is always elsewhere: when I ask in France, the East is in Germany; when I ask in Germany, the East is in East Germany when I ask in East Germany, the East is in Poland; when I ask in Poland, the East is in Ukraine' (2020, 10-11). Hence, what (and who) we include as European or exclude as non-European never involves a permanent location of the East, but 'various internal Europes and Easts', a malleable framework that precisely due to its flexibility remains a timeless source of 'passing alterity further east' (Kuus 2004, 480), prone to 'continuous recycling' (Neumann 1999, 207).

It is Central Europe's tragedy to overlook that in spite of all of their efforts to belong, they remain foreigners (Marinković and Ristić 2018, 165) – internal though, but still just an 'other' in European identity formation. To evade nesting orientalism, I reject labeling the region Central and Eastern Europe and use the term 'East' throughout my writing to encompass all that is meant with both 'Central' (i.e. more western) and 'Eastern' (i.e. less western) without partaking in the intellectual and political project of constructing Central Europe (Kuus 2004, 480).[8]

This Central European 'microcosm' creates a space for some to 'feel better vis-à-vis others who, in turn, feel better vis-à-vis some other others', or differently put, Central Europe employs the same language to other others that it is othered with (Buchowski 2006, 474). One could argue that we speak of 'colonial mimicry' (Homi Bhabha 1984 in Kalmar 2024, 433; see Pungas et al. 2024 for self-colonization) in this instance; the condition of almost-the-same-but-never-

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[8] While in my own research I commit to rejecting nesting orientalism, I retain to use terms such as Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) when employed by the authors I draw upon, thereby leaving the normative and political decision of labeling to them.

quite which mirrors how the East's attempt to become (more) fully Western and European is doomed to fail. Hereby, I turn to scholars that write on the vexed relationship Eastern Europe has to coloniality at large.

2. 5. 'Same same but different': tracing coloniality and whiteness in Eastern identity politics

Whereas EE had never been a formal colony, it 'occupied a subordinate role during its modern history vis-à-vis the centers of global capitalism' (Gagyi 2016, 350) which justifies its portrayal as colonized and then post-colonial. Although some warn about EE's membership 'in the camp of the 'white West'' (Mark and Slobodian 2018, 366), postcolonial studies have been extending to incorporate the experiences of the former 'Second World' (Mälksoo 2021, 870; see also Tlostanova 2012; Müller 2020). Especially in the light of EE's 'doubly postcolonial' experience (subjection to both Soviet and Western imperialism as embodied in being called the 'hot-bed of neoliberal but also simultaneous non-capitalist economic experimentation' (Pungas et al. 2024, 83)), the region can be said to a be a 'quasi-colony', a 'semi-oriental'[9] (Mälksoo 2021, 871). Müller points out that coloniality in the East is multi-layered insofar as systems of domination include the Ottoman, the Austro-Hungarian and the Russian Empire, as well as Soviet Union and Western market liberalization (2020, 7). It is exactly this complication of the colonizer-colonized dichotomy that he taps into by asking 'If you are Bulgarian, is Istanbul, Moscow, Brussels or New York your metropole?' (ibid.).

Said's foundational work on orientalism (1978), that is, the distinction between orient (Europe) and occident (everything to the East of Europe) has been invaluable in thinking of the colonized East. Buchowski, moving beyond Said, institutes that the distinction is further underpinned by a political and intellectual separation (and subordination) between capitalism and socialism, civility and primitivism, wherein the West is characterized by rationalism,

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[9] To also acknowledge EE's colonial experience's particularity compared to African, Asian and Caribbean (post)colonial subjects.

secularism and commercial activities (2006, 274). This imperialist projection of the Western nation-state model and norms through the eastern enlargement is what prompts Janos to contend that EE transitioned 'not from authoritarian communist regimes to democracy but from one international regime to another' (2001 in Bârgăoanu et al. 2019, 106). Hence, EE is not just historically different, it simultaneously also serves as a 'blank sheet onto which Europeannness [sic] can be inscribed' (Kuus 2004, 483; see also Lewicki 2023).

In this regard, Buchowski points out 'the mentor attitude of the missionaries of laissez-faire', the similarity of the EU expansion to the 'Enlightened project of educating "the masses"' (2006, 475). The very people of the East are different, the 'homo sovieticus': those that only after being disciplined, educated and having internalized capitalist values can become 'normal'. By default, they are characterized by 'egalitarian and demanding attitudes, […] double standards for public and private life and the acceptance of meager performance', 'civilizational incompetence' of 'cultures of cynicism' and 'lack of trust' (ibid., 470 and 471). If they fail to crawl out of the 'moral vacuum' that their socialist past landed them in, they remain demoralized and corrupted 'Easterners', not part of progressive humanity (ibid., 475). To illustrate the contrast: 'communism promoted cynicism, nepotism, collectivism, egalitarianism and a diffused individual responsibility; a feeling of impotence towards destiny and even a kind of mysticism prevailed. In capitalism, individualism, realism, efficiency, freedom of creativity, human subjectivity and responsibility are supreme; it is future oriented and along with democracy it demands involvement in public affairs' (Sztompka 2000, 55-60 in ibid., 470).[10]

Importantly, the collectives defined in 'homo sovieticus' terms constitute the other that in turn makes the definition of 'the European us' possible. That is, collective European identity

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[10] The broader implications of the stigmatization of the 'Eastern' speak more generally to 'other forms of othering which see non-market economies, traditional forms of knowledge, informal trust-based relations, the reproductive sphere and rural areas as inferior to market, expert-based, productivist and urban visions of modernity' (Pungas et al. 2024, 96).

formation is inherently grounded in the logic of exclusion and inclusion (Marinković and Ristić 2018, 152). Europe's others, irrespective if is the Central European orient, those behind the iron curtain, the Balkan or wandering foreign emigrants, all help define what Europe is not, instead of what it actually is – 'Perhaps what is European is the constant discovery of the other – its great discovery – but never the discovery of itself' (ibid.). Norton advances this understanding of the self-other nexus for both individual and collective identity creation when remarking that they come about not simply 'from the difference between self and other but in those moments of ambiguity where one is other to oneself, and in the recognition of the other as like' (1988, 7 in Neumann 1999, 8). In other words, EE is both like and unlike the West; similar enough to be an insider within the EU, but outsider enough to be seen caught in the perpetual state of catching up, of becoming European *à la* the West, of partaking in the 'bright march toward a free-market haven, a racially homogeneous collective, a discursive structure cleansed of power in which bounded individuals realize a perfected democracy […]' (Neumann 1998, 414; see also Boatca 2006).

To pick up on Neumann's remark on racial homogeneity, it is noteworthy that there is also scholarly work in the intersections of Eastness and race. For instance, Müller – similarly to how he opens up the colonizer-colonized dichotomy by inviting reflection on the East as seemingly neither but in reality, both – insists that Easteners as majority white people are both perpetrators and victims of racism (2020, 7). After the fall of communism, they have become the 'off-white blacks of the new global world', which neatly encapsulates their similarity but essential otherness (Tlostanova 2017, 8 in ibid.; see also Lewicki 2023). This means that although they are inferior to the civilized West, they are 'civilisationally 'above' Black people because of their relative proximity to the Western world' (Shmidt and Jaworsky 2010 in Narkowicz 2023, 1537).

To conclude, the duality of the Eastern European identity lies in how it signals superiority through 'Eastern Whiteness' but inferiority within hierarchies of Europeanness at the same time

(Lewicki 2023, 1485). This in betweenness, the liminality that EE finds itself entangled in is what I take up in the analytical framework.

2. 6. Synthesis

The above literature review has moved from structural and technocratic analyses of decarbonization to more critical interrogations of how EE is positioned and framed within EU climate governance. It has explored a growing body of scholarship that draws attention to the constructed nature of regional categories, the essentialism that runs through 'Eastness' and the hierarchies associated with various identities, all embedded in historico-political contexts predominantly shaped and colonized by the West. Thus, while on the one hand, research has documented debates about the East–West divide in EU climate policy and regional disparities in decarbonization performance, and on the other hand, much critical-conceptual work has been done on EE as an active agent in and a target of othering, coloniality and other forms of exclusion, the two rarely speak to each other and remain yet to be meaningfully integrated.[11] This thesis contributes to the literature by drawing these perspectives into conversation: not to verify or dispute EE' climate performance, but to ask how the East–West divide itself is produced and if it is rendered meaningful across EU climate governance and media discourse. In doing so, the next chapter proposes liminality and poststructuralism as a framework for understanding EE's environmental positionality.

3. RESEARCH DESIGN

3. 1. A note on positionality, reflexivity and research as a transformative practice

In contrast to the positivist research paradigm that searches for a single, universally true and external reality, my research is grounded in interpretivist research practice that acknowledges that knowledge production is always embedded in a context. I build upon an 'internal ontology'

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[11] Drieschova's work (2024) provides and exception but fails to go beyond essentializing practices.

that recognizes the intersubjective and socially constructed nature of reality and an epistemological position that embraces the subjective and interactive aspect of research practice. In terms of the present research, the position from which I study the East-West divide, or rather the construction of the East therein is not neutral and independent, it is not detached, and it is certainly not from a 'view of nowhere' (Steinmetz 2005, 26). As an Eastern other to Western Europeans, I write with a sense of 'disappointed love' (Mälksoo 2021, 880), both coming from and exploring societies that have been silenced as sites of knowledge production (Mignolo 2005, 109 in Boatca 2006, 328). Guided by the thinking of scholars such as Neumann, I recognize research as a normative concern, for '[i]t is not enough to reflect on what we do (that is, on why we study this or that slide of world politics) and why we do it. We must also pay attention to what that which we do, does' (1999, 36). In this vein, the below research itself is not unmotivated or apolitical either, for it works against what Kuus described to be the 'disengagement from the complexities of East-Central Europe' (2004, 474). In studying European identity formation, my aim is to contribute to 'living in difference and not to some of us dying from otherness' (Neumann 1999, 37).

Moreover, this inquiry has and continues to serve as an emotional and intellectual reflection on the ambiguity of my own place in Europe and the structures I study here at large. The research provided me with an entry-point into reckoning my own liminality. To be called 'European' has always sat uneasily with my condition of Eastness; my Europeanness was never as unwavering as the Germans', nor as effortless and self-assured as that of the Dutch. My belonging to Europe is more fractured, it is more hesitant, it is more out of reach due to the lingering Eastness in me. In writing this paper I noticed my mind being colonized: the internalized inferiority, the self-orientalising and self-stigmatising (see further Mälksoo 2021) ever so accurately captured by the haunting hope that my language or my name are not 'Eastern European sounding' (Narkowicz 2023, 1541). I have come to see how devastating and tragic it

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is to renounce one's own identity in the pursuit of belonging, only to engage in colonial mimicry as well as to reproduce the logic of (colonial) exclusion from within when thinking about others.

Yet, I have also come to embrace that my liminality is a position of both privilege and disadvantage (Sojka 2019 in Lewicki 2023, 1484). Similarly to Pungas et al. (2024), I, too, have and for now continue to belong to the insiders; the academics of not just the Global North, but Western Europe more specifically. While having been academically 'raised' in a Western European environment does not mean that I forgot – that I could ever forget – my continuously reaffirmed 'Eastern outsiderness', the research process has allowed me to recognize that it is 'European' *and* 'Eastern', not 'European' *but* 'Eastern'. It is a position that bestows certain privileges and disadvantages at the same time – the liminality manifested in me is intertwined with the liminality of the region I write about. I am thankful for this journey rich in reflexivity, enriching both academically and personally and remain committed to 'wordling' our thinking (Mälksoo 2021, 883) of not just environmentalism but international relations at large when speaking and writing on behalf and for EE.

3. 2. Analytical framework

This chapter establishes the analytical framework for the thesis by integrating the concept of liminality, poststructuralist theory and argumentative discourse analysis. First, I introduce perpetual liminality to enlighten how EE's in-betweenness is an eternal, enduring one. Second, poststructuralism informs my research theoretically in terms of an anti-essentialist stance which is foundational to viewing identities as discursively constructed. Third and last, I will use argumentative discourse analysis, following Hajer to trace how competing storylines in the Hungarian media approach the West and the EU and how they position themselves and the East more broadly within it.

3. 2. 1.　　　　Operationalizing liminality

Limen in Latin means threshold (Rumelili, 2003, 219), and it describes a 'state of in-betweenness, of being neither here nor there, both geographically, and temporally' (Drieschova 2024, 293). Liminality was first conceptualized by social anthropologist Victor Turner (1967) and originates from studying rituals, more precisely the stages of rituals between separation and reincorporation. Thomassen introduced subjecthood to liminality, namely by differentiating between liminality on the individual, on the social/group and on the state/society level for analysis (2012 in Raghunath 2020, 256).

Those with liminal identities are characterized by neither completely being excluded as an other nor included unequivocally, thereby representing the 'possibility of self and other's coexistence' (ibid., 221). The East is not just in-between the North and the South, it is also placed in-between 'the West' and 'the non-West' (Mälksoo 2021, 871). On the one hand, Müller notes that although the fall of communist regimes theoretically lead to the 'evaporation of the communist Other […] [as well as] the East–West division', the East is 'too rich to be a proper part of the South, but too poor to be a part of the North, […] too powerful to be periphery, but too weak to be the centre' (2020, 2-3). It seems to be stuck in an 'eternal transition towards an elusive modernity' dually excluded from the entitled Global North and from the marginalized Global South (ibid., 5).

On the other, the East also never quite became fully European, it remains in the 'waiting room of history' only allowed to participate in modernity at the discretion and grace of Europe (Müller 2020, ibid.). Müller therefore concludes that '[w]hat holds the East together is a 'shared feeling of simultaneous difference and resemblance to an amorphous Europe' (ibid.); while the fall of communism promised the 'end of history' in the Fukuyaman sense (Boatca 2006, 339), the East never quite 'caught up' to the West. Eastness as such, therefore, can be seen as an 'inert condition, as though fallen out of time and space', which is accurately exemplified by how we

refer to EE by 'always indexing the past': post-socialist, ex-Soviet, former USSR, old Eastern bloc, former Second World (Müller 220, 8; see also Mälksoo 2009, 657). Analytically, therefore, we distinguish transitional from perpetual liminality. Whilst the first relates to 'social actors' sense of being in-between an old and a new situation', the latter encompasses the 'more lasting experience of ambiguity and inbetweenness [sic] of actors working on the notional boundaries of social categories' (Ybema et al. 2011, 27). In my research design, I mobilize perpetual liminality to understand the East.

Kuus captures EE's perpetual liminality aptly when noting that it is either framed in terms of the past or the future, never in present terms – as having begun but never having finished the process of 'becoming mature Europeans', wherein Europeanness is equated with development (2004, 476). Mälksoo has shown that some of EE, such as Poland and the Baltic states have noticed their position that is 'Europe but not quite Europe' and have thus tried to 'become European', 'truly European' instead of 'lesser European' compared to their Western counterpart (2009, 655). These narratives have given way to 'a multitier patchwork Europe with varying degrees of Europeanness and Eastness', one in which, importantly, European subjects are ranked in terms of their 'Europeanness' (ibid., 475 and 484).[12]Notably, this thinking is underpinned by orientalist accounts of essential differences between Western and Eastern Europe, whereby the West is ascribed normality, which also means that deviation from the norm is thought of as 'lack of Europeaness' (Kuus 2004, 473 and 475), as being 'congenitally, inherently, culturally backward' (Kalmar 2024, 433), as 'grey, uninteresting, inferior, and non-modern, and as a perennial learner and a region of shortage' (Pungas et al. 2024, 83).[13]

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[12] This is the reason why Eastern Europe is further broken up into a more developed Central part and a less developed Eastern one, a phenomenon which I address in section IV. of my literature review.

[13] Although not formally included in the thesis' analytical framework, I refer readers interested in the material manifestation of the region's liminality to literature on semi-peripherality. This vocabulary borrows heavily from Wallerstein's World-systems theory (WTS) (see Martínez-Vela 2001; Udemans 2022; Sattler 2024), wherein the East is argued to assume an intermediate position: not the core nor the periphery but semi-periphery. Specifically for semi-peripherality, see Arrighi 1990; Vliegenthart 2010; Drieschova 2024; Pungas et al. 2024. Relatedly, for

Liminality has thus implications for the 'dynamics of the politics of belonging, becoming, and recognition in Europe' (Mälksoo 2012, 483). Importantly, it allows me to trace what happens during the 'constitutive' or 'axial' moments in politics (ibid., 486) and what experiences this leads to.

3. 2. 2.   Poststructuralism and the importance of discourses

Reckoning about the construction of identities means accepting that they are not pre-existing the way the essentialist theory of identity posits (Piazza 2019, 1). Rather, the starting point is that identities are 'constructed and shaped through language' – in other words, adopting a poststructuralist lens meaning denaturalizing and de-essentializing them and underlining their discursively produced and negotiated nature (De Fina 2013, 41). Poststructural theory 'assign[s] conceptual and analytic prominence to language' and other forms of meaning making (Norton and Morgan 2012, 1). Central, thereby, are discourses, which Norton and Morgan define as 'systems of *power/knowledge* that define and regulate our social institutions, disciplines, and practices', thereby normalizing 'the personal and collective possibilities we are capable of imagining in place and time' (ibid., original emphasis). In Tolis' words discourse 'enables, constrains, and excludes what can be thought, defines who is allowed to speak, and thus produces objects and subjects' (2023, 2). In this manner, poststructuralism traces 'how we come to believe what we hold as true' (Harcourt 2007, 21). In so doing, it views language as a 'key site for the ongoing creation and contestation of identity and its performativity', wherein heterogeneous linguistic communities engage in various signifying practices and make conflicting claims to truth and power (Norton and Morgan 2012, 2; see further Agger 1991).

Looking at the East-West divide through a poststructuralist lens thus means tracing how the processes through which physical and geographic spaces become interactionally and

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dependent development, see Raviv 2008 and Jessop 2014. For 'exploitative inclusion', see Sokol, 2013 and Pósfai and Nagy 2017. Beyond WTS, Neumann also confirmed that the European Union can also be viewed as an entity composed of internal cores and peripheries, or what he expressed in non WTS-aligned vocabulary as the Union's 'core member[s], member[s], honorary economic member[s], almost-member[s], or whatever[s]' (1998, 414).

discursively produced, or in other words, exploring the interlinkage of 'who we are' with the 'where we are' – or to return to liminality, 'where we wish to be' (Piazza 2019, 2).

3. 2. 3.   The 'East' as an ontological and epistemological category

Similarly to the Global North and the South, I use the 'East' as an ontological and epistemological category, that is, I recognize the word's malleability and its function of delineating an eternal 'Other of a thus affirmed West' (Müller 2020, 10). At this point, I would like to evoke Mälksoo (2021) conceptual work on the East as a space (i.e. a descriptive frame) or a trope (i.e. an evaluative frame) or as both (i.e. a mixed frame). First, a descriptive frame refers to 'geographical/geopolitical space of analysis and projection of power in international relations' much in an empirical fashion, as illustrated by the analogy of EE 'as 'a lawn' where 'two elephants', aka the Great Powers, have either fought or made love on (Van Ham 1998, 47 in ibid., 874). Second, an evaluative framing uses the East as a normatively loaded signifier, 'a problem to be sorted' in Mälksoo's words (2021, 874). Third and last, a mixed frame means combining the space of EE with its role as a 'subject in progress', both in terms of Europeanisation and international socialization (ibid.). It is this third, mixed framing of the East that will inform my analysis.

3. 3.   Methodology

In this section, I introduce my methodological approach, namely, first expert interviews, and second, discourse analysis.

3. 3. 1.   Expert interviews

To refine the research focus and to ensure that the discussion is grounded in empirical relevance, a small number of expert interviews were conducted at the early stage of the project. The interviews were intended as heuristic and exploratory, to grasp understandings of the East–West divide in European climate policy. Accordingly, the interviews were semi-structured to allow for flexibility and in-depth engagement with experts' perspectives throughout our

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conversations. The two key insights that the interviews that the interviews revealed that shaped my later methodological decisions are the following. First, several experts emphasized the role of media in framing and reinforcing the East-West divide. Second, it became evident that EU-level actors are often reluctant to acknowledge any intra-EU divisions openly. I will return to both points in chapter 4 where I present my findings. Taken together, these insights prompted to undertake a discourse analysis, which I detail below.

3. 3. 2.   Argumentative discourse analysis

Next, a discourse analysis helps me unpack how intra-EU hierarchies and identities are constructed and reproduced or dismantled in public dialogue, and by extension, in our minds. To trace how liminality tangibly appears and manifests in social imaginaries, I take look at the Hungarian media discourse on decarbonization. Of concern thus is not the environmental problem per se, but the way in which different actors in the Hungarian landscape make sense of, how they *socially construct* it[14] (see further Hajer and Versteeg 2005). Whilst at first, analyzing discourse may seem self-serving, Tolis reminds us that 'insofar as discourse defines knowledgeable practices, [it] delimits the range of policy options, and eventually creates a truth effect that has a disciplining function in society' (2023, 3). The connection between public dialogue and policy is crucial: by exploring what is (what can) and what is not being (what cannot be) said about the problem in public dialogue, we get insight into how language sustains or overturns policy positions (Cotton et al. 2014, 428).

As already touched upon in previous parts of this chapter, discourse analyses are situated within anti-essentialist ontologies for assuming 'the existence of multiple, socially constructed realities instead of a single reality, governed by immutable natural laws' (Hajer and Versteeg 2005, 176). This interpretative tradition also places great emphasis on the historical, cultural

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[14] In Hajer's words: 'The point, however, is not that dead trees as such are a social construct - it is how one makes sense of dead trees' (2006, 66).

and political context in which the 'truth' arises. This is imperative, for the utterance of a discourse is never apolitical; especially claims pertaining to environmental problems 'invariably function to persuade rather than to inform' (Usher 2013, 812) – the attempt thereby for each actor is to secure support for its own definition of the (social) world (Winton 2016, 207). Decarbonization discussions, i.e. the need to reduce emissions provide a curious case, since whereas the scientific rationality of climate change usually underpins narratives, this does not mean that it can 'provide policy solutions or confer political legitimacy' (Szarka 2004, 328). Therefore, decarbonization can still be considered a 'complex reality', which sparks various accounts and contestation (ibid., 318).

More specifically, I will utilize Hajer's framework on argumentative discourse analysis (ADA), which examines how language, through its argumentative structure, influences political realities. To call this method 'argumentative' is a reflection on Hajer's intention to differentiate his approach from what we call the 'linguistic turn' in academia in the 1970s, which concerned itself with studying 'the political process as the mobilisation of bias' (2004, 61). In contrast, ADA moves beyond 'simply analyzing arguments' and aims to consider 'politics as a play of 'positioning' at particular 'sites' of discursive production' (ibid., 64). To illustrate, consider Hajer's emblematic work on the environmental discourse on acid rain in Great Britain:

> '[…] understanding the acid rain problem not only involves the understanding of the ecological phenomenon (which in itself requires the combination of pockets of knowledge from many different disciplines) but also involves questions of cost, abatement techniques, analysis of social and economic repercussions of the different remedial strategies, and ethical questions concerning fairness or the attribution of blame and responsibility' (1996, 45).

The appeal of ADA is largely similar to other Foucaultian approaches to discourse analysis that focus on the interlinkage of power, knowledge and social practices (Hajer and Versteeg 2005, 177). First, ADA is fit to reveal the embeddedness of language in practice by answering 'how questions'. Second, to return to the point on the peculiarity of environmental discourses that may 'seem factual and scientific', ADA highlights their

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'meaningful, suggestive and atmospheric' nature. Third, it uncovers the process whereby actors attempt to influence the problem definition. Essentially, the analytical apparatus of ADA aids best in research that is focused on understanding, mapping and tracing how actors justify, legitimize, and contest political decisions and topics. This is what I undertake by exploring the liminality that runs through Hungary's decarbonization discussion.

Under ADA, discourse is taken to be an 'ensemble of ideas, concepts, and categories through which meaning is given to social and physical phenomena, and which is produced and reproduced through an identifiable set of practices' (Hajer 2006, 67). Here, it is analytically important to note the difference between discourse and discussion: 'a discourse refers to a set of concepts that structure the contributions of participants to a discussion' – this differentiation enables the existence of a plurality of discourses (ibid., 68) which is pivotal for my analysis below. ADA, moreover, employs the concept of storylines to refer to the 'condensed statement summarising complex narratives, used by people as 'short hand' in discussions' (ibid., 69). Fisher explains storylines as 'devices through which actors are positioned and through which specific ideas of 'blame' and 'responsibility' and of 'urgency' and 'responsible behaviour' are attributed' (2003 in Bern and Winkel 2013, 294), whereas somewhat more simply, Cotton et al. summarize them as 'narratives on social reality' (2014, 429). Storylines do not neatly adhere to one discourse, in fact, they function to conceal discursive complexity by combining elements of various discourses 'into a more or less coherent whole' (Hajer 2006, 70).

Also central in ADA is the concept of discourse coalitions, which refer to 'group[s] of actors that, in the context of an identifiable set of practices, share the usage of a particular set of story lines over a particular period of time' (Hajer 2006, 70). They sustain particular storylines even without agreeing upon a shared interpretation of reality or having ever met (Cotton et al. 2014, 429). Coalitions' struggle for discursive hegemony is what Muller calls

'the essence of politics' (2015, 2). The concept of discourse coalitions proves most useful when dealing with a variety of social actors, say, politicians, advocacy groups, scientists, local as well as international organizations and everyday individuals. Exploring how they align around shared storylines to form coalitions is thus only meaningful in actor-diverse research setups (see, for example, Szarka 2004; Kurki et al. 2016; Metze and Dodge 2016; Nadeau and Berardo 2025), which is an inquiry I do not attempt here.

Hajer contends that apart from identifying and analyzing discourses, it should also be possible to assess their influence. He proposes to judge that based on a simple two-step procedure. First, discourse structuration happens when a discourse dominates the way we conceptualize the world. Second, discourse institutionalization entails discourse solidifying into institutions and organizational practices, for example, by becoming the primary way to measure air pollution (Hajer 2006, 70). We argue that a discourse can be considered dominant if both criteria are satisfied. Within the scope of the current research, however, I do not attempt to assess the dominance of the discourses for two reasons. First, due to feasibility constraints. Second, and more importantly, one media outlet I analyze is clearly aligned with official government communication. Chouliaraki's point on a discourse's universality depending on 'the power relations and the institutional logics of the social practice it is embedded in' (2005, 51) enlightens why attempting to demonstrate the dominance of a line of communication that is intertwined with institutional authority and policy-making power becomes futile.

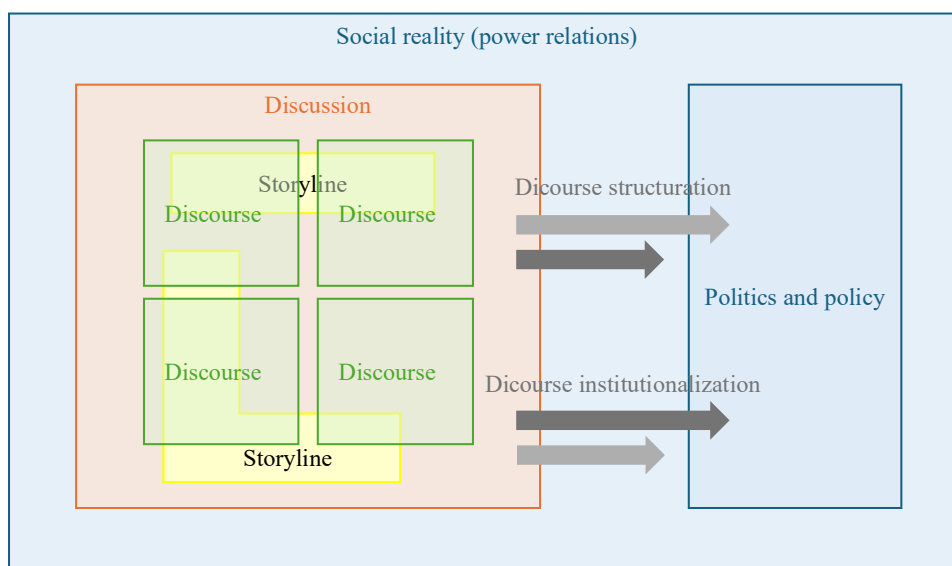For a schematic overview of the ADA framework, see Figure 5.

Figure 5: Argumentative discourse analysis (ADA) - schematic overview. Darker arrows mean stronger influence; structuration shapes society broadly while institutionalization acts mainly in the sphere of politics.

It is important to acknowledge the scholarly work in the intersection of post-structuralism and decarbonization discourses. Such discourse analyses encompass a variety of topics ranging from local-level empirics (Usher 2013; Tozer and Klenk 2018) to various energy technologies (Cotton et al. 2014; Jessup 2010; Mander 2008; Szarka 2004; Bern and Winkel 2013) and various climate change mitigation solutions (von Malmborg 2024; Hasan et al. 2025; von Malmborg 2023). Moreover, whereas Hajer initially created ADA for the analysis of environmental issues, the approach's influence spans beyond the field (see, for example, Yoon et al. 2024; Winton 2016; Tonkiss and Skelcher 2015; Gephart 2016). The novelty of my contribution lies in tracing the role of the East-West divide and liminality in Hungarian accounts on climate change mitigation. To my knowledge, ADA has not been employed to this end; transitology scholars and academic researching liminality, while still adhering to the critical, interpretive paradigm, tend to take different methodological approaches (for example Kuus 2004; Firnhaber et al. 2019; Romero-Trillo 2011).

3. 4. Data collection and analysis
3. 4. 1. Expert Interviews
Seven semi-structured interviews were conducted with professionals engaged in EU climate and energy policy, including policymakers, civil society actors, analysts, and advisors. My aim with the selection of the interviewees was to acquire a variety of viewpoints, both insiders and outsiders to policymaking and -implementation. The interviews were conducted online and lasted between 30 and 60 minutes.

Once the interviews were conducted, I created an affinity diagram of the material following Martin and Hanington (2012, 12-13) to help synthesize what I observed and learned. Organizing raw results into affinity diagrams helps externalize and meaningfully cluster observations and insights from research. Concretely, I transferred points and arguments made by the interviewed experts into notes, which I then then clustered based on affinity, that is, allocating those that shared similar intents, problems, or issues into the same group. This revealed themes and helped stories to emerge in terms of how people think of the divide and how both their professional and personal experience relate to it.

3. 4. 2. Argumentative discourse analysis
To tap into the public discourse on decarbonization and trace liminality within the dialogues, I apply ADA to media texts form two Hungarian outlets. Arguably, the permanence and accessibility of media discourse, especially through digital newspaper archives, makes it a valuable resource for the study's aims (O'Keeffe 2012, 441). More significantly, however, media serve as key sites of meaning-making where one can examine how (environmental) issues are politicized, contested, and communicated to the public. Here, it is worth alluding to Hall's concept of 'government by culture' that sees mediatized debate 'as a minor device of government [in a Foucauldian sense, see also Rose 1999 on government as 'the conduct of conduct'], a mode of ruling through showing how we should think and act' (1997 in Chouliaraki 2005, 49). Therefore, media analysis most notably offers an entry-point into the 'mundane, on

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the non-political, yet the intensely politicized' (ibid., 47) by framing, representing, (re)producing and maintaining common sense (Silverstone 1999, 6 in ibid.; see further Simon and Jerit 2007; Cotter 2015). As in the circulation of meanings associated with climate change, the media are a central arena is shaping both public and political options (Carvalho 2007, 223).

More specifically, I focus on two prominent platforms within the Hungarian public discourse: Origo and HVG. These outlets were selected because they represent two markedly different discursive positions within Hungary's media landscape. On the one hand, Origo has been shown to embody pro-government ideology (Göncz et al. 2024, 55), due to media capture by pro-government investors (Szeidl and Szucs 2021) and because of government-associated ownership from 2016 onwards (Simonovits and Vig 2023). As the largest pro-government outlet, Origo's stance is right wing and uncritical of government action (Sebők et al. 2024, 2899 and 2904). On the other hand, HVG belongs to the left-leaning media and is known to frequently critique the government (Szabó and Bene 2019, 38; Szeidl and Szucs 2021, 302). While both Origo and HVG are leading news outlets in the Hungarian scene, HVG's coverage is smaller (Szeidl and Szucs 2021, 286). Yet, recent market research cites it among the most credible news sources among the Hungarian population (Reuters in Polyák et al. 2022, 142). HVG was selected not only for its oppositional stance and discursive contrast with Origo, but also because it engages with topics related to decarbonization more frequently and in greater depth than other independent outlets, such as, for instance, Telex.

Taken together, I anticipate these two media outlets to showcase how competing discourses frame Hungary's decarbonization agenda (for similar research designs, see Simonovits and Vig 2023; Sebők et al. 2024; Szeidl and Szucs 2021). I expect the contrast to run through not just the way in which the outlets construct storylines, but also in whom they assign blame and responsibility to, especially in terms of the East-West divide.

The material I analyze covers the period from November 2019 to February 2022. Although December 2019 marks the official launch of the EGD, Hungarian reflections on the proposals were already published in November, hence the addition of the previous month. The endpoint, February 2022, corresponds with the Russian invasion of Ukraine, which significantly shifted the focus of the decarbonization debate towards security, sovereignty, and geopolitics (Skalamera 2023; Bordoff and O'Sullivan 2023).

Articles from the two media outlets were identified by using search terms such as decarbonization, the European Green Deal, green transition. Searches were done using the internal search engines of both websites and filtered manually to exclude irrelevant reports. Considering that using more specific search terms excluded useful material – partly because poor tagging on the outlets' side –, the manual screening of articles was necessary. To maintain analytical focus, ensure feasibility, and uphold a level of parsimony in the dataset, I included only those articles that engaged directly with climate or energy policy in an EU-related context, meaning they referenced European-level frameworks, debates, or actors. Articles that, for instance, focused solely technological innovations, were excluded. The articles were then bibliographically ordered and assigned numerical references enclosed in square brackets to facilitate convenient citation within the analysis. For the comprehensive list of sources analyzed, see Appendices 8.1 and 8.2. The resulting dataset, which entails 53 articles, was coded using an interpretive approach based on ADA. My focus throughout was on how the emerging storylines framed the East-West divide as well as whether and if so, how they utilized Hungary's liminal positionality, a country that has seen a revival of concepts such as 'Central Europe' (Balogh 2017).

3. 5. Limitations
3. 5. 1.   Expert Interviews
While interviewees were selected for their professional insight, their views do not represent a comprehensive landscape of all actors involved in European climate policy. Moreover, oftentimes, they highlighted that they were sharing their subjective interpretations and opinions. Insights from interviews should thus be understood as indicative of prevalent narratives and framings rather than generalizable truths.

Additionally, given the political sensitivity of the East-West divide in EU circles, which I detail in 4.1.1, some interviewees may have downplayed or avoided explicit acknowledgment of the divisions.

3. 5. 2.   Argumentative discourse analysis
In terms of limitations of ADA, I will first address two limitations that relate to the very nature of the method that I am using: intersubjectivity and internal biases. First, discourse analysis is oftentimes critiqued for the lack of intersubjectivity (Boréus and Bergström 2017, 19), that is, the lack of clear criteria for replicability or validation of the research. Yet, under post-structuralism, the aim is never to make universal, objective truth claims. Multiple interpretations are not only possible but expected. I recognize that other discourses and storylines exist beyond those identified below, and that my analysis is shaped by my own positionality. This brings me to the second point on limitations of discourse analysis, namely the bias of the researcher. While some argue that the reliability of interpretive analysis is comprised by the analyst's prior knowledge and experience (Hammersley 1992), critical approaches deny the possibility of full objectivity in the first place. Differently put: '[…] the researcher is […] entrusted with the task of revealing social mechanisms of oppression, domination, and exclusion through discourse from a critical perspective, provided that s/he is guided by theoretical premises, systematic analysis, and constant self-reflection during the

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course of the research […] [T]he analyst does not exist independently of the discursive (and/or non-discursive) context within which society operates' (Aydın-düzgit and Rumelili 2019, 301).

Second, focusing exclusively on media texts means that my analysis captures only one layer of public discourse. While important discursive arenas, media outlets do not encapsulate the full spectrum of actors involved in shaping decarbonization narratives. Broadening the analysis to incorporate non-governmental organizations (NGOs), policymakers, academic experts, and industry stakeholders would add analytical depth. It would also enable identifying discourse coalitions in the full sense proposed by Hajer (2006).

Third, as data is limited to a single country and a relatively modest set of media texts, it may limit the generalizability of the findings. Work across multiple countries or media ecosystems could shed light on regional patterns or transnational discursive dynamics.

Fourth, although manually filtering through the articles, as I mentioned previously, was necessary to ensure they are analytically relevant, which hurts the research's reproducibility.

3. 6.   Ethical considerations

All interview participants were informed about the purpose of the research and gave their consent to participate. I took care to protect the anonymity and privacy of my interviewees, especially as some of the insights shared by EU officials touched on politically sensitive ground and could have put them at professional risk (see section 4.1.1.). For this reason, I chose to leave out names, job titles, and other identifying details, even though including their positionality could have added depth to the analysis.

4. RESULTS

4. 1.   Expert interviews

Through affinity diagramming the raw material of the interviews, three overarching themes emerged:

(I) opinions and arguments questioning the salience of the East–West divide in the decarbonization scene,

(II) policy areas and differences where experts do observe a divide between Western and Eastern Europe, and

(III) mitigating/influencing factors that are at play when thinking about the East and its positionality within Europe in energy and climate policy

Whereas I separate these categories below analytically for clarity, they overlap and do not constitute mutually exclusive categories. Figure 5 below present the complete diagram.
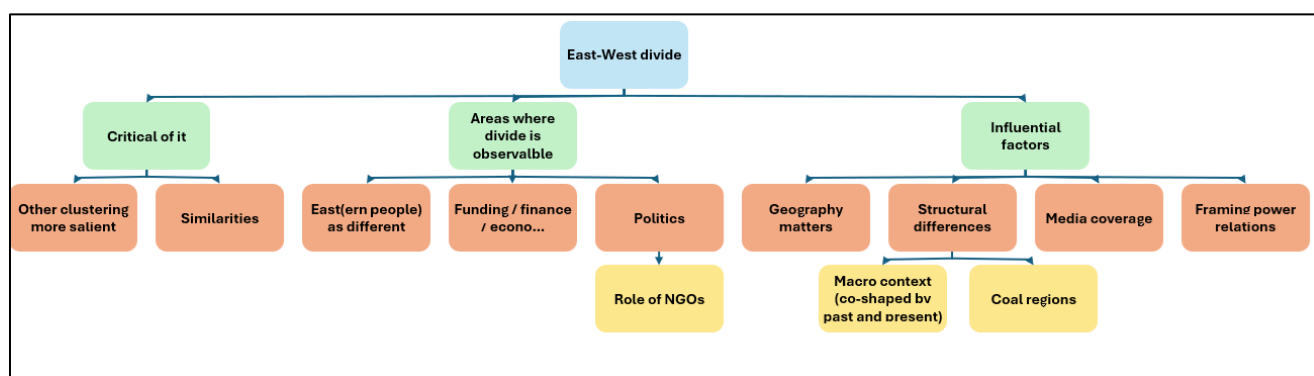

Figure 5: Affinity diagram of the interview material

4. 1. 1. Contesting the divide: alternative divisions and overlooked similarities

In almost all interviews, participants were somewhat skeptical about the salience and the of the East-West division. While Interviewee 7 saw potential in the analytical category, Expert 4 warned about the differences within the region as well as the domestic division within EE member states. Others were more critical, calling the divide outdated (Interview 1) or uninformative (Interview 3). These participants highlighted the heterogeneity within the group politically (Interview 2) as well as difference in decarbonization contexts (i.e. natural endowments and relatedly, diversifying efforts) (Interview 3, 6).

Some of the experts argued for other types of clustering of the Union's member states. Both participants 3 and 7 highlighted the intra-EU division that emerged along stances regarding nuclear energy. Thereby, Germany and Austria create a pole that is strongly anti-nuclear, whereas majority of Eastern member state rely on nuclear power generation. Yet, the picture is further complicated by France, the loudest advocate for nuclear energy, alongside some of the Nordic countries like Finland or Sweden that are similarly supportive of it (Interview 3, 5, 7). Following this argument, there is no intra-EU split, and we rather see a conceptualization of the energy transition that is accommodating more views on decarbonization (Interview 3). For example, Participant 5 argued that there are big structural differences in how countries see the market, meaning that while France and Germany provide considerable state-aid in the transition, Nordic countries entrust the market with all regulatory roles.

Moreover, those wishing to draw the East-West divide into question argued with convergence and similarity between the different regions. Interviewee 2 pointed out that the energy poverty alleviation plans of Western member states such as Spain look very similar to those of Poland or Bulgaria. Similarly, Interviewee 7 underlined that the deployment and perception of renewables function quite similarly in the West and East. When questions about Easterners being different as people arose, several experts claimed that differences manifest rather along urban–rural and generational and not East-West lines (Interview 6, 7).

Crucially, one official working for the European Commission highlighted that those insiders within EU policymaking will 'want to make this [East-West] division invisible, […] because even if there were a division, we would not really want to highlight it.' That is because the role of the EU is to bring member states 'as close as possible to European politics and to cover up even the appearance of its divisions.' This conversation exposed that inquiring about any intra-EU division from EU officials is a 'politically very, very sensitive issue, […] because most people do not want to hear that there is such a division.'

4. 1. 2.   Where the East-West divide is still felt
The East(erners) as different

The majority of experts drew distinctions between Westerners and Easterners. Interviewee 1 argued in favor of an East-West divide by claiming that 'people are the problem in the East', seeing that they are 'ignorant' and fail to 'comprehend the logic' of the transition. Western European citizens, on the other hand, are not just more aware of the need to transition but have also internalized environmentalist values better, which is best exemplified by German citizens becoming angry when their government, in its attempt to reduce its reliance on Russian fossil fuel imports, resorted to coal. Expert 1 continued by explaining that people in the East are afraid of the green transition and show no willingness for it because they tend to be on smaller budgets, with a substantial part belonging to the working class. Moreover, they have a false vision of decarbonization, falsely thinking that it will result in blackouts in the energy system as was the case in Spain and Portugal recently. More generally, Eastern people are seen as more 'down to Earth', as individuals that 'want to see concrete action', or as Interviewee 2 put it, compared to the 'idealistic West', they are 'more pragmatic people'. Expert 4 added that they observe a stark difference in the success of different narratives between the West and in CEE: whereas referring to climate change triggers action and secures supports in the West in policy circles, in the East, it is never 'a motivation in and of itself'. Rather, one has to frame climate action through either energy security or cost reduction' and potentially even avoid mentioning climate change as it may discourage some people from engagement. Potentially, scientific theories such as post-materialism and the Maslow pyramid may explain this, for if people have to 'worry less about their safety and everyday survival, they have more capacity to consider things that go beyond them, such as climate change and environmentalism' (Interview 4).

Experts that had insight into policymaking processes between older and newer member states confirmed differences in the character of countries themselves. For instance, whereas 'old

democracies in the Western part of Europe display an understanding of partnership with others as well as with the Commission, EE authorities struggle with something that Interviewee 7 was hesitant to call inferiority complex and described rather as 'more willingness to comply and less willingness to object.' Interview 6 also confirmed the East-West divide in the two regions' willingness to cooperate, regionally and otherwise. Expert 6 detailed that unless there is a strong commercial or economic interest, Eastern member states refuse to come together merely for the purpose of sharing experiences or helping each other out with the green transition. The Visegrad Group (V4), composed of Czechia, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia represented an exception in this sense, but they, too, displayed interest in cooperation and coordination 'only as long as there were clearly identifiable interests for all parties' (Interview 6). Another caveat that Expert 6 mentioned concerned the Baltic countries, who 'cooperate very well with both each other and with external parties such as Germany and Denmark.' By and large, furthermore, there is no coalition formation 'between the Eastern countries in the European Council during negotiations either', although its 'common practice in the West.'

Transitioning on a budget

Interviewees also reported differences between the two regions' leeway financially and economically. Accordingly, decarbonization cannot and will not happen 'at all costs' in the East, for whereas 'rich countries can play around with solutions for decarbonization, Eastern ones cannot', meaning that EE will only decarbonize if 'there is economic rationale behind it' and display a 'united cautious approach when it comes to financing the transition' (Interview 2, 3, 4, 6, 7). Interviewee 6 argued that the reason why EE cannot detach itself from Russian gas imports may also be political, but there are definitely economic considerations: while Russian gas provided a stable supply of energy at an affordable price, the EU's new solution to cut Russian energy imports, the import of liquefied natural gas (LNG) is very expensive. In other words, the East is pragmatic and prioritizes affordability over sustainability (also mentioned in

Interview 2). Similarly, Expert 1 reasoned that it is expensive to switch district heating (DH) systems if the infrastructure is not built for green sources and it its old – in this regard, Finland is 'lucky' to have installed its DH system in the 70s that is suitable to accommodate green sources such as biomass and renewables, whereas Eastern countries still struggle to phase-out fossil fuels from their DH systems. Additionally, Western states such as Germany are also able to provide state aid for alternatives to centralized energy systems such as heat pumps (Interview 1).

Politics

Expert also notes the political differences between the West and the East, such as the lack of green parties in some EE member states, the lack of considerations of environmental consideration in energy policy discussions and the 'demonization' of environmental policy, especially in Hungary and Czechia and Slovakia (Interview 1, 4, 5).

Interestingly, although I never posed specific questions on the role of civil society and NGOs, both Interviewee 4 and 7 argued that while NGOs have been influential in some of the EE countries' transition towards democratic rule, they now 'lack power' and 'fail to deliver big achievements' in the environmental sphere – especially so in Slovakia, Hungary and Romania.

4. 1. 3.   Factors shaping countries' decarbonization pathways

A third analytical group I set up from discussion themes relates to the underlying factors that shape the real or alleged division between countries. Below, I will address these in the following order: first, the role of geography, second, structural accounts of countries' endowments and limitations, third, the media coverage/framing of decarbonization topics, and lastly power relations and positionalities, including frames through which we think about the West and the East.

First, Interviewee 4 underlined that decarbonization comes down to more than money and technology – which, as argued above, is also a critical point in the East –; it is co-shaped by

historical context and geopolitics. Due to the East's proximity to Russia and some of the Eastern member states being landlocked, energy security concerns 'always come first' and constitute a more 'sensitive issue' than in the West (Interview 1, 4). Therefore, for instance, while the 'physical market integration is quasi-complete at European level for natural gas', Hungary and Slovakia approach the phase-out of Russian gas very differently due reasons that pertain to both 'historical reasons and contemporary economics' (Interview 6, 7).

Second, structural divergence was one of the most prevalent themes throughout the interviews. Post-soviet characteristics of the East such as older and energy inefficient building stocks, heavier reliance on fossil fuels, centralized energy system and greater dependence on Russian energy imports were reoccurring subjects (Interview 1, 2, 4, 6). Interviewee 1, in connection with the Cohesion Fund, prompted whether 'we are right to support countries that set lower targets, because if so, the divide will always remain'. Intriguingly, Expert 7 noted that the East tends to struggle with administrative capacity, which may partially explain why they tend to argue for more time or later deadlines argues for the implementation of decarbonization measures. They added that sometimes, the initial planning that Eastern member states submit is 'not very realistic and is too optimistic.'

Across accounts that underlined structural differences between Western and Eastern member states, the East's endowment in coal was argued to account for different positionalities towards decarbonization (Interview 3, 5, 7). Curiously, organized interest around coal was argued to influence the messaging of both media and politics (Interview 3, 4). In this vein, coal – though its prevalence in media – is able to shape public discourse, which in turn influences voting behaviour, which ultimately then shapes public policy making (Interview 3). This relates to why both Germany and Poland during their presidencies of the Council of the European Union in 2020 and in 2025 respectively hesitated to push for an ambitious green agenda, fearing domestic voter pushback and potentially losing the elections (Interview 5). Expert 5 expects the

solution to come from Denmark assuming the presidency from July to December 2025 – a country that Interviewee 1 called a 'climate leader' alongside the Netherlands, 'not just in Europe but worldwide.'

Third and relatedly, several experts highlighted the role of media and implied that it functions differently in the East than in the West. To illustrate the first point, Expert 3 states that the 'East-West divide is only salient because the media portrays it this way', also reaffirmed by Expert 2 noting that although some Balkan countries have exceptionally green energy systems, 'no one really knows' due to a lack of media coverage. In further support of this point, Expert 7 underscored that even though Romania has been doing exceptionally well in terms of decarbonization, this is 'not reflected in the press.' Further, Expert 6 agreed that the media and the press play crucial roles in information dissemination and opinion-forming, and added that the particularity of the East lies in cult of personality and the importance of personal connections, which means that certain distinguished people have a disproportionate say in where their country is headed, differently than the way in which one finds dominant corporates and figures in the West.

Last, and somewhat also connectedly to media portrayals, majority of experts discussed instances of biased framings suggesting different distinct power positionalities of older versus newer member states. For instance, according to Expert 5, the clean energy transition lobby is so focused on big member states, that 'one sometimes forgets that the East exists.' Likewise, in discussions between transmission system operators (TSOs), 'Eastern voices are not really heard although there are platforms dedicated to discussions', implying an 'inception that they [Eastern TSOs] are scared to participate and bring ideas' (Interview 4). Interview 2 verified that the East is still thought of in terms of 'catching-up dynamics' to the West, although not to same extent as in the developing-developed, Global North-Global South dichotomies. Along similar lines,

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Expert 5 remarked Finland's historic and still ongoing attempt to 'prove that they are either Western or Nordic but under no circumstances Eastern' (Interview 5).

Some interviewees underlined the differentiated treatment that EE receives (how it is 'overcriticized' in Expert 2's opinion). To illustrate, when Romania has agreed to ambitious targets in 2021 but struggled with delivery, some people cited Romania's 'lack of commitment' among the reason for the delay, calling the Romanian plan a 'bluff', disregarding the difficulties that Russia's invasion of Ukraine induced in the realization of the country's promises (Interview 7). Expert 7 added that this is curious, seeing that on the one hand, the West's failures are rarely framed in such terms, and on the other hand that there is sometimes more ambition in the East in certain areas. Furthermore, while cognitively, we continue to associate the issue of energy poverty with the East, the problem is more prevalent in Spain and in Portugal than in most Eastern member states (Interview 2). To highlight a similar pattern, energy communities are marketed as a 'new and modern Western invention', even in spite of not just continued citizen engagement in energy policy in both in the East and the West, but also in the face of the post-communist legacy of collective action and resource management (Interview 2).

4. 1. 4. Synthesis

Taken together, the expert interviews reveal that although questions regarding the East-West decarbonization division's analytical usefulness and contemporary relevance endure, majority of experts confirm permanent structural, political, and discursive distinctions. Those critical of the salience of the East-West divide propose alternative cleavages, such as splits along attitudes toward nuclear energy, market regulation, or urban–rural and generational divides.

Interviewees that affirmed the divide related it to public perceptions, differences in (geo)political and media cultures, financial constraints, historical dependencies (mainly regarding Russian energy imports), and infrastructural legacies. Among other things, the role that media portrayals and narrative play in particular emerged as a key site of contestation.

These insights will be carried forward into the discourse analysis that follows, which investigates how these framings appear in Hungarian media portrayals.

4. 2. Argumentative discourse analysis

4. 2. 1. Origo: a storyline of resistance for an alternative Hungarian decarbonization path

What not to do: framing in relation to negative exemplars

Origo's storyline is one that acknowledges the urgent need to fight climate change and curb emissions [20] but rejects the path that the EU and some Western European member states are pursuing. To illustrate, the EU's[15] Green Deal – especially certain elements of it, such as those regarding price controls and the ETS system – are presented as 'bad' 'foolish', 'unacceptable', as 'inducing suffering' and should therefore be 'withdraw', 'suspended' so that 'we can return to reality' [16, 18]. Notably, Origo frames Hungary's decarbonization path through examples of both what should be emulated and what should be rejected, wherein the use of what I call 'bad examples' delineates what Hungary should steer clear of.

Most resentment is directed against the EU as an institution, proxied by its de facto capital, Brussels:

> 'The European Union and its new leadership in Brussels are preparing to conclude an ambitious agreement in the coming period: an EU climate agreement and the creation of financing conditions for what they call the "transition" process. […] The monotonous proliferation of semantic solutions is a warning sign in itself: "social transition", "climate transition", "just transition", "gender transition", and so on. "Transition" is the new buzzword: social and demographic transition through the opening of borders and the legalization of migration, cultural transition through the dismantling of national identities and the celebration of diversity (multiculturalism), political transition through the transfer of state sovereignty, and now climate transition. […] We don't have to dig too deep to discover behind these terms the outlines of the concept of a United States of Europe, complete with gestures to radical greens, the universalist Kantian utopia of "eternal peace" and its guardians: the Brussels super-bureaucracy' [1].

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[15] In its critique of the EU's approach, Origo frequently refers to the European Commission, rather than the EU as a whole, to represent supranational interests and agendas.

The Commission is scrutinized for high energy prices resultant from incorrect calculations, aggressive climate policy [1, 18, 21], for ineffective coordination and mismanagement in times of crises [1] and for preparing a 'secret plan' with the EGD that involves indirect taxation for homeowners and car owners under the guise of climate protection, which is unacceptable to Hungary [21].

The construction of 'bad examples' – enemies, one might argue – proceeds further. First, the domestic political opposition is claimed to serve 'the interests of multinational companies – to the detriment of families' [13, see also 21], meaning that if 'the left-wing coalition comes to power, […] Hungarian families will once again be paying a quarter to a third of their income on utilities. Just like in the eight wasted years before 2010' [15]. Second, greens, referred to as 'radical movements' [2], 'opponents of nuclear energy' [4] or 'the renewable energy lobby' [3] 'are unable to let go of what was once their most important identity-forming element: opposition to nuclear power' [2], which is not just irrational [2] but it also targets taxpayer money [3]. Third, 'the grand strategy of Western elites' [15] also pursues 'misguided energy policies by pushing for the rapid and ill-considered introduction of renewable energy sources (RES) and by completely or partially shutting down base load power plants, including nuclear power plants' [10]. Fourth, two Western European countries appear to be especially often quoted counterexamples of good decarbonization practice. On the one hand, although Austria's eco-social tax reform plan, 'forced by the Greens' sounds promising [21], as a country rejecting nuclear, it increasingly relies on gas-fired power plants and – somewhat paradoxically – imports energy from neighboring countries that rely on nuclear [9]. What is more, the Austrian government's anti-nuclear agenda extends beyond the country's borders: through the Energy Club, a Hungarian climate policy institute, Austria is using federal funds to 'attack Hungary's sovereign decision on the Paks II project', thereby questioning member states' sovereign

competence to determine their won energy mix [5]. On the other hand, Germany is also depicted as a problematic precedent – so much so that it is worth devoting a whole section to it.

The Energiewende's tragedy

Germany's Energiewende is a cautionary tale [12], 'huge chaos' [20], an 'absolute dead end' [14] in Origo's storyline. The reasoning is manyfold. To start, the 'ill-considered' [10] development of RES (primarily solar and wind) and the phase-out of nuclear energy are named as drivers in energy price increases: German prices stand three times the price paid by Hungarian households and are more than 70 percent higher in than in France [2, 3, 7, 12, 13, 14] – importantly, both owing to the use of nuclear. Morevoer, Origo calls into question the high costs and state subsidies (i.e. lack of competitiveness) associated with RES, drawn into a direct causation with rising energy prices [3, 7, 8, 12].

Additionally, heavy reliance on RES risks power outages Europe-wide [9, 10, 12], as a consequence of which Germany has to rely on gas or coal for base line power, which is arguable more polluting than nuclear [3, 7, 12, 14, 20]. Thus, while Germany 'presents itself as a champion of climate protection' [6], it 'shuts down climate-friendly nuclear power plants only to replace them with either coal- or gas-fired ones' [14]. This implies that Germany's dependence on Russia for gas imports is growing [2, 3, 6], as well as that in the form of coal, the country is falling back on an energy source that is hurting people's health [2] and for the expansion of which entire 'settlements and churches are being sacrificed' [3].

Besides that, Germany is also forced to import energy from its neighbors when RES are not covering the full demand, for '[w]ithout imports, Germany would simply be plunged into darkness'[14]. Hence, Germany – alongside Austria, the other anti-nuclear member state – either imports clean and reliable nuclear energy from, for example, France, [6, 9] or alternatively, coal- and LNG-based one, both more polluting than nuclear [15].

The 'tragic consequences of the experiment known as Energiewende' [12] can be summarized as follows:

> 'The Energiewende, which shut down nuclear power plants and drastically increased the share of weather-dependent renewables, has been a huge failure. Support for green energy has led to incredibly high electricity prices for households, In addition, the current situation is characterized by the failure to meet climate targets, increasing environmental pollution despite renewables, and, as a result, the premature death of 1,100 people per year. Furthermore, certain sectors of German industry are showing signs of decline, with more and more German companies and jobs "moving out" of the country' [14].

The 'failure of German energy policy' [14] lies in how it has 'not resulted in positive progress in terms of any of the objectives of the energy policy trilemma' [2], seeing that prices increased, alongside pollution [2, 17], and security of supply has been comprised by overreliance on RES without the necessary base line power sources. Importantly, the stakes extend beyond the German border: the Energiewende indirectly caused economic problems for Europe, undermined not just Germany's credibility but also 'the unity of the European Union' [2].

To return to my point on how the Hungarian path is positioned with reference to bad exemplars, the most pronounced of them Germany, Origo writes that while Germany struggles to deal with rising energy prices, 'Hungarians ended up on the right side once again' [15]. This is no coincidence, it is the consequence of the hard-fought path that Hungary pursues for its decarbonization, even in face of contention by others, as I will show below.

Hungary's alternative decarbonization path: rationality and fairness

Hungary's approach is grounded in the polluter pays principle, in rules of sovereignty, equity/fairness, technological neutrality and rationality [1]. Regarding the first two, Origo finds it concerning that the European Commission would cover the costs of the green transition 'using cohesion funds intended for the convergence of former socialist countries' for the support of countries such as Germany that is 'responsible for one-third of the EU's coal consumption for energy purposes' [1, see also 2]. In so doing,

'the German government would shift the long-term, indirect costs of nuclear disarmament, which was politically forced by the radical anti-nuclear lobby, onto developing countries, which seriously contradicts the fundamental values of the EU' [2].

That is not the intended use of support, seeing that 'cohesion funds have traditionally gone to vulnerable regions in less affluent countries' [1]. Moreover, Origo underlines 'the high costs of emission reduction measures should be borne proportionally by those who are actually responsible for the emissions.' For Hungary is only responsible for 0.14% and less than 1.5% of total EU CO_2 emissions – with per capita emissions well below the EU average (5.46 compared to 7.35 tons), unlike Germany that exceeds the average with 10.38 tons – the costs of the transition 'should not primarily be borne by the former socialist countries that are catching up' [1, see also 17].

Further along the lines of fairness, Origo publishes voices that call for an approach that does not pass on the costs of decarbonization to citizens. That is, instead 'radicalism, apocalyptic expectations, post-humanist attitudes', we have to keep to 'common sense, the scientific method, and the principle of rationality' [1, see also 17]. That is because carbon neutrality is neither 'an excuse for cherishing supranational or imperial dreams' of the 'super-bureaucracy in Brussels' nor 'a "transition" to the ideal society of the "end of history"', but a process that shall protect the status quo [1]. Hence emission reduction needs to happen while 'preserving the economic and social achievements that have been made since the industrial revolution' [2]. The belief that our energy needs will decrease is a 'green illusion' [12], the assumption that decarbonization is aligned with economic growth is constant [for example, 1, 20]. Origo, moreover, supports a vision of a carbon-free(r) future that is patriotic: as '[s]ecurity of supply can only be maximally ensured if every country consumes roughly as much energy as it produces [10], '[t]he goal is that domestic consumers are supplied from domestic power plants' [12].

Importantly, a frequently reoccurring theme in Origo's storyline is the demand for technological neutrality vis-à-vis actors that have a vendetta for certain decarbonization technologies, most pronouncedly nuclear. The line of evidence is the following: the most effective and economic regulatory instruments are technology-neutral, even if the current international practice fails to understand that, instead pursuing 'witch hunt against nuclear technology' through policy intervention [2]. Yet, Origo (and the Hungarian government) maintains that '[t]here is no climate neutrality without nuclear energy' [22], citing the analysis of not just the European Commission's independent scientific advisory body, the Joint Research Centre (JRC) [12, 17, 22] but also of the International Atomic Agency [2, 4, 6. 8]. I will turn to this aspect of Origo's storyline now.

The necessity of nuclear: Hungary's 'Paks II-only' energy strategy

Technically speaking, Hungary's distinct decarbonization pathway is based on combination of nuclear (more precisely, the Paks nuclear facility and its expansion) and RES, especially solar [3].

> '... [I]f we take a responsible approach to our future, we must rely on both nuclear energy and renewable energy sources in order to achieve our climate protection goals. Hungary has also chosen this path, as it wishes to move forward together with other countries around the world – which have correctly recognized the future role of nuclear energy in the energy mix and made rational decisions – in order to achieve competitiveness, climate protection and security of supply goals through the implementation of Paks II. The Hungarian government is committed to implementing the Paks II nuclear power plant project and developing renewable energy sources, especially solar power plants.' [4]

Yet, renewables' weather dependency is heavily scrutinized, or in other words, the question Origo poses is what we do when 'the sun is not shining or the wind is not blowing' [3, 5]. The technologies' intermittency, coupled with lack of large-scale energy storage solutions [2, 6, 8, 10, 12, 14, 19] may result in grid-wide instability and ultimately collapse, induced by Western Europe that are pioneers in RES [3, 10, 19]. Furthermore, lack of space, delays in permitting, bureaucracy [12], the time pressure on humanity to act swiftly [1], unreliable

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efficiency [2, 8], locality, NIMBY[16], high costs [3, 15] are all mentioned as drawbacks. Therefore:

> '[w]ithout base load power plants that meet climate protection and security of supply targets […] security of supply cannot be guaranteed solely with (weather-dependent) renewables' [12].

Nuclear, therefore, is the most prominent theme on Origo's storyline: '[w] e are part of a new nuclear renaissance' [3] wherein 'more and more countries want to join the "elite club" of nuclear energy users' [4]. Nuclear energy is presented as having no alternative [1, 2, 4, 8], for without it 'Paris climate targets cannot be achieved' [16]. In this light, 'the construction of the Paks II Nuclear Power Plant is of paramount national interest' [13]. Concerns about the public perception of nuclear safety have been refuted [1, 2], and what is more, nuclear is a solution to the energy trilemma as it satisfies all three pillars:

> 'Strengthening energy sovereignty and security, maintaining affordable energy prices, and decarbonizing energy production can only be achieved through the combined use of nuclear and renewable energy' [22, see also 3, 4, 7, 8, 9, 13, 15; for arguments specifically on nuclear energy's climate-friendliness, i.e. lower lifecycle emissions than some RES and all fossil fuels gas, see 2, 5, 6, 12].

Success narrative: resolution to the energy trilemma and reassurance from good examples

In Origo's storyline, the Hungarian decarbonization pathway is considered success indeed in all three aspects of the energy trilemma. First, per capita carbon dioxide emissions in Hungary are significantly lower than in Germany, a country that 'considered a leader in climate protection' [17], first and foremost owing to Paks' nuclear capacity and also to the use of renewables [20]. The country is performing greatly in terms of renewable penetration in the energy system [6], in fact, better than most other EE member states [23]. Hungary belongs *both* to group 10 of 27 EU countries that reduced their carbon dioxide emissions by more than 30 percent as well as to group of 21 countries in the world that have managed to increase their

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[16] 'Not In My Backyard', used to describe opposition from local residents to proposed changes in their direct environment, such as RES projects.

GDP while reducing their emissions [20]. Second, both domestic nuclear energy supply and the long-term Russian gas contracts ensure security of supply [21, 15]. Third, the price cap on utility prices safeguards affordability [18]. To demonstrate, Origo writes that Hungarian households pay the lowest gas prices, and electricity is the second cheapest in Europe, around 40% of what it would be based on European electricity prices, which constitutes an average 25% price reduction and amounts to savings HUF 2,162 billion [approx. EUR 5,4 billion on 2025 exchange rates] for families since 2013 [21, see also 13].

Also important to not is that the storyline occasionally relies on a sense of regional unity amongst some EE countries, mostly the V4. Their unified voice is portrayed as not just underlining their support for – and the absolute necessity of – nuclear energy for decarbonization [22, 8], but also as standing for reducing energy prices and against attempts 'to tax homeowners under the guise of climate protection proposals' [21].

Furthermore, to complement the construction of 'bad examples'/enemies, Origo also relies on 'good' examples, not necessarily in the sense of cases to be followed which would entail normative power and role models. Rather, they are rather used to further support and justify the Hungarian decarbonization path. First, those countries that are pro-nuclear, such as Romania, Poland, Czechia [8, 11], but most principally France [3, 7]. France is 'setting an excellent example' as it supplies secure, stable, clean and affordable, competitive and reliable electricity to residential and industrial consumers alike, thereby boosting its own national economy (which RES are unable to do). Thus, nuclear energy is not just the 'main pillar of French energy independence' [7]. Second, Origo also praises those countries that in reaction to soaring energy prices, 'are considering measures to reduce energy prices for the population', such as Austria, Spain, Greece, France [21].

Discursive hostility against all 'others'

While in constructing this analysis, I deemed it important to show how closely linked bad examples are with the Hungarian model – precisely to justify it –, I want to return to *the way in which* Origo construct enemy figures. That is because although framing certain actors or countries as negative reference points is not unusual in political discourse, the level of hostility, disrespect, and delegitimization running through Origo's texts stands out and deserves closer attention.

This feature is most evident in communication about domestic Hungarian actors, may those be opposition politicians, fellow media actors or think thanks. They are frequently referred to something along the lines of 'anti-nuclear and pro-renewable lobbyists' driven by 'sentimentality, self-serving, and/or foreign political, partisan, and other interests' [12] and are claimed to 'slavishly follow the German example' when questioning Paks II and thereby 'pushing Hungary [to] suffer the same [i.e. German] fate' [14, see also 12]. In so doing, they are said to 'grossly misrepresent' the truth [13], having 'no idea what they are talking about', reflecting 'the Greens' complete lack of understanding' [5]. It is this lack of understanding that is argued to lead to 'evasion, equivocation and obfuscation', 'personal attacks and ranting', 'spouting of boring, repetitive green slogans' instead of giving 'competent answers to fact-based questions' [5 and 8].

> 'It is understandable that they would try to downplay the failure of the German energy revolution if, as professionally uninformed politicians, they want to convince voters that green energy is a very good deal, without any facts, based on fearmongering...' [8].

Germany, the paradigmatic negative example, is likewise depicted to push renewable development on 'political rather than professional grounds' [3], thereby constituting an example of energy policy that 'hostage to party politics' [12]. Nuclear disarmament is claimed to have been driven by the 'the radical anti-nuclear lobby' who wishes to shift the transitions'

cost onto 'developing countries, which seriously contradicts the fundamental values of the EU'

[2, see also 3].

> 'The example of Germany's nuclear phase-out clearly shows how a left-wing anti-nuclear lobby, which pursues a narrow-minded political agenda and is willing to make unprincipled compromises to achieve its goals, can cause serious long-term economic and environmental damage to an entire country…' [2].

The anti-nuclear green movements/renewable energy lobby is not just argued to have captured German politics, it also has 'European decision-makers in its pocket' [10]. Greens' stance is one characterized by 'professional nonsense' with the goal to 'sway public opinion and secure political support – that is, to ensure the state subsidies necessary for the existence of renewables' [3].

More generally, Western Europe is also framed in terms of failure, exemplified by how its citizens are 'being prepared in educational films to […] make heating from flowerpots and tea lights' and to 'invite their neighbors, who also have a body temperature of 36 degrees, to help heat their homes' [15].

For a visual representation of Origo's storyline, see Figure 6.
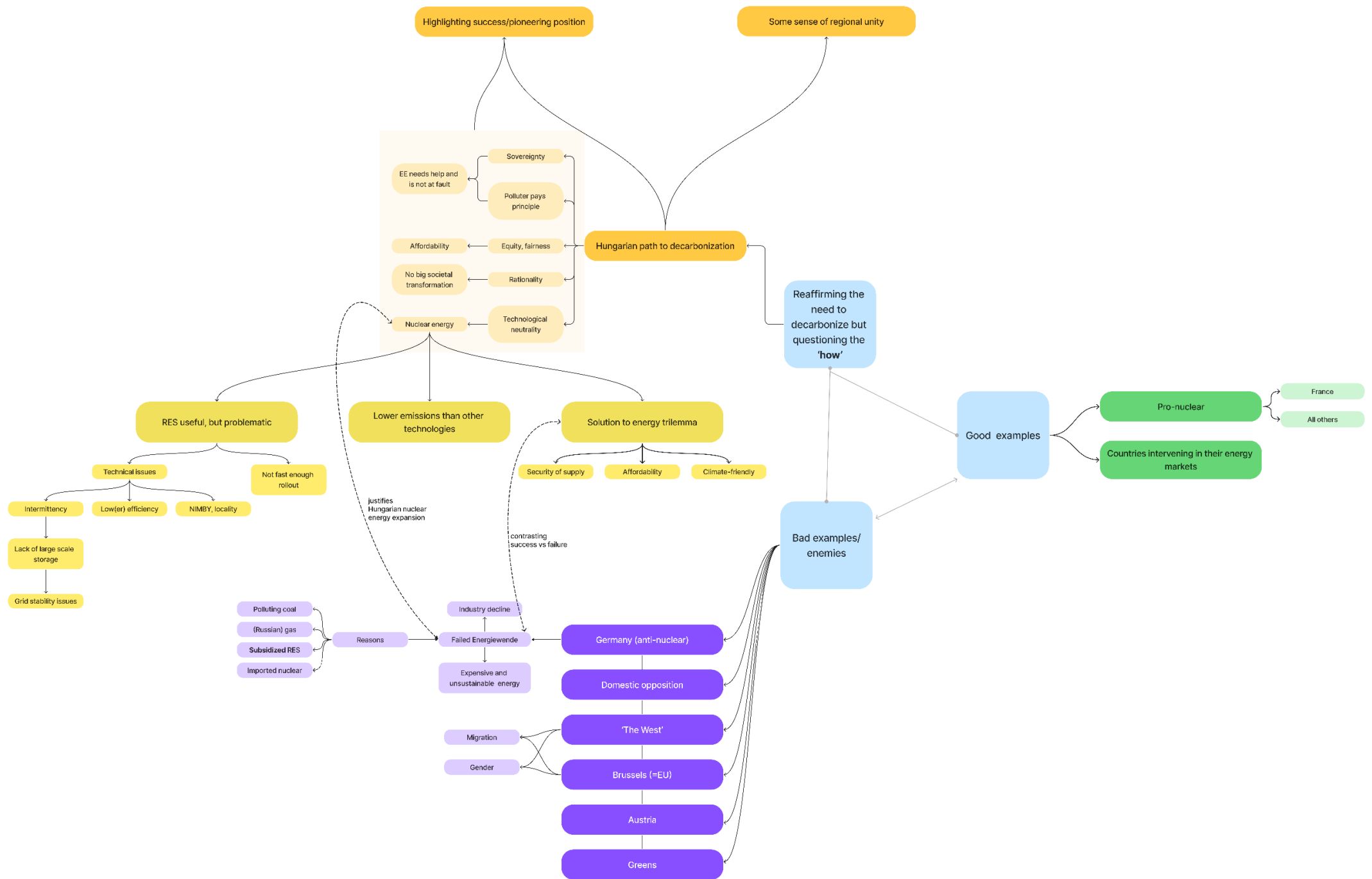
Figure 6: Conteptual map of Origo's storyline

4. 2. 2.　　HVG

Critique and the alternative way forward

HVG's storyline of decarbonization is highly critical of the government's approach [for example, 45]. First, scrutiny heavily falls on the Paks nuclear facility enlargement (Paks II): its inevitability is drawn into question due to concerns related to profitability and costs [32, 35, 43, 44], its environmental impact and sustainability [41, 42] and the dependence that a Russian-built Russian-financed reactor induces [41, 42, 46]. Second, to continue along the lines of Russian dependency, HVG also calls out the government's tendency to 'criticize the EU's climate protection plans, but welcome cheap Russian gas', labeling it an 'addiction' [42]. HVG notes that Russian energy exports are a foreign policy tool and market considerations are only secondary [45], which implies a negative connotation around Hungary's exposure to Russian will [46]. Third, HVG is vocal about the government reluctance to phase out fossil fuels [48], especially coal [32]. One article exposes that the EU and Hungary have been shifting coal consumption outside of the EU (to countries that host fossil fuel power plants that 'are inefficient and in some cases relics from the Soviet era'), meaning that 'Hungary's emission indicators are only good because, under UN rules, Ukraine is responsible for the CO_2 emissions generated by the energy we [Hungarians] consume' [28].

Fourth, the storyline is critical of the 'controversial and secret' social consultations executed by the government [31, 32, 37], the lack of (timely) background studies for certain energy projects [44], as well as the large funds allocated to the green transition without supporting evidence or based on faulty calculation [32, 42, 43]. Last, as shown above, affordability considerations are the centerpiece of the government's approach to decarbonization. Yet, HVG argues that keeping energy affordable through the utility cap is inefficient, since even if household prices are regulated, businesses still buy energy at market rates. These costs are then passed on to consumers through higher prices for goods and services,

or indirectly through other taxes and contributions paid to the state rather than through utility bills [45, 46, 53].

Instead, HVG entertains alternative visions of the green transition, which – while still prioritizing accessibility for vulnerable households and supporting the alleviation of energy poverty [25, 29] – lends complete support to RES. That is, 'it is neither possible nor worthwhile to oppose the spread of renewables' [35, see also 41]. The storyline pushes for more ambition and more support for RES [25, 29], especially regarding wind energy as 'the wind blows even when the sun is not shining' [35, see also 25, 30]. Next to a renewable-based energy system, emphasis is given to energy efficiency, remarkably to retrofitting and insulating houses, i.e. the energy efficiency of the built environment is portrayed as 'indispensable' [26, see also 25, 29, 39, 47].

HVG's coverage of decarbonization is arguably more holistic, for it addresses emissions from agriculture and waste management and addresses labor market-related implications as well [26, 29]. The storyline also gives voice to critical environmentalists, usually representing NGOs and civil society actors. For instance, it remarks Great Thurnberg's call to '[a]ct now, not in 2030 or 2050, because the existence of humanity is at stake' in the face of the 'EU having already given up the fight and dooming all of us to failure' referring to the unambitious draft EU climate law [48 and 51]. Articles also entail a critique of the use of biomass as a renewable source of energy along calls to completely phase out both coal and lignite [25], and opinions on how human health and environmental protection go hand in hand [26].

Compared to Origo's narrative, HVG underlines the 'vital importance of preserving the Earth's habitability' [26, see also 25] and advocates for 'structural change' to mitigate emissions, or put in another way, a 'different growth trajectory' post-Covid:

'… it is important that this economic recovery is also sustainable in ecological terms. It is

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also essential that we do not want to do the same things in the same way as we did before the virus – as the term "restart" would suggests…' [29]

Importantly, however, HVG's storylines adheres to green growth ideas, as evident in how it wants to move towards 'lower environmental impact without compromising economic growth' [29].

'The Hungarian path'

Whereas Origo's storyline described, but never openly identified a distinct Hungarian approach to decarbonization in relation both the EU and the West, HVG's explicitly does so. More concretely, it delineates 'the Hungarian path' [26] as one that aims to repoliticize the EU decarbonization discussion, considering that while there is broad consensus on the need to mitigate climate change, disagreement remains over the best approach to achieve it. As Timmermans, European Commission Executive Vice-President for the EGD between 2019 and 2023 put it: '[a]ll member states agree on the goals and direction of the Green Deal; the debate is not about the principles, but about how to implement them' [30].

Typical to this Hungarian path then is that'[w]hen the government talks about climate policy, it thereby also means preserving the country's sovereignty, securing the livelihoods of the nation and families, and maintaining Christian culture' argues HVG regarding the Hungarian NECP [32]. Throughout – HVG argues – the government constitutes 'Brussel not as a solution, but the problem itself' [53] and generally being odds with EU positions insofar as agreements on carbon neutrality with Orbán's government can only be reached 'at the cost of several summits, blood, sweat, some deception, and a great deal of lubrication' [44]. This refers to The Hungarian government 'vetoing the EU's climate neutrality commitment, citing the high costs of the transition, but later giving the green light to […] [them] once subsidies for green developments became available to it [32].

The 'affordability argument' is presented as one of the main drivers of the anti-EU rhetoric: 'Orbán played the same old tune: we must protect utility price cuts from Brussels, because if the rules that the EU is preparing to introduce are implemented, consumer costs will rise dramatically' [41, see also 42]. However, the utility cost reduction scheme that 'puts consumers first' [31] is framed as the government's 'political silver bullet' [42], an 'effective political weapon' that has served the ruling party for years [31]. While the government is claimed to have 'won an election with the central message of reducing utility costs', during energy price hikes, Orbán has to 'work hard to avoid losing his role as the savior of the nation' [41]. Furthermore, affordability enjoys priority over environmental concerns: 'the price of household energy cannot increase just because we are slowing down the negative effects of climate change with renewable energy sources' [32].

Framing inadequacy in the shadow of the West and the EU

HVG's storyline, contrary to Origo's highlighting Hungary's decarbonization success and pioneering position, continuously reaffirms its inadequate performance. It cites 'weak targets' [25], calculation bias in emission indicators [26, 28], as well as overall 'insufficient action that be worse than no action at all' [25, 44]. On the one hand, the storyline pinpoints the severe energy inefficiency in the buildings sector [33, 25] as problematic. On the other hand, and more critically, it asserts that 'we [Hungarians] are still light years away from using enough renewable energy', as the yet again 'insufficient' approach 'falls short of possibilities' [36, see also 34].

Interestingly, the Hungarian shortcomings are occasionally positioned in contrast to superior Western Europe performance. Hungary 'lags significantly behind Western European countries with the political will to achieve ambitious green goals in terms of green innovation and the spread of renewable energy sources and transport systems' [26], for example regarding energy efficiency compared to Austria [33]. While 'wealthier [Western] member states are

required to achieve emission reductions that are 40 percentage points greater than those of less affluent countries, […] , countries with lower GDPs [Eastern member states] should also make greater efforts to achieve the more ambitious EU target than is required under the current system' [47]. I will return to this point of contrast in a later section.

Also prevalent in the storyline is HVG's use of the EU as a normative power, as a goal setter and as a threshold to compare to and measure against. It is not just Hungary forest cover that is 'well below' EU average [52], but also in contrast to the EU average of 20%, 'the share of energy produced from renewable sources in Hungary is only around 10%' [50]. Even if the plan is to increase the share of RES 'to at least 20% by 2030', it still fails to keep up with the EGD targets of 32% [32]. In other words, the 'current rate of growth will not be sufficient to achieve climate targets' [45]. In discussing the Commission's opinion of Hungary's decarbonization plans, HVG details in length that

> '[…] [P]icture is very mixed (cf. climate champion). […] [W]hen it comes to the share of energy from renewable sources, the report considers Hungary's commitments to be "unambitious." With regard to the national contribution to energy efficiency, the report states that the level of Hungarian efforts is "very low." There is also work to be done in the area of energy efficiency in buildings. […] [Moreover,] investment needs have been analyzed and expanded, but the government program is lacking in terms of identifying the appropriate resources' [26].

Moreover, whereas the Hungarian government plans with both nuclear and natural gas a bridging technology, its climate friendliness is disputed in the EU [47]. Further, the state of energy efficiency in Hungarian homes reflects also reflect a lag behind EU standards, as most residential buildings remain far from meeting the performance levels expected across the Union [33].

Regional unity in the East, divide in the EU

Unlike Origo, HVG paints a picture of the EU wherein (some) EE member states as a group [26, 29, 42, 43, 44, 45, 47]. Exceptionally pronounced is the union of Poland and Hungary, as two member states particularly reluctant to phase out fossil fuels [44], or as a duo

opposing Commission's proposals for emission reduction under the EGD [30, 41]. By 'citing the high costs of the green transition', they were the reason why the EU's climate strategy 'did not come about smoothly' [31]. Yet, beyond the happy marriage between Poland and Hungary, HVG depicts a broader Eastern coalition in its narrative. EE member states are portrayed as 'unruly' and 'reluctant', going against countries that 'already rallied behind' the EU's carbon neutrality goal by 2050 [42]. Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic and Slovakia 'still dislike' and object the EGD [49], at least partially to initiate 'a change in pricing rules to make energy cheaper for families' in Orbán's words, who – once again – retaliated that the coalition wants to 'prevent the 'Brussels plan' of imposing taxes on homeowners and vehicle owners' [24]. The Czech Republic is encouraging effort sharing between wealthier, Western and poorer, Eastern member states, which Poland – due to its heavy industry and reliance on coal – and the 'climate champion Hungary' – ironically meant – are also likely to support [26].

Complementary to constructing an 'European East', there is also a 'West' in HVG's storyline [46]. Within this division, the two groups are differentiated in their capacities, willingness as well as their attitude to meaningfully contribute to Europe green transition. To illustrate, Poland's pro- and Austria's anti-nuclear mentality is mentioned [24], along the East's relatively larger dependence on Russian fossil fuel imports which explains why member states do not just 'face different challenges in switching to environmentally friendly energy, but their willingness to do so also varies' [42]. On one side are 'progressive member states, with leaders from dozens of countries pushing for higher emission reduction targets and their swift adoption'; on the other 'countries that are lagging behind […]' [51]. In the introduction of my research, I raised the very concern that HVG also reaffirms in relation to this phenomenon, namely 'the specter of a two-speed Europe, with some member states, such as Austria, Denmark, Finland, and Sweden, wanting to achieve climate neutrality sooner, while Poland has not yet been able to commit to it' [51, see also 30].

Discursive hierarchies of Western superiority and Eastern inferiority

Crucially, each group is framed in a morally charged way: the West as forward-thinking and responsible, the East as reluctant or obstructive:

> '[…] But the price will be even higher if we fail to take action, argues the group of countries that includes Germany and the Netherlands. They would rather accelerate the spread of renewable energy than intervene in European energy market regulation on an ad hoc basis' [41].

Some Western and Northern European member states 'have already aligned their national climate targets and measures with the stricter EU targets' [47], which all countries will have to do at point, reaffirming their pioneer position. Further, community energy is termed a 'forward-looking element' in Eastern energy planning, which is 'already widespread practice in Western Europe' and is now only 'spreading further east' [25]. Western member states[17] also outperform Eastern ones in terms of share of RES in electricity generation [34], their approach to decarbonization and post-Covid green recovery being praiseworthy [27]. Moreover, while energy efficiency of the Hungarian building sector is a cornerstone of HVG critique of the status quo, compared to the 21% EU average in emissions reduction in 2018 in the sector, Sweden hit 65%, Denmark 45%, Portugal 43% [47].

Sweden in particular emerges as a forerunner as a country 'where oil heating dominated the system three decades ago, today much more efficient heat pumps and district heating powered by renewable energy are dominant thanks to forward-looking policies and regulations' [47]. HVG remarks similar trends in the transport sector, where compared to the EU average of 2% decrease since 2005, Sweden and Italy hit 20%, Portugal 14% and the Netherlands 11% largely due to the innovative tax reforms and financial measures they introduced [47]. Western (and northern) member states are also in favor of all economies needing to meet collective EU decarbonization targets instead of differentiated treatment, whereas EE commitments are

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[17] In article 11 only, the rigid East-West divide is less clear as Latvia is also mentioned amongst high-performers.

unambitious [26]. This proposal, however, would hurt the interest of countries such as Poland, 'which have traditionally based their energy systems on coal, a highly polluting fuel, and are unable or unwilling to switch quickly to renewable energy sources […]' [48].

In sharp contrast to West stands East, constructed as inferior. Whether argued through Czechia's outstanding reliance on coal, 'extremely low' share of RES even despite 'the underlined harmful effects of fossil fuels on human health' [38, see also 42] or Poland's protective stance of its heavy industry [26], the East is less capable, less committed, or less legitimate in its approach. To illustrate the latter point, in Hungary – contrary to Germany, a leader in RES implementation – negative prices are still a novelty [35]. That is partially because 'even though our [Hungary's] potential is equivalent to that of Austria or Germany, which are considered wind power giants, [only] one tenth of Austria's wind power capacity was built in Hungary', meaning that 'based on the *Austrian model*, domestic wind energy production could be up to ten times greater than it is now' [40, emphasis added].

Relative poverty is also a collective marker of Eastern member states, which is further utilized to explain their positionality in terms of decarbonization: 'if the obstructive eastern member states do not receive enough money, they will block the proposal' [44]. HVG considers it 'certain that the transition will place a greater burden on the less developed, poorer eastern Member States than on the richer, western ones' [42]. This is where the EU's role comes into the picture: through the Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF), a flagship initiative to mitigating the impacts of the pandemic by making economies more resilient and sustainable [27] as well as the Just Transition Fund (JTF), a financial instrument that supports vulnerable regions in the transition towards a climate-neutral economy, primarily targeted at Eastern member states [42].

The EU's a supporter, unified in climate leadership

Eastern leaders', and more specifically, Orbán's unwavering demand towards the EU entails that 'cohesion funds will remain in place because, in his view, money should be taken not from poorer countries but from richer, bigger polluters' [42, 49]. The EU acknowledges the need for supranational support in its 'historic €750 billion loan package' under the RRF [44, see further 47] as well as by doubling available JTF support, as exemplified by Timmermans noting that '[w]e cannot leave anyone behind; this transition is either fair or there is no transition at all' [30]. In answering to the East's plea for the acceptance of nuclear energy [for example, 23, 42, 47, 49] as contributing to emissions reduction, he also noted the technological neutrality of the EU, more marginally admitting to the preference for RES as decarbonization solutions [30].

Interestingly, though not explicitly, but Timmermans as a Commission representative also reinforces cognitive associations with both Hungary and more broadly East when 'pointing out that the EU 'has reason to be cautious, especially in the case of Hungary' in terms of allocating funds and trusting that they are used as intended [30]. When asked about rule of law considerations, the implied hierarchy in his answer becomes more obvious:

> 'People of my age can still remember clearly the times when Europe was clearly divided into two halves: *fortunately*, I lived in the half of the continent where the rule of law prevailed, but *unfortunately*, Hungarians lived in the other half. Because that was precisely what communist regimes thrived on: everything they did was in accordance with the law. But if there is no independent judiciary, if there is no independent media, then there is no rule of law either. It is as simple as that. And we definitely need to talk about this at EU level, because sooner or later it will pose *a very serious challenge'* [30, emphasis added].

Acting in unity, and doing so as swiftly as possible, thus, in the EU's fight against climate change, as I touched upon it in my introduction, is essential [for example, 24, 30, 47]. HVG depicts the EU as priding itself on 'doing more than is done elsewhere to combat the state of emergency caused by climate change' [48], referring to the Union's commitment to 'maintaining its leading role in international climate negotiations' [51]. As 'one of the world's largest economies […], it could encourage other countries to make higher commitments' 'through its own ambitious emission reduction commitments' [51]. HVG in its writing goes even as far as stating that 'the success of COP in Glasgow depends on whether the EU will be

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able to come up with a significantly higher climate targets' [47]. Thus, instead of shifting the blame away, which the Union could do seeing that it is only responsible for only 5% of global methane emissions, as 'the world's largest energy importer and a major player in the agricultural and waste sectors, it will also encourage international action' [26].

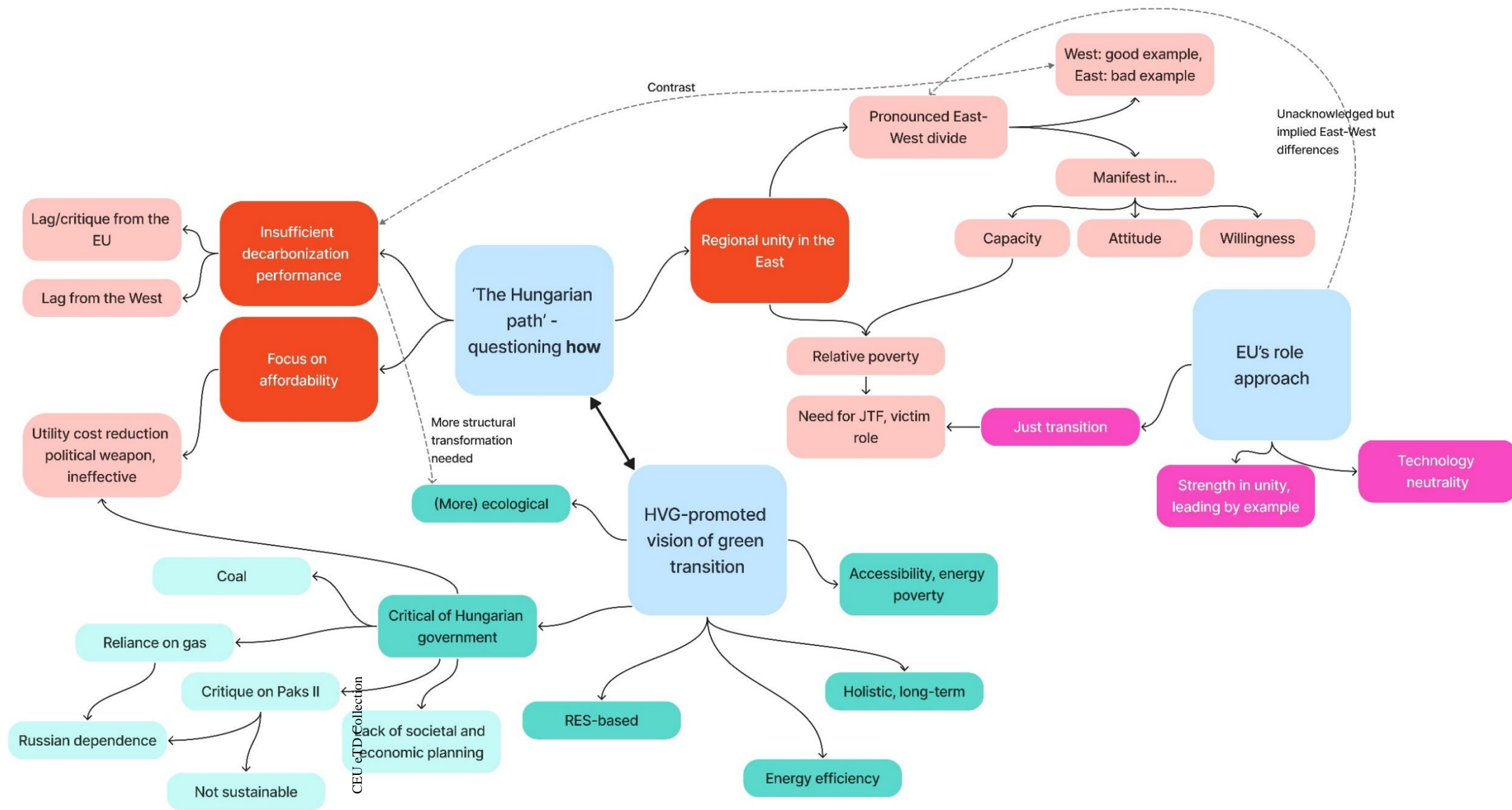For a visual representation of HVG's storyline, see Figure 7.

Figure 7: Conceptual map of HVG's storyline

5. DISCUSSION

The discussion chapter first explores the continued salience of the East–West divide in EU climate discourse primarily in light of expert input. This sets the stage for a deeper analysis of how Hungarian media narratives exploit liminality for two contrasting yet complementary storylines for competing political visions. Finally, I also discuss the broader implications of my findings for the politics of identity and belonging and the theory of liminality.

5. 1. The salience of the East-West divide

The findings of the interviews suggest that although many experts challenged the validity of the East-West framing altogether, groupings of old vs. newer, Western vs. Eastern, modern vs. backward still live on in our minds and the way we conceptualize not just decarbonization, but European politics at large. That is not to say that the interviewees' proposals on more functional, issue-based differentiations within member states (for example, between pro- and anti-nuclear states, or coal-dependent and non-coal-dependent countries) are not materially informative. The East-West division within Europe is not exclusive: it does not mean that nuclear does not enjoy particular popularity both in France and in Slovakia, or that the West is not occasionally cojoined by the North in depictions of exemplary decarbonization performance. On the contrary, highlighting the East-West divide contributes to the bigger political project of exposing other intra-EU divisions, and crucially, the hierarchies associated with them. For example, see Bordenave and Ciaffi (2025) and Smith et al. (2024) on an exploration of the intra-EU North-South divide in decarbonization discussions and Truchlewski and Schelkle (2024) and Filardo-Llamas and Perales-García (2022) beyond that.

In fact, in experts' attempt to refute even the possibility of intra-EU divisions, EU officials penetrated a historic discourse that construct Russia as a 'complete outsider of Europe' or what Morozov and Rumelili (2012) call an 'Europe-maker', in contrast to the East that is either Europe's incomplete self and other (Boatca 2006, 327) – or both at the same time. Russia

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emerges as a new other against which call for a European unity can be made, which, keeping in mind that interviewees have already witnessed the unfolding of the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the ensuing use of 'energy as a weapon of war' against Europe (LaBelle 2023), is increasingly becoming important. As Neumann writes, '[s]ince exclusion is a necessary ingredient of integration, this is in itself no problem', and the question is rather wo what extent the EU will 'play up the alterity of Russia in order to increase the integration of the European' (1998, 413). Curiously, for example, the government-critical and pro-EU HVG storyline also problematizes both gas and nuclear dependence on Russia but does not raise the same concerns on the newly emerging LNG dependence on the US. Although outside of the scope of this study, the anti-Russian sentiment that is on the rise since the breakout of the war (Casas and Curci 2024) is likely to lead dynamics of nesting orientalism (Bakic-Hayden 1995 in Kuus 2004, 479), whereby the otherwise othered Eastern countries, especially those with historically hostile stances towards Russia such as Poland, the Baltic states and the Czech Republic, seek to reposition themselves closer to the West, thereby, in a way, externalizing Eastness outside of official EU borders.

To return to the discussion of my findings, many experts emphasized that regional differences are heavily shaped by media portrayals. Moreover, an EU official acknowledged the EU's bias towards reiterating convergence, i.e. the silent denial of even the possibility of regional lags. Therefore, I pursued an argumentative discourse analysis of Hungary's media landscape to add new layers to my analysis.

5. 2. Liminality across two storylines

Pro-government outlet Origo's storyline frames the Hungarian approach, characterized by a tone of necessity around nuclear energy and the Paks II enlargement as well as by heavy state involvement in the energy market, as a success. Elsewhere, I have written about the former point, wondering about how the Paks II nuclear facility enlargement has been depoliticized

through the evocation of energy security in public discourse, potentially allowing a project that was portrayed to be *apolitical* to in the end advance underlying (geo)political interest (Tarsoly 2023; but see also Deak and Weiner 2019; Egres 2020).

To position Hungary as a pioneer, it sets up EU climate policy as externally imposed and misaligned with national interests and relies on themes such as sovereignty and economic disadvantage to pave and justify its distinct approach. Remarkedly, it portrays Western European trajectories of decarbonization – mainly Austria's and Germany's – *not* as aspirational models in the way that a liminal or semi-peripheral actor might be expected to look 'upward' to the West. Rather, it inverts this gaze by othering them as misguided and harmful examples, ideologically driven and thus detached from the material realities of ordinary citizens. Hence, Origo's storyline resists Western agenda, or in other words, it pushes back against unidirectional projection of normativity 'from the "West" to the "rest"' (Owczarzak 2009, 13, see also Jehlička and Jacobsson 2021). Empirically, this takes places in and is explained by a context wherein initially, Europeanization or Westernization have been the 'most important legitimation devices' of Hungarian governments after the collapse of socialism (Agh 1999, 841), but after the coming into power of Fidesz, the ruling party of Hungary in 2010, there was a change in symbolic discourses, namely towards 'revolutionary metaphors about Hungary not becoming a colony of the EU' and rather opening up to the East (Göncz et al. 2024, 53; see further Végh 2015).

It instead articulates an alternative vision of climate politics, one that is rooted in national sovereignty and economic realism which speak to previous academic work on how the Eastern enlargement made energy security, affordability and the issue of burden sharing (i.e. questions of responsibility and cost-bearing) more salient (Bocquillon and Maltby, 2017; Ćetković and Buzogány, 2019). Moreover, it is highly skeptical of supranational imposition, for if not managed well, decarbonization can be a threat, not just to Hungarian livelihoods, but to

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industrial competitiveness and political autonomy as well (see further Parker and Karlsson 2010, 935).

Furthermore, by blurring the lines between 'green utopias' and broader cultural anxieties like 'wars on gender' and 'wars on migration', it creates enemy pictures and positions itself as the protector of Hungarian citizens and interests. Pitting elites against ordinary people through fears of 'experienced or anticipated loss of control or values' is characteristic of the populist rhetoric ((Yazar and Haarstad 2023, 2), which the Orbán government has been accused of many times (see, for example, Visnovitz and Jenne 2021; Lamour and Varga 2020). Yazarand Haarstad have shown examples of right-leaning populist leaderships transforming decarbonization from a 'valence issue' (a problem that society acknowledges as one even in light of debate around potential solutions to it) into a 'value issue' (ibid. 7). Ćetković and Buzogány warn us about such developments as potentially hindering the green transition and simultaneously reaffirming the prospects of 'established energy sources such as nuclear energy' (2019, 130).

In contrast, HVG's narrative is reactive in nature: its aim is to 'discredit, to criticize or to provide counterexamples to the governmental [course of action], but always remaining in the frame set by the latter' (Göncz et al. 2024, 61). A prevalent case of this is HVG's attempt to repoliticize the debate around Paks II by showing that it is not natural and not inevitable, and as a political decision, it is contingent; it is 'the product of some actions among a larger range of possibilities' (Calhoun 1995, 35 in Guillaume and Grayson 2023, 4-5).

HVG articles presented climate action as an opportunity; for modernization on the national and for global leadership on the EU-level. As a harsh critique of the government's decarbonization strategy, the HVG storyline frames Hungary not as a prudent outlier but as a self-sabotaging exception within an otherwise progressing European community. It reports on Western European countries as benchmarks of successful, forward-looking climate action,

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whereas the Eastern bloc is a site of resistance within the EU. While Origo does not reinforce narratives on EE as a unified group, HVG presents it as 'Eastern coalition' that largely acts in opposition to a more progressive West, thereby contributing to essentializing accounts of the East and the East-West divide, wherein the East is a laggard (Drieschova 2024; Ćetković and Buzogány, 2019; Toshkov 2017; Wurzel et al. 2019; Czyzak and Fox, 2023; Derewenda, 2023; Parker and Karlsson 2010). The legitimacy of the EGD principally remains unquestioned, and in fact, calls are rather made for a faster rollout of RES and the implementation of ecological principles in Hungary's green transition. This implies that contrary to Origo's scrutiny focused on external actors – on others; Westerners and elite Europeans –, HVG directs critique inward. This discursive strategy could be argued to constitute an instance of internalized coloniality, or what Mälksoo calls 'self-orientalising' (2021, 872) and what – in light of my analytical framework – I am inclined to term *internalized liminality*. Internalized not as accepted but as exploited by different domestic Hungarian actors to either prove or refute belonging to the West and being an integral part of the Union. This means that Hungary, although part of Europe, only has conditional membership in the group; its place therein tentative and incomplete. Its legitimacy is measured against its ability to perform 'Westernness' (for similar work on rule of law and democratic consideration, see Sedelmeier 2024 and for minority right protection, see Tesser 2003).

This way, HVG's storyline displays similarities to what Drieschova terms the 'discourse of the CEE apprentices', wherein EE member states have 'learn to behave appropriately' (Lovec et al., 2021 in Drieschova 2024, 297) and 'understand how the EU works' (Wiener, 2004 in ibid.) as 'younger, poor brothers' of older member states within the European Community (Holesh et al., 2022 in ibid.). Further, it could also be argued that HVG's storyline adheres to the postcolonial logic of development and modernity I spelled out in previous parts of my research, wherein the West represent the norms that the East is expected to be aligned to,

signaling 'the banal obviousness with which places in Europe are ranked in terms of Europeanness' (Kuus 2004, 484). This storylines ties into determinism (Cima and Sovová, 2022), developmentalism (Jehlička and Jacobsson 2021, 4) or the catch-up narrative, which 'pictures development as a temporal rather than a context-specific and relational characteristic' instead of 'individual countries undertaking autonomous developmental paths at different speeds and in different directions' (Pungas et al. 2024, 91). Determinism implies that the future is not open; it is foretold, namely along the linear story that advanced Western European lead and Eastern Europeans follow (Jehlička and Jacobsson 2021, 2)

The duality in the two media storylines is apparent: although in different ways and to different extents, both penetrated a discourse on the East-West divide: Origo through resistance, HVG through aspirational mimicry. For an overview of the differences, see Table 1 below. These findings are structurally comparable to Göncz et al. who also identified two main discourses: one rejecting the EU and highlighting national sovereignty and Hungarian superiority and another, integrationist one centered around superior European values, wherein 'Europe appears as an example, the guardian of certain values' that are questioned and even eroding in Hungary (2024, 62).

Theme	Origo storyline	HVG storyline
View of Hungarian decarbonization performance	Regards it as successful, even pioneering at times	Insufficient, lacking
Examples	Negative: the West (Germany and Austria), the EU, greens, domestic opposition Positive: Pro-nuclear states or those intervening in the market to protect affordability	Negative: East is framed in negative terms, as a region lagging behind Positive: West is exemplary, to be caught up to
Eastern unity	Minimal, unity rather along pro-nuclear and pro-market interference approach	Highly pronounced, framed in inferior terms
Blame, responsibility	Polluter pays principle, bigger responsibility on the West	Emphasizes the need for Hungary to contribute to continent-wide decarbonization even in spit of small size Reaffirms that EU needs to lead by example internationally
Critical of	Enemies, i.e. negative examples	Hungarian government, but also EU (e.g. civil society critique)
Energy affordability	Non-negotiable	Utility cost reduction scheme framed as a political weapon of the government
Transformation	Least minimal change, protection status quo (especially socially)	More transformative change needed
Vision of Hungary's energy vision	Nuclear based, with cautious rollout of RES	Questions need for nuclear, advocated for RES-based system
View on nuclear/Paks II	Overwhelming support	Critical view

Table 1: Comparative overview of main findings of ADA

Nevertheless, it is critical to emphasize that '[t]hese images are neither true nor false. Their constitutive strength lies in the fact that they have the power to construct social difference' (Buchowski 2006, 476). Differently put, such invented identities 'become social identities at the very moment they are inscribed in people's minds and deeds, a process whereby our thoughts become a part of the social reality' (ibid.).

5. 3. Implications

These findings remind us, in support of poststructuralist claims, that even highly rationalized domains like climate change mitigation are saturated with discursive constructions, for 'science is reconstructed and not merely mirrored in the media'; 'there is no such thing as "pure facts", instead, "truth claims" are embedded with certain worldviews, judgments and

preferences' (Carvalho 2007, 223 and 225). Hence, my research confirms that 'there is a crucial cross-insemination between the normative and the descriptive, or the axiological and epistemological' in how media (re)construct climate change discursively, meaning that what gets to be presented as 'facts', who gets to and who does not get so speak and what the ultimate goal of the 'speaking' is also tied to politics and ideology (ibid., 237).

Theoretically, these findings imply a sense of fluidity and obscurity for the concept of liminality. While in my analytical chapter, I mentioned taking a 'perpetual liminality' perspective following Ybema et al. (2011, 27), and developed an argument for internalized liminality through my argumentative discourse analysis, this research enriches our understanding of in-between states as dynamic and prone to mobilization of different political (and partisan) forces. Therefore, my analysis findings prompt reflection on liminality understood as a phase 'where the old world has been left behind but we have not yet arrived at what is to come' (Franks and Meteyard 2007, 215), which initiates 'learning processes and phases of creative exploration' as well as 'development of new visions and strategies' (Schnugg 2019, 56). It is this view of liminality that Piazza refers to when emphasizing 'that liminality is not synonymous with marginalization', for liminality 'is a powerful and heuristically useful construct that allows a reflection on a range of human conditions that are susceptible to further development and transformation […]' (2019, 5). Yet, the celebration of this 'potentially unlimited freedom' is complicated by a similarly important quality of liminality:

> '[…] [L]iminality also involves a peculiar kind of unsettling situation in which nothing really matters, in which hierarchies and standing norms disappear, in which sacred symbols are mocked at and ridiculed, in which authority in any form is questioned, taken apart and subverted; in which, as Shakespeare said, 'degree is shaken'. Human experiences of freedom and anxiety (they do belong together) are condensed in liminal moments. Nothing really matters, and yet, deeply paradoxically, meaning often becomes over-determined' (Thomassen 2016, 1).

Pragmatically, while a two-speed Europe (Barbière, 2017) may seem fitting in the Hungarian government's and Origo's narrative (Göncz et al. 2024, 64), concerns about an

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internally divided Europe that is thus weaker in the fight against climate change and on the global stage are growing. For instance, intra-EU division of any kind damages the Union's credibility, especially because the EU has been shown to rely on directional leadership, grounded in 'unilateral action and is accomplished by the demonstration effects of leading by example' that is most vulnerable to internal divisions (2010, 941).

5. 4. Limitations and pointers for future research

Media narratives are naturally reflective of domestic political polarization (Hallin and Mancini 2004). What I claim here is that the different political actors are able to exploit Hungary's liminality to support their own agenda and vision by either arguing for a divergent decarbonization path vis-à-vis the West and Brussels or for deeper integration, more compliance with supranational rules and less backward lag from the West. Moreover, although I relied on material from only two media outlets in my analysis, the fact that the Hungarian media landscape is largely clustered along pro- and anti-government narratives of the political reality (Polyák and Urbán 2024). Nevertheless, a multi-actor argumentative discourse analysis would warrant further analytical depth and academic robustness to these findings, especially because it would allow for the analysis of discourse coalitions à la Hajer (2006). Additionally, while my focus on both experts and media presentations was justified and proved fruitful for our thinking about the East-West divide, examining policy documents or parliamentary debates could reveal how discursive constructions translate into formal policy positions.

Second, focusing on Hungary limits the generalizability of the media analysis. Future research could benefit from comparative studies across multiple EE countries to assess whether similar discursive patterns hold.

Third, though I ensured that I preserve narrative and rhetorical structure, the fact that the material needed to be translated inevitably introduces a sense of subjectivity in the interpretation of meaning. Seeing, however, that English is not an official language in any

Eastern member state, this could only be circumvented by writing research in an EE language, which in turn would limit its reach and potential impact.

Fourth, research deliberately focused on a member state-level case rather than on EU-level institutional discourse. That is because although my initial idea was to look at EU-level data sources for my analysis, the expert insights pointed out that official framings of climate policy often present a homogenized, consensus-driven picture, void of signs of internal divisions. Yet, future research could explore whether official EU documents do in fact conceal East-West differences that the Hungarian national narrative does not, as I showed. Such research could shed light on the role of strategic silence in EU climate discourse, which scholars such as Elomäki (2023) have started laying the foundations for on non-environmental topics.

6. CONCLUSION

This thesis aimed to assess the way in which the East–West divide is constructed, sustained, or challenged by policy actors and national media discourses in the EU's decarbonization discussion. It did so to reply to the call 'that it is time to again focus on differences across Europe' (Blazek and Suska 2017, 47 in in Jehlička and Jacobsson 2021, 2), considering that even in spite of the strategic essentialist perspective gaining prominence, unlike in the Global South, people in the East have not found a cause for compassions (Müller 2020, 7). Similarly to Jehlička and Jacobsson (2021), my aim was to move the East-West binary – to critically assess it be more precise – through examining it by mobilizing postcolonial theory and the concept of liminality. The primary premise thereby was that beyond structural and material disparities that academics, journalists and policymakers – as my literature review showed – oftentimes highlight, this division is co-constructed and reproduced in our cognitive thinking and public discourse. Scrutinizing historically embedded intra-EU hierarchies means exposing the West's colonial power and epistemic authority and the East's inferiority, which is not just salient in climate change mitigation conversations, but also beyond.

By analyzing both expert perspectives and Hungarian media narratives, the study has shown that EE's role in EU climate governance is shaped by both of the region is spoken about and importantly, how it speaks about itself, without overlooking formal policy positions that has been studies elsewhere (for example, Mišík 2021; Ćetković and Buzogány 2019; Toshkov 2017; Bocquillon and Maltby 2017). In tracing liminality in the 'East' as a construction, I showed different attempts of othering. These practices are multidirectional and also largely depend on *who speaks with what intent*: is it EU officials with an agenda of continent-wide convergence? Is it pro-government Hungarian media framing Western decarbonization efforts as reckless? Is it oppositional media outlets reasserting the Western model and portraying Hungary and the East more broadly as lagging behind?

In this vein, both positions reinforce the notion of a normative West and a conditional East and differ only in the ways in which they strategically mobilize liminality, the eternal state of transitioning, through resistance or reproduction. Thus, the thesis reveals that belonging to Europe is not merely a matter of institutional membership; it is narrated, negotiated, and unevenly granted. I encourage readers to consider the implications of this dynamics not only for the non-European other I mentioned, such as Turkey and Russia, but also for those not discussed in detail, including Ukraine and the Balkans.

Affirming poststructuralist thought, the discourse does not just mirror the divide but enables it in the process in which soft variables such as symbolic identities solidify into assumptions and expectations, delimiting what climate futures are seen as possible, legitimate, or desirable. Differently put, what 'makes sense' tends to be what has been successfully framed as such. In light of this, it is imperative to distance 'our thinking from the constraints of common sense, the taken-for-granted, and the goes-without-saying' (Guillaume and Grayson 2023, 5) that structure EU (climate) politics. Not in support or against nuclear energy or market

intervention, but to help us 'imagine more diverse and open environmental futures' by 'questioning the hierarchies in global knowledge production' (Jehlička and Jacobsson 2021, 2).

From a theoretical perspective, the thesis contributes to scholarship on liminality by demonstrating how the state of in-betweenness plays out in the specific domain of climate change mitigation, usually understood in technocratic and economic terms rather identity-driven ones. Moreover, the research also speaks to critical EU studies and to (post)coloniality *within* the EU, not just beyond (see further Bhabha 1998). In so doing, it aimed to unsettle binaries of rich-poor, powerful-powerless 'that we have perhaps grown too comfortable with' (Müller 2020, 4). Crucially, I had neither the intention 'to set the West and East against each other' nor to deny Western contributions or romanticize EE (Jehlička and Jacobsson 2021, 3) and only strived to prompt reflection on the 'pluralized ways of being European (Mälksoo 2009, 656).

More broadly, this research poses questions about framing countries – groups of countries in fact – in a language of inferior difference, always tied to their past but never 'European enough' to arrive in the present and co-shape the future. Countries, in a similar manner to people, stive to belong. In the case of EE, if not to the elite group of older, Western member states, protectors of modernity and development, then elsewhere. If a unified Europe is the goal we wish to move towards, the margins of the Union must also become sites of listening, contestation, and co-creation in their own right.

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8. APPENDICES

8. 1. Origo articles

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