

“For Generations, Farmers Have Preserved the Environment, Now You Are Endangering It”: Affective-Discursive Practices in European Farmers’ Reaction to Climate Policy

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ABSTRACT

The farming sector is one of the sectors most affected by climate change while simultaneously contributing to around 20% of global greenhouse emissions. To alleviate the pressures of agricultural production on nature and climate, the European Union (EU) established a new set of agri-environmental regulations positioning farmers as crucial actors in providing sustainable food and safeguarding the environment. However, farmers are increasingly contesting these regulations and mobilizing through EU-wide protests. Despite the obvious potency of the farmers’ actions, scholarly studies problematizing their manifestation in the context of climate governance are scarce. This paper addresses this gap by analyzing the 2023–2024 farmers’ protests in Slovenia to examine the interplay of affects and discourse in meaning-making among the farmers, which shows a mobilization driven by anger and fear as well as self-importance. The paper thus contributes to the knowledge on agrarian populism and farmers’ mobilizations in the European context, uncovering complexities and nuances of the articulated affective-discursive canon.

KEYWORDS

farmers’ protest, affects, affective-discursive practices, environmental regulation

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INTRODUCTION

Since the adoption of the European Green Deal (EGD) in 2019, the European Union (EU) has increasingly supported a comprehensive transition to a more sustainable way of food production aiming to reduce the environmental and climate footprint of its food system ((EUROPEAN COMMISSION 2020)). For these purposes, the EU has introduced the Farm to Fork (F2F) strategy, which aims to shift farming practices towards more sustainable ones. The goals defined in the F2F strategy are to be achieved as part of the broader reforms within existing policies, particularly the EU's Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) ((BAZZAN ET AL. 2023)). This implies that significant changes in farmers' practices will be necessary to meet EU requirements, presuming an active engagement of rural communities and farmers in addressing adaptation and mitigation challenges. However, since the introduction of the EGD, but especially since 2023, we have witnessed an upsurge in farmers' protests spreading across the EU in response to the proposed changes, with some protesters employing a populist rhetoric to amplify their grievances and garner broader public support. The 2023 wave of protests did not bypass Slovenia – where the last major protests before then occurred in the early 1990s as the country was transitioning into neoliberal markets.

During the protests, farmers expressed their opposition to additional agri-environmental requirements and additional tax burdens ((DNEVNIK 2023A; PETROVČIČ 2023; RTV SLOVENIJA 2023A)). As the Slovenian farmers were disappointed by the government's reaction to their demands, and in line with the EU protests, Slovenia experienced a resurgence of protests in February and March 2024. The farmers once again voiced their disagreement with the government regarding the then current and additional legislation, expanding their demands to include solutions regarding the exemption from taxation for areas with limited agricultural activity and compensation in the event of a ban on agricultural cultivation in riparian areas, among other issues ((RTV SLOVENIJA 2024A)). These two waves of farmers' protests in Slovenia were "*undoubtedly historic*" ((LOVENJAK 2023)), drawing several thousands of farmers and their supporters. Their significance is further amplified by the diversity of farmers that were involved in these protests: young and old farmers, organic and conventional ones, and small-scale and large-scale

operators. This broad participation has led to the characterization of the protests as truly “all-Slovenian.”

Considering the crucial role farmers play in achieving the goals of the EGD and the growing expressions of resentment and frustration from farmers across the EU, a deeper assessment of farmers’ concerns and perceptions about heightened environmental and climate rules and regulations becomes imperative. This is especially true in the context of International Relations (IR) scholarship – while research started assessing the role of non-state and private actors in global climate governance (STRECK 2020; SUISEEYA ET AL. 2021), farmers are perennially missing from these investigations. Hence, this paper focuses on farmers’ reactions and concerns regarding the prospect of stricter agri-environmental standards, as expressed during the recent EU-wide protests. The tension between the positions farmers assume has been escalating into protests with more intensity than before while holding a distinctly transnational character, thus raising concerns about the future of sustainable food production and the viability of new agri-environmental rules. Early analyses and reporting also point to this concern, albeit following two main issue areas.

On the one hand, the analyses imply that the farmers’ protests risk eroding the climate agenda as the business interests of farmers trump the need for the implementation of sustainable agri-environmental rules. The authors talk of ‘special interests’ which are seemingly prioritized as *“every time there is a demonstration, there is more money coming [in subsidies]”* (MALMSTRÖM 2024), and the EU is bowing down to the business interests of farmers and therefore *“taking marching orders from a parasite of its own creation”* (DUTKIEWICZ 2024). On the other hand, the farmers’ protests are increasingly related to right-wing populism in association with climate change denialism and anti-science rhetoric. Miller (2024) writes that by their proximity to right-wing populism, the farmers *“are damaging the profession they claim to represent”*, while Schatzschneider (2024) claims that *“giving into [sic] the farmers on climate is now effectively giving ground to the far right”*. Such reporting found grounds in earlier studies that explored support for and receptiveness to right-wing populism in rural areas (HAJDU – MAMONOVA 2020; MAMONOVA – FRANQUESA 2020; STRIJKER ET AL. 2015).

However, we find that the root question of the farmers' relation to the environment and environmental policy is missing from the current discussion, and it is arguably crucial to understanding how farmers may navigate their complex position in the agri-environmental discourse. As Magdin (2024) argues, beyond scrutinizing the protest tactics as an *"aesthetic exercise"*, we should use this opportunity to have an honest discussion and a genuine engagement with what is expressed by the farmers. Overemphasizing false claims related to the protests does not *"just obscure the protesters' real demands, but also amplifies existing scepticism and suspicion of the EU's climate policies"* (DE LA FELD 2024). Taking into consideration the pressing nature of the successful implementation of agri-environmental rules, we thus turn the lens to grievances expressed by the farmers regarding their complex and interdependent relation with the environment and climate-action policies.

To do so, we analyze the farmers' protests under the banner of agrarian populism, which we find to be a fruitful springboard for investigating contemporary farmers' protests and their relevance to world politics. With this, we are focused on how agrarian populism shapes the farmers' mobilization strategies and the discourses which the farmers draw upon and which are infused with different affective dimensions. In discursively analyzing how the farmers issue claims about the new regulation, their role in protecting the environment and their resentment over the way agri-environmental policies are made, we thus center the role of affects at the core of our inquiry. Accordingly, in the analysis, we introduce Margaret Wetherell's (2012, 2015) concept of affective-discursive practice as a heuristic device for analyzing the farmers' protests. With this, we are concerned with assessing how affects are intertwined with discourse and how this plays out in practice. Therefore, this study addresses the following research question: How do the discursive-affective practices that have emerged during the 2023–2024 farmers' protests in Slovenia reflect the farmers' grievances around their role within environmental and climate governance? With this question, we aim to unveil the underlying motivations and concerns driving the farmers' reactions, as well as to analyze the implications of these responses for the implementation of environmental policies in agriculture. By answering this question, we contribute to the

literature on farmers and farming action amidst the increased agri-environmental regulation and in the context of recent farmer mobilizations in the EU and beyond.

The article is structured as follows. In the first chapter, we contextualize farmers' protests in the EU and beyond, assessing our comprehension and evaluating their relevance regarding the successes of agri-environmental regulation. In the second chapter, we establish our conceptual and analytical framework through a discussion of agrarian populism studies and the affective-discursive approach. In the third chapter, we establish our methodology, and in the fourth, we move to the empirical analysis of the Slovenian farmers' affective-discursive canon. The two final chapters offer a discussion of our findings and draw conclusions as to their implications for future agri-environmental policy and governance.

UNDERSTANDING THE DRIVERS BEHIND THE FARMERS' DECISION TO ENGAGE IN PROTESTS

The imposition of additional rules under EU and national agri-environmental policies rooted in the EGD and operationalized through the new CAP has been one of the main triggers behind the farmers' protests across the EU. The first wave of protests began in 2019 when Dutch farmers staged extensive traffic disruptions, utilizing their tractors to orchestrate the nation's largest-ever protest. These protests were ignited by the government's announcement of plans to buy out and shutter livestock farms as part of a concerted effort to significantly reduce nitrogen emissions (VAN DER PLOEG 2020). In 2023, a similar policy announcement led Belgian farmers to block the traffic across the streets of Brussels, while German farmers protested proposed cuts to diesel subsidies and a surge in taxes (DW 2023; EURONEWS 2024). By early 2024, farmers from Spain, Italy, Germany, France, Hungary, Poland, Slovenia, and other EU countries joined the protests, voicing their opposition to the introduced changes in agri-environmental policies. They particularly criticized certain provisions of the F2F and the CAP, such as the mandatory reduction of pesticide and fertilizer use, the increased support for organic farming, and the efforts to rewild landscapes (GILL 2024). The farmers argued that these policies are unattainable and are driving up their costs, making their products more expensive and less competitive than non-EU imports (FRANCE 24 2024).

Beyond the EU, farmers' protests have emerged across the world, resonating especially with farmers from the main food-producing countries. In Brazil and Argentina, farmers protested the demands for identical environmental protection standards as those in the EU, while in India, farmers have been regularly protesting since 2020 against the liberalization and corporatization of the country's agricultural markets (BAVISKAR – LEVIEN 2021; SIEGFRIED 2024). The latest wave of protests in India and the EU was said to be politically timed, with both Indian and European Parliament elections occurring in 2024, which further points to the relevance of farmers' mobilizations in shaping the political agenda (ROGIN – MUFSON 2024). As protests were rolling out ahead of the EU elections, Politico (VINOCUR – BRZEZIŃSKI 2024) reported of far-right parties in Europe "piggybacking on farmers' noisy outrage", while a report of the European Fact-Checking Standards Network revealed a weaponization of the farmers' protests by various far-right groups, which led to a situation where *"the representations of these protests have now converged towards a single meta-narrative, advocating for a substantial redirection or termination of European climate policies"* (LARRAZ 2024).

While it is not claimed that farmers are necessarily the originators of anti-climate narratives, the spread of such rhetoric with the ongoing protests created a strong depiction of farmers' interests as being incompatible with the EDG, the F2F or the green transition (HILMI – FRISON 2024). This opened up a broader discussion about farmers, the environment, and climate change, which inevitably rests on the question of farmers' support for various adaptation and mitigation strategies (VAN DER PLOEG 2020). Filtering the phenomenon of farmers' protests through the lens of climate change and its possible denialism brings up a situation where, as Matthews (2024: 84) explains, *"instead of being seen as heroic producers of a vital commodity, they [farmers] are increasingly described as environmental villains and climate destroyers"*. This tension proves to be the essential element of farmers' grievances; as Hilmi and Frison (2024) note, farmers aren't necessarily *"asking for handouts but for recognition of their essential role in society"*. This conundrum is then related to the farmers' motivation and willingness to comply with new agri-environmental rules.

A growing body of research on the increasing adoption of agri-environmental policies analyzes European farmers' perceptions, attitudes and behavior, assessing which factors influence farmers' decisions as to whether they will adopt sustainable farming practices. The key influences include pro-environmental attitudes, goodness of fit and past experiences as well as openness to new experiences and the role of interpersonal relationships (BARTKOWSKI – BARTKE 2018). Brown et al. (2021) caution against the simplicity of some explanations for farmers' decisions as to whether they will implement sustainability measures, since such explanations result in skewed political perspectives, especially when they concern a productivist ethos being imposed on farmers. Studies done by Rust et al. (2022) and Polge and Pagès (2022) show how farmers rely on their knowledge networks and interpersonal relationships as they navigate mitigation and adaptation strategies. Farmers filter new information “*through a fine mesh of perceived credibility and trust*” (SLIGO – MASSEY 2007), where they rely more on peer networks than traditional ‘experts,’ who are seen as not being empathetic towards farmers or aware of the realities they face (RUST ET AL. 2022).

The key takeaway from these discussions is that the farmers' engagement with new agri-environmental rules hinges on trust in and support for the farmers, while the exclusion of farmers from such discussions may lead to their alienation and refusal to participate. These insights implicitly tap into the emotional or affective dimension of farmers' behavior related to adoption and mitigation strategies. However, while it has been established that emotions influence farmers' behavior (LEBEL – LEBEL 2018; O'KANE ET AL. 2017; RIEPLE – SNIJDERS 2018; STEVENS ET AL. 2020), the role of emotions in farmers' decisions to protest against new agri-environmental rules is yet to be assessed. In this sense, a failure to explain the full extent of motivations behind farmers' decisions to adopt or reject new agri-environmental rules could result in poorly formed incentives, decreased participation from farmers and even a distortion of their motivations in the long term, thus causing a reduction in the effectiveness of policy implementation (BROWN ET AL. 2021). To truly assess and understand the farmers' meaning making, we cannot separate it from the affective component of their messaging. The latter allows us to contextualize the farmers' mobilization in historical, social, and ideological environments conducive to meaning making. While studies have shown the impact of the politics of resentment in the USA in matters of rural consciousness (CRAMER 2016), and relatedly in the lack of

support for environmental regulation (HOCHSCHILD 2018), these insights are yet to be properly assessed within the European context. Drawing on an analysis of the affects employed by the protesting farmers, we thus offer a new perspective for farmers' protest studies, explaining the affective potency of farmers' discursive messaging.

POPULISM AND THE PROTESTING FARMERS' AFFECTIVE CANON

We approach farmers' movements and mobilizations through the concept of 'agrarian populism', understood as "*the political bundling of various rural-based or rural-oriented social groups and class interests and issues into a homogenised category 'the people of the land'*" (BORRAS 2019: 5). Some notable historical examples of agrarian populism are the Russian *Narodniki* movement and United States *People's Party*, while the most visible modern manifestation of it can be found in the food sovereignty movement *La Via Campesina* (IBID.). While there are varieties of agrarian populism, the broadly shared features of such mobilizations include the use of an 'us' vs. 'them' rhetoric, an anti-capitalist stance, advocacy of small production as a sustainable path and an emphasis on collaboration and diversity (HAJDU – MAMONOVA 2020). In our analysis, we embrace the discursive approach to populism as developed by Laclau (2005) to suggest that populism represents a political logic which can be employed with varying degrees of frequency, intensity, and consistency. This means that we understand agrarian populism as a special form of populist discourse available in farmers' toolkits, which is combined in diverse ways with the grievances they seek to communicate by protesting environmental regulation.

With the rise of populism across the world, even those scholars who are otherwise sceptical of agrarian movements and their emancipatory potential, are becoming more open to assessing this phenomenon. Bernstein (2018: 1146) points out this shift, arguing that "*for a variety of reasons agrarian populism appears a more vital ideological and political force*". This was proven especially true in the case of the upsurge of the Farmer-Citizen Movement (BoerBurgerBeweging, BBB) in the Netherlands, which gained traction during the first farmers' protests in 2019. The BBB has since successfully galvanized the protesting farmers' political discontent while broadening its electorate to people in the countryside in general

(ROODUIJN – DE LANGE 2023). As mentioned in the previous chapter, the farmers' protests point to different underlying tensions and grievances related to agrarian populism in the context of the effects of environmental governance, new climate action policies and the rural condition in general. The canon of populist studies has long acknowledged the role of emotions, especially as the 'discursive force' implicated in building and organizing communities (SOLOMON 2012), which complements the growing scholarship in IR exploring emotions and affects in world politics (AHÄLL 2018; HOMOLAR – LÖFFLMANN 2021; HUTCHISON – BLEIKER 2014; KOSCHUT 2018).

As Kinnvall (2018: 10) explains, it is important to recognize how discourses and emotions overlap as emotional investment is tied to the institutionalization of shared collective identities where our emotional pattern in regard to particular circumstances is always *"intertwined with social, cultural, and political contexts"*. In general, populism has been labelled as an 'emotional' phenomenon, and typically described in pejorative terms – but what we can gather from the so-called emotional or affective turn in IR is that decision-making *"relies conjunctly on emotions and cognition"*, the two being intimately related and interdependent (BONANSINGA 2020: 98–99). This highlights the importance of illustrating *"how affects, emotions and discourse are produced together in multiple ways in actual practice"* (KINNVALL 2018: 10).

With this in mind, we turn to Wetherell's (2012) insistence on assessing these links as complex puzzles which operate in everyday life, thereby producing different consequences and entailments. In this sense, affect is never independent of language, but is constructed through the process of signification, showing how the affective element of the discourse produces meaning and confers legitimacy and power (KOSCHUT ET AL. 2017). For Wetherell (2012), affect speaks of both traditional psychological notions focused on emotions and the broader concept which highlights difference, process, and force. Turning to affect allows for an exploration of how subjects make sense of and communicate affect, while also uncovering and emphasizing relationality, articulation, and entanglement (WETHERELL 2013). Wetherell's approach to affective-discursive practices builds on practice theory through its application in social psychology. If social practice is understood as *"a nexus of doings and sayings"* (SCHATZKI 1996), affective-discursive practice further assembles or articulates different

patterns of activity that articulate emotion, discourse, and meaning (WETHERELL ET AL. 2015). Assessing the patterns of affective-discursive practices thus emerges as a fruitful avenue for the analysis of affect and emotion, as such assessments explore how exactly the domains of semiosis and affect are intertwined (IBID.).

Exploring the 'affective canon' of the protesting farmers thus allows us to identify which affective-discursive practices become relevant in this case and how they manifest in variation of frequency and content (WETHERELL 2012). To do so, we utilize the analytical tools of the affective-discursive approach – discourse, affect and the subject positions employed by the farmers. We pay attention to discourses about agri-environmental regulation, focusing on both the themes raised by the farmers and the affective charge of their rhetoric, and assessing them as patterns through which affective-discursive practices are constructed. Furthermore, we try to establish the subject positions in which the farmers appear in these practices but also the subject positions afforded to policymakers and other actors and made available in the practices. By distinguishing affective-discursive practices, we thus observe their discursive functions, and the affects and subject positions established by them (SAKKI – MARTIKAINEN 2022).

All in all, the affective-discursive approach gives (agrarian) populism scholarship an entryway into a comprehensive understanding of how the farmers make sense of the new agri-environmental regulation and, more broadly, their position within the climate change discourse. The patterning of affective-discursive practices in this way acts as an avenue for investigating the way the farmers respond to the agri-environmental regulation through the realms of semiosis and affect working together (WETHERELL ET AL. 2015). This further enables a closer explanation of how the farmers develop distinctive affective-discursive practices embedded in specific social, spatial, and temporal contexts.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

For this research, we analyzed 54 articles that shed light on the farmers' protests in Slovenia during 2023 and 2024, and were published by five primary informative media sources in Slovenia: RTV Slovenija,

24ur, Delo, N1, and Dnevnik. From these sources, we extracted the claims, demands, and comments articulated by the farmers during and in relation to the protests, particularly those concerning the stricter EU and national agri-environmental regulations. In addition to these materials, we conducted 17 semi-structured interviews with Slovene farmers from November 2023 to January 2024. During these interviews, the farmers were asked to provide insights into the EU-wide protests, though the focus was on the developments specific to Slovenia. They were also prompted to share their emotions evoked by the protests and their perspectives on the significance and repercussions of the policy changes prompting the farmers' protests. To ensure a heterogeneous sample, we selected farmers from various regions across Slovenia for the interviews, and the sample was to represent diverse farming methods and practices, as well as a range of ages and genders. For anonymity purposes, pseudonyms are employed in the paper instead of the real names of the farmers.

The limitations of this study regarding the selection of materials and data-gathering methods arise from the fact that the data primarily reflect the views, understandings, and positions of a specific group of farmers – those who were present and actively engaged in the protests. Consequently, the findings cannot be generalized to represent the views of all Slovene farmers. Moreover, a significant limitation is the absence of detailed demographic and socio-economic data on the farmers who delivered speeches or provided statements to the media during the protests. This lack of information hinders our ability to draw broader conclusions about the diversity of perspectives within the protesting farmer population and attribute specific affective-discursive practices to particular subgroups of the protesting farmers. Therefore, while this paper addresses the perspectives of (protesting) farmers, it does not explore which specific types of farmers may be more or less represented in these protests. Consequently, our analysis is centered on the affective-discursive practices that were most commonly implemented during the protests.

We initiated our analysis by extracting vital data from both the media articles and the interviews, and coding them to discern patterns in the construction of the reasoning and demands articulated by the farmers. Subsequent rounds of coding enabled us to not only structure these patterns based on their wording but also consider the context in

which they were invoked and the emotional nuances accompanying them. Through these iterative examinations, and by employing analytical tools from affective-discursive scholarship (WETHERELL 2012; WETHERELL ET AL. 2015; SAKKI – MARTIKAINEN 2021, 2022), we identified various discourses, affects, and subject positions that emerged among the farmers amidst these protests. Ultimately, by systematically pinpointing and categorizing their analytical functions, we consolidated them into four distinct affective-discursive practices. This concept speaks to *“articulating, mobilising and organising affect and discourse as a central part of the practice”* (WETHERELL 2015: 57). By drawing on affective-discursive practices, we can capture how the farmers’ advance privileged discourses, signal their importance and therefore marginalize opposing discourses and their advocates and place them into obscurity. In the analysis guided by Wetherell et al. (2015: 59) and Sakki and Martikainen’s (2021) studies, we use the terms ‘affect’ and ‘emotion’ interchangeably, acknowledging that making epistemological and ontological distinctions between the two may be difficult to preserve. However, we also acknowledge that some forms of being affected can be more organized than others – here, ‘affect’ may refer to more generic and ‘emotion’ to more specific articulations (IBID.).

ANALYSIS

The analysis of our data regarding the farmers’ protests against the new agri-environmental policymaking in Slovenia from 2023 to 2024 reveals the emergence of four interconnected affective-discursive practices: farmers as innate protectors of nature, environmental protection as a peril to the farmers, suffocating farmerdom, and farmers as guardians of the (home)land. The identified affective-discursive practices, along with the discourses, affects, and subject positions they entail, are summarized in Table 1.

TABLE 1: INTERPLAY OF DISCOURSES, AFFECTS AND SUBJECT POSITIONS

Affective-discursive practices	Farmers as innate protectors of nature	Environmental protection as a peril to the farmer	Suffocating farmerdom	Farmers as guardians of the (home)land
Discourses	Knowledgeable about nature protection due to experience and expertise.	Political decision-making without farmers.	Increasing demands on top of the farmers' already unstable standing.	Importance of farmers in safeguarding nature, people, and the nation.
Affects	Humiliation, Resentment, Horridness	Anger, Resentment, Disillusionment	Fear, Self-pity, Anxiety	Assurance, Self-importance, Empowerment
Subject positions	Environmental savants (us), The Ignoramuses (them)	Discounted outsiders (us), Elite insiders (them)	Victims (us), Unruly imposers (them)	Patriots, Heroes (us)

FARMERS AS INNATE PROTECTORS OF NATURE

The affective-discursive practice of farmers as innate protectors of nature constructs an image of farmers as actors inherently destined to safeguard nature. This discourse is rooted in farmers' perceived deep connection to the land and animals, which is forged through the farmers' dedicated labour and long-term engagement with farming practices. Through the constructed subject position of "environmental savants", the protesting farmers are portraying themselves as uniquely qualified to critique policymakers and environmentalists, whom they perceive as the main culprits for the formulation of the new environmental regulations. By challenging their expertise and knowledge, farmers portray them as "Ignoramuses", mobilizing a range of affects, including horridness, humiliation, and resentment.

FIGURE 1: PROTEST BANNER: “WHO HAS BEEN SAFEGUARDING BARJE UNTIL NOW?”



Source: Dnevnik 2023c. Photo taken by Tatjana Pihlar.

One of the proposed policy changes that has faced strong opposition from the farmers is aimed at addressing the declining condition of grassland butterfly species, birds, and habitats within Natura 2000 areas. Among other measures, this includes bans on grazing, fertilization, and grass mowing before 1st August in Ljubljansko Barje, which is an area under Natura 2000 protection. These measures are viewed as horrifying by the protesting farmers as they see them as detrimental to Slovenian agriculture, and as potentially leading to the closure of numerous farms operating on these lands. Feeling unjustly targeted in the pursuit of higher nature conservation standards, the farmers raise a rhetorical question on a banner attached to a tractor: “*Who has been safeguarding Barje until now?*” (DNEVNIK 2023c).

This example highlights the affect of resentment as the protesting farmers emphasize that their expertise in caring for nature and animals has been disregarded and undervalued by the proposed policy changes. As one farmer claims: “*We respect all forms of life, which is why we treat our animals and plants responsibly,*” but “*the countryside should not and must not become an open-air museum*” (RTV SLOVENIJA 2023c).

The farmers argue that they are the primary stewards of nature, sustaining its vitality, and assert that the government should leave them to farm as they see fit rather than imposing frequent new regulations on them (Marko, personal interview 2023¹ and Vid, personal interview 2024²). As Anton Medved, the leader of the Farmers' Union of Slovenia, expressed at the protest: *“For a thousand years, we have farmed these lands and preserved nature, but now we only face restrictions. Farmers are horrified by these demands”* (N1 2023A).

The affectiveness of these claims depends on their factualization. However, unlike a study by Venäläinen (2022), where arguments are substantiated by references to scientific research findings, the farmers support their claims by relying on their traditional and inherent knowledge of nature preservation acquired through their long-term daily interactions with the land and animals. Thus, their positioning themselves as environmental savants due to their traditional knowledge and farming expertise allows them to dictate the “correct” social and political approaches towards nature conservation and justifies their continued utilization of natural resources (KURZ ET AL. 2005) or, in this case, the land for farming.

Furthermore, this affective discursive entanglement depicts the constructed irrationality and ridicule surrounding the proposed conservation and other environmental measures, and this discourse is employed with simplified language and rhetorical questions to diminish the credibility of these measures and their proponents (TORMIS ET AL. 2024). Government officials and environmentalists advocating for stricter environmental legislation are having their knowledge and expertise devalued through the chosen lexical style. They are accused of implementing *“irrational and unsustainable environmental measures”* (RTV SLOVENIJA 2023A), with the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Food (MAFF) being a *“mere courier for European directives”* (RTV SLOVENIJA 2023B).

This raises questions about the necessity of such a ministry if all the restrictions are proposed by environmentalists (DELO 2023B). These discursive and affective processes are positioning government officials and environmentalists as environmental “others” (LOCKWOOD 2018; TORMIS ET AL. 2024) in relation to the farmers, as irrational “ignoramus” contrasted with rational “environmental savants”. Their perceived lack of knowledge

and expertise is further disparaged with derogatory labels such as “so-called activists,” “armchair environmentalists”, or simply “idiots,” and they are accused of engaging in “environmentalist experiments” that are “at odds with farmers’ wisdom” (24UR 2023A; DELO 2023B) (Alen, personal interview 2023³). These terms serve to amplify the negative emotional reaction and exaggerate the irrationality of their actions by invoking mockery and ridicule, which is a common strategy to make one’s position more acceptable to a wider audience (SAKKI – MARTIKAINEN 2021, 2022)

ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION AS A PERIL TO THE FARMER

The affective-discursive practice titled “Environmental protection as a peril to the farmer” highlights the farmers’ critique that political decision-making, including the new environmental rules and regulations, constitutes an exclusive arena where policymakers act without the farmers’ input and without consideration of their best interests. “*Why protest? Because Slovenian officials, with their non-transparent and arbitrary decision-making, and blind compliance with demands from Brussels offices, are taking away the Slovenian farmers’ place, their families’ future, the caretakers from Slovenian nature, and our domestic food from Slovenian citizens*” (RTV SLOVENIJA 2024A).

By invoking the discourse of “political decision-making without farmers”, the protesting farmers express their discontent with the government’s exclusionary approach and channel the affects of anger, resentment and disillusionment through protests. As depicted in the extract above, the protesting farmers are angry and resentful towards politicians for operating in a non-transparent manner and making arbitrary decisions without taking into consideration what the protesting farmers refer to as the “farmers’ position”. Additionally, the farmers believe it is unjust for the focus of the blame for climate change and environmental issues to rest on them rather than on the industries that degrade and pollute agricultural land, or on consumers who contribute to the problem through their food waste (RTV SLOVENIJA 2023C); Lovro, personal interview 2024⁴). This perceived inequity fosters a perception that policymakers prioritize certain actors and their own agendas over the interests of the farming community, thereby producing distrust among the farmers vis-à-vis the policymakers.

The protesting farmers view the policymakers' decisions as irrational and disconnected from established farming practices, which further alienates them from their elected representatives. This combined effort of the employed discourse and affect constructs two opposing subject positions (DAVIES – HARRÉ 1990; WETHERELL 2013), where the politicians are represented as the “elite insiders” having the power to make decisions for the farmers, but their actions further erode trust in their ability to advocate for the interests of the “common people” (BUZOGÁNY – MOHAMAD – KLOTZBACH 2021; SCOTT 2022). Along these lines, the farmers claim that “[t]he ministry has no connection with the reality of farmers in Slovenia” (Ema and Rok, personal interview 2023⁵), and that “[t]hey are the ones setting the rules without even understanding what they entail, what kind of lives farmers live” (Klemen, personal interview 2023⁶).

On the other hand, the protesting farmers perceive themselves as marginalized “discounted outsiders”, a subject position characterized by deep frustration and disillusionment with policies that fail to address their needs and additional environmental demands imposed by “elite outsiders.” They also assert that the government consistently dismisses their concerns and suggestions, exacerbating their sense of exclusion. Despite reaching out to the MAFF and participating in public forums, the protesting farmers lament that their input has been consistently disregarded (Alen, personal interview 2023; Lukas, personal interview 2024⁷). They claim that even when they were involved in the decision-making process, such as in the preparation of Slovenia's CAP strategic plan, the result came to be a completely different story from what they were advocating for (DNEVNIK 2023B), which continuously reaffirmed their position as outsiders: “It is a repeating pattern; we have never been heard. They never consider us, ask for our opinion, or invite us when decisions are made regarding laws and common land policies as if we do not exist” (24UR 2023A).

This positioning of the farmers as “discounted outsiders” or “neglected others” emphasizes their feeling of being unheard and unnoticed, as outlined in the previous excerpt. This perception validates the pervasive affects of disillusionment and anger they hold towards the government and its policy-making procedures, given their precarious position (VENÄLÄINEN 2022). Consequently, the protesting farmers argue that their

precarious circumstances compel them to take to the streets and participate in protests, seeing it as necessary for asserting their visibility and amplify their voices.

SUFFOCATING FARMERDOM

Invoking the affects of fear, anxiety, and self-pity circulating within the farming community due to the ongoing imposition of new regulations and increasing environmental requirements – conditions that the protesting farmers claim are particularly burdensome amidst the already challenging and difficult conditions in which they operate – constitutes the core of the affective-discursive practice of pointing to suffocating farming conditions: *"I have been living on the farm for sixty years now, but it has never been like this before. Just paperwork and restrictions. You cannot do this, you cannot do that. How are we supposed to work?"* (RTV SLOVENIJA 2023A).

As this description resembles the situation in the Netherlands (VAN DER PLOEG 2020), the above excerpt illustrates that the protesting farmers assert that they are driven to protests by the overwhelming pressure of constantly escalating rules and regulations, which positions those who enforce them as "unruly imposers". When asked about his thoughts on the Natura 2000 proposal, Vid (personal interview 2024) expressed his bewilderment, stating that he cannot comprehend *"what kind of person you (government officials) have to be to lead your own people into misery"*.

These examples illustrate the discourse in which the protesting farmers not only feel suffocated by the multitude of rules and regulations they must adhere to but are anxious as they fear the negative impact of these policies on their farming practices and their lives (SIEBERT ET AL. 2006; KURZ ET AL. 2010). The constant imposition of rules by the EU and the Slovene government has positioned them as "unruly imposers", with the protesting farmers blaming them and their disorderly and illogical policymaking for the farmers' revolt. However, what really exacerbates the magnitude of the affective distribution of fear, anxiety, and self-pity among the protesting farmers is the claim that the introduction of these new regulations and more stringent environmental standards would add to the existing daily obligations and struggles farmers face in sustaining their livelihoods from agriculture.

The interviewed farmers express that they constantly sacrifice their time, energy, and even small luxuries like beach holidays or new clothes and cars to invest in their farms, simply to survive in the farming business. In the agricultural arena, they are subjected to price fluctuations for their products, unfair purchase prices, constant rises in the costs of agricultural inputs such as pesticides or fertilizers, both conventional and organic, and ever-increasing prices of agricultural land. On top of that, the farmers express their increasing anxiety about grappling with the repercussions of the changing climate, and contending with severe droughts, floods, emerging diseases, and pests, which are further compounding the difficulties they face in their daily agricultural activities and intensifying their overall struggles. These challenges introduce a new frontier for them in times of the changing climate, one they are uncertain about how to navigate within their current agricultural practices. Therefore, the expressed resistance to changes in farming practices and regulations, as demonstrated during the protests, also stems from their fear of self-preservation and anxiety about the potential impacts of additional environmental legislation on their livelihoods (KOTTER – SCHLESINGER 2008). The protesting farmers emphasize their fear of being unable to manage both regulatory shifts and the day-to-day operations of their farms.

The entanglement of affect and discourse here both determines and reinforces the subject positioning of the farmers as victims – victims of the “*EU Green Deal*” (RTV SLOVENIJA 2024B), “*victims of undemocratic decision-making*” (DELO 2023B), and victims of unruly imposers. As seen in other protests, like the *Gilets Jaunes* protests in France and the farmers’ protests in the Netherlands (VAN DER PLOEG 2020; BUZOGÁNY – MOHAMAD-KLOTZBACH 2021), the protesting Slovenian farmers’ complaints stem from a sense of social injustice resulting from years of neglect by the governing officials that is now exacerbated by the agri-environmental policy shifts. Thus, the affective-discursive position of the victim, embodying the necessity of self-pity, has been regularly persistent among farmers around the globe, resulting in their defensive attitude towards those whom they perceive as culpable for this injustice (SIEBERT ET AL. 2006).

FARMERS AS GUARDIANS OF THE (HOME)LAND

We observe the emergence of the fourth affective-discursive practice, “farmers as guardians of the (home)land”, through the discursive portrayal of farmers as essential caretakers who nourish the Slovene people, feed them, and provide a clean and orderly environment. Here, farmers are no longer victims but construct their subject positionings as heroes and patriots indispensable for the nation’s existence.

FIGURE 2: A PROTEST BANNER STATING “NO FARMER, NO FOOD, NO HOMELAND”



Source: Regionalni 2024. Photo by: Farmers’ Union of Slovenia.

The protesting farmers emphasize their crucial role in supplying food for their customers and catering to the Slovene population’s needs. Additionally, they stressed their pivotal function in environmental stewardship, preserving the landscape’s beauty. As one farmer stated: *“If we don’t farm, all of this will overgrow, and the landscape will be completely different; there won’t be any butterflies, nothing; it will turn into a primateval forest”* (24UR 2023B).

In exercising the role of environmental managers, the protesting farmers proclaim that they not only bolster tourism but also help the nation

save on the expenses of hiring additional landscape managers (Niko, personal interview 2023⁸). Thus, through their protests, the farmers assert their self-importance and their subject position as heroes, not only as providers of food and managers of the environment but also as the ones who hold the well-being of the entire country in their hands. With the farmers being driven to protest, they claim the nation is already experiencing negative effects of their absence in the fields; it is already “bleeding” (RTV SLOVENIJA 2023A). Nonetheless, they feel compelled to protest, claiming that: “[o]ur demands concern the national interest, the interest of all Slovenes, the Slovenian state” (RTV SLOVENIJA 2023C).

This practice of intertwining affect and discourse serves to construct the specific meaning highlighting the indispensable role of farmers, while it implicitly holds those hindering their efforts accountable for jeopardizing the nation’s prosperity and welfare (WETHERELL 2013; SAKKI – MARTIKAINEN 2022). However, what truly amplifies the affective force of their protesting stance and reinforces their subject positioning as heroes is the assertion that they are acting for the benefit of the Slovenes, positioning themselves not only as indispensable but also as inherent patriots, as members of the people (OFSTEHAGE ET AL. 2022). When they unite as a collective sharing a profound love for their homeland and facing common challenges, this positioning fosters a sense of assurance and a responsibility to support farmers (SAKKI – PETERSSON 2016). On the other hand, they argue that failing to do so implies a lack of desire for serving the country’s best interests.

Elevating the farmers’ significance and positioning them as heroes and patriots contributes to the social recognition of their pivotal role in safeguarding Slovenia (WETHERELL ET AL. 2015). This fosters a collective consciousness regarding their indispensable contribution to the nation’s preservation, thereby effectively mobilizing empowerment (CHAKRABARTI 2022) and prompting the farmers to unite: “Let’s say this together – enough is enough” (N1 2024). “Farmers from all over Slovenia are urging us to persist, as it concerns the Slovenian nation and the Slovenian farmer who produces food for the Slovenian consumer” (N1 2023B). With the protesting farmers on the streets, driven by a “shared” purpose and a deep sense of assurance, their actions aim to symbolize a broader movement towards a stronger, more resilient Slovenia.

DISCUSSION

Examining the four affective-discursive practices that reveal the protesting farmers' grievances regarding the potential intensification of agri-environmental regulations reveals that the farmers feel both threatened and pressured from two sides. On the one hand, these policies explicitly target their farming practices, leading them to perceive themselves as being blamed for Slovenia's climate and environmental challenges. On the other hand, by targeting these same practices, the policies imply that addressing these issues necessitates fundamentally altering farming methods. As a result, the protesting farmers feel caught in a double bind, as they are portrayed as both guilty of environmental degradation and responsible for mitigating it. This duality places them in a challenging and contradictory position, as through protests, they seek to distance themselves from these identities via a complex interplay of social positioning and affective engagement.

The protesting farmers argue that they are being portrayed as guilty of climate change and environmental degradation frames them as 'villains' or 'destroyers' of the environment (MATTHEWS 2024). This characterization fuels the farmers' grievances and prompts an affective-discursive response aimed at reshaping the narrative around their roles (WETHERELL 2013). In this reframing, the protesting farmers demand not to be seen as the perpetrators, but rather as victims who fear for their future as farmers and are striving to manage their farms amidst increasingly frequent extreme weather conditions, which bring new diseases, rising costs, and numerous challenges. Moreover, they argue that they are further burdened by unjust and humiliating additional political requirements, which only exacerbate their already precarious situation.

Through strong emotions such as anger, fear, and injustice, which are frequently associated with populist logic (RICO ET AL. 2017; MAMONOVA - FRANQUESA 2020; SAKKI - MARTIKAINEN 2021), the protesting farmers are invoking the victim position that not only serves to bind them together but also serves to make their claims resonate with most Slovenian citizens. The latter are the ones who will suffer equally from these new environmental regulations, as the consequences extend beyond the availability of local, nutritious food to encompass the loss of vibrant landscapes if the farmers

cease their activities due to the challenging farming conditions imposed by these regulations. Here, populist logic serves to connect “the people” by highlighting how these regulations impede their daily lives, fostering a collective sense of injustice and rallying them around shared grievances (TORMIS ET AL. 2024). Rather than blaming themselves or other farmers for climate change and environmental issues, the protesting farmers suggest looking elsewhere: at industrial emissions and land misuse, the large quantities of food waste, or policymakers making irrational decisions that fail to consider farmers’ realities. Critically, the protesting farmers remark that when these factors are not considered, “*nature is being protected in a highly selective manner*” (RTV SLOVENIJA 2023C). Echoing sentiments observed among Dutch farmers (VAN DER PLOEG 2020) and directing the criticism elsewhere, specifically towards the policy-makers, whom they portray as “ignoramus”, absolves the farmers of responsibility for adjusting their practices to align with environmental realities.

Furthermore, the protesting farmers also respond to the portrayal of them as being responsible for addressing climate and environmental damages by invoking affects of resentment and horridness, asserting that they are already protecting the environment. They depict themselves as environmental savants who gained environmental knowledge through their deep dependence on nature and their everyday outdoor labor. The protesting farmers stress that their expertise in and understanding of the environment deserve recognition, but they feel consistently disregarded and undervalued in the decision-making processes. What emerges here is that the farmers emphasize that they are already playing a significant role in protecting the environment. Thus, they dissociate themselves from politicians, whom they see as unfairly placing the blame for environmental degradation on them while lacking an understanding of farming practices and overlooking the contributions of other sectors to climate change and environmental damage.

Consequently, the protesting farmers do not view agri-environmental rules as measures to protect the environment, but as a way to restrict their land use. This ongoing conflict between farmers and policymakers over the perceived right to manage natural resources has historical roots (GONZÁLEZ DE MOLINA ET AL. 2009) and can be understood within a broader discourse that frames “too much” climate change mitigation and environmental

protection as a constraint on resource use that ultimately hinders economic growth (VAN DEN BERGH 2023). It is, indeed, this discourse that the protesting farmers are tapping into as they argue that they are already fulfilling their share of environmental protection and that additional burdens threaten their crucial role as food producers. To amplify their claims, they are invoking a populist logic grounded in ethnonationalism to position themselves as heroes and patriots indispensable to the nation's well-being and the Slovenian people they feed (OFSTEHAGE ET AL. 2022; TORMIS ET AL. 2024). In this narrative, they emphasize their irreplaceable contribution to society, defending their role against perceived political pressures.

Overall, the analysis of the four affective-discursive practices reveals that farmers are actively negotiating their position in relation to agri-environmental regulations. Despite their differing frustrations, the farmers collectively express a sense of being "discounted outsiders" neglected by policymakers and unjustly targeted by agri-environmental rules. In articulating their grievances, the protesting farmers consistently distance themselves from elected officials, creating a pronounced "us" versus "them" dichotomy underscored by an anti-elitist stance. This aligns with populist logic, which portrays elites negatively as oppressors indifferent to the needs and desires of the people (LOCKWOOD 2018; SAKKI – PETTERSSON 2016; TORMIS ET AL. 2024). Consequently, the protesting farmers perceive policymakers as oppressive, uninformed, and unreasonable, and as pursuing environmentally questionable objectives that jeopardize farming and diverge from not just their interests, but the interests of the entire nation. Thus, the agri-environmental regulations proposed by "them" are perceived as unjust and burdensome, with the farmers believing that these additional demands exacerbate their already precarious situation. Despite their expertise in food production and land stewardship in Slovenia, they stress that they feel consistently disregarded and undervalued in the agri-environmental decision-making process.

Thus, it can be inferred that similarly as in the case of the protests in France and Spain, the Slovenian farmers' positioning and affective-discursive practices are centered on frustrations regarding agri-environmental policies, the perceived injustices surrounding the development of these policies and the policymakers responsible for them rather than on rejecting environmental concerns or the importance of nature protection

altogether (BUZOGÁNY – MOHAMAD-KLOTZBACH 2021; BUJDEI-TEBEICA 2024). The analysis reveals a multifaceted distrust of government officials that perpetuates a sense of alienation from the perceived elite “others” among the farmers and erodes their sense of being represented by the elected officials. This has further fueled widespread opposition, which has materialized as extensive EU-wide protests.

It is important to note, however, that their protesting against agri-environmental measures in this case does not necessarily imply that the farmers are opposed to all forms of environmental protection or that they are climate sceptics, as has sometimes been suggested in media and scholarly research (BRUNNER 2024; DAVIDSON ET AL. 2019; HESS ET AL. 2024). The Slovene farmers have expressed their commitment to the environment and nature and recognize the burdens that a changing climate imposes on the operation of their farms. This indicates that whether their motivations are altruistic or opportunistic, they do acknowledge the necessity of sustainable practices. However, the question remains whether this recognition translates into meaningful action. In line with Knežević Hočevar (2018), our interviews revealed that Slovene farmers, regardless of their operation size or method, be it organic or intensive, view their practices as environmentally sustainable. Nonetheless, scientific evidence indicates that agriculture remains the second-largest emitting sector in Slovenia and that significant improvements can still be made to reduce agriculture’s environmental impact (CLIMATE MIRROR SLOVENIA 2022). Currently, however, farmers are distrusting policymakers and feel that opportunities for dialogue and compromise are limited, which makes it increasingly challenging to find a constructive path forward.

CONCLUSION

This paper examines how affects and discourses cooperate to construct the meaning-making around farmers’ protests against the intensification of sustainability demands in agri-environmental policies at both the Slovenian and the EU levels. The analysis of the four affective-discursive practices employed by the farmers shows us that the farmers feel angered and horrified by what they perceive to be an unjust culpability and an unjust responsibility that are placed on them in matters of environmental issues, while policies are decided on without them despite their extensive

practical expertise in farming and environmental stewardship. We identify a prevalent utilization of populist logic by the protesting farmers with the aim to amplify their sense of injustice and voice their claims, whereby they distance themselves from the perceived "elite others" or government officials, portraying them as irrational, ignorant, and disconnected from the realities of farming. In contrast, the protesting farmers position themselves as victims whose invaluable knowledge and expertise are disregarded in policymaking. Moreover, through an ethno-nationalist rhetoric, the protesting farmers emphasize their vital role in preserving Slovenia's land and nation, framing farming not just as a profession that sustains the Slovene population but as an embodiment of patriotic values.

By examining the interplay between affects, discourses and subject positions, we underscore the necessity of understanding the complex rationale behind the protests. We illustrate that the farmers' resistance to the increased agri-environmental measures does not necessarily stem from a lack of concern for the environment or disbelief in climate change. Rather, it is a response to specific policies and the policymakers behind them. This resistance is rooted in a sense of exclusion compounded by feelings of being unjustly labelled as primary polluters, a lack of recognition for their contributions, and the overwhelming burdens imposed by political decisions. Moreover, through their protests, the farmers position themselves as allies of the general populace, who similarly feel victimized by the oppressive policies of the "elites". This framing effectively distances the farmers from government officials while aligning them with "the people", thus strongly evoking the logic of agrarian populism.

The analysis of the farmers' protests in Slovenia offers two crucial insights that are essential for understanding the significant implications of farmers' protests for international relations and the global development of climate change and environmental policy. Firstly, the dissemination of populist logic during farmers' protests may lead to broader shifts in the EU's political landscape that would impact governance, agri-environmental policy-making, and the overall cohesion of the EU. As demonstrated in the case of the Netherlands, the far-right BBB party achieved notable success in the 2023 provincial elections by aligning its platform with farmers' grievances and employing a similar populist logic, thereby raising doubts about the increased regulation of nitrogen reduction in the Netherlands.

Additionally, at the EU level, the European People's Party has chosen to realign itself as more sympathetic to farmers, partly in response to various national and regional election outcomes indicating a growing support for populist far-right parties in rural areas, which has led to the relaxation of EU agri-environmental targets (EURONEWS 2023; MATTHEWS 2024). By making these concessions, primarily aimed at alleviating the unrest among farmers and preventing further alignment with far-right parties, the EU is temporarily appeasing the growing discontent within the agricultural community. However, this approach ultimately undermines its climate and environmental initiatives and allows far-right groups to exploit farmers' grievances and feelings of disenfranchisement.

Secondly, through the interplay of affect and discourse, farmers are re-negotiating their role in global governance, seeking to communicate an alternative meaning and focus of agri-environmental policies. As the analysis has shown, the potential and abilities of farmers as relevant actors in IR should not be underestimated, nor should their mobilizing power be overlooked as irrational or reactive. Since 2023 farmers' protests have spread to over 65 countries worldwide, illustrating that while reasons for discontent vary from country to country, farmers are increasingly "*feeling under political attack*" (HADAVAS 2024). While farmers are not typically a part of studies of non-state or transnational actors in IR, the increasingly transnational character of farmers' mobilizations shows that the conception of the 'rural' as an arena of political contention does not only concern national or subnational levels. The illustrated dynamics of farmers' protests expand beyond national boundaries, in many ways aligning with different polycentric collective struggles emerging around the issues of climate change and agriculture. Grappling with those therefore requires new kinds of discussions and the inclusion of non-state actors such as farmers in scholarly analyses of climate policy and the green transition in IR.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Interview with Marko, Slovenia, 15 November 2023.
- 2 Interview with Vid, Slovenia, 5 January 2024.
- 3 Interview with Alen, Slovenia, 28 November 2023.
- 4 Interview with Lovro, Slovenia, 30 January 2024.
- 5 Interview with Ema and Rok, Slovenia, 19 December 2023.
- 6 Interview with Klemen, Slovenia, 30 November 2023.
- 7 Interview with Lukas, Slovenia, 31 January 2023.
- 8 Interview with Niko, Slovenia, 17 November 2023.

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