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# Implementing the Sustainable Development Goals in Times of Rising Right-Wing Populism in Europe

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**Abstract:** This article discusses two ostensibly antagonistic themes: right-wing populism (RWP) and the UN 2030 Agenda and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). European politics has seen a sharp increase in right-wing populist influence over the last few election periods. More recently, such political influence has led to questions about right-wing populism's impact on environmental and sustainable development policy. This paper takes a novel approach to understanding the potential connections between the rise of RWP in Europe and the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and SDGs in two ways. First, the paper is based on two workshops, informed by a preceding literature review on the topic of RWP in Europe, requested and organised by the European Sustainable Development Network (ESDN). Secondly, the results from the workshops are used to discuss and interpret the role of potentially differing worldviews (ontology, axiology, epistemology and societal vision) and how these relate to specific policy and governance responses, thereby impacting upon the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and SDGs in European countries.

**Keywords:** 2030 agenda; governance; worldviews

## 1. Introduction

The rise of right-wing populist parties (RWPPs) in Europe, their increased political traction, and their potential impact on policy and politics is a widely covered topic in academia and popular media [1]. Lately, with RWPPs gaining increased voter support in Europe, attention has further been directed toward RWPPs' impact upon and influence over pressing societal issues, such as climate change [2]. Such attention is, to a certain degree, driven by the apparent link between RWPP influence and retraction from previous commitments on energy transition, climate targets and international climate agreements [3]. Recent examples from Europe show ambitious climate targets stymied by coalitions consisting primarily of EU member states with right-wing populist (RWP) governments in place, often on the basis of claims about “overly ambitious” targets or a perceived loss of sovereignty over national energy production and use (regardless of detrimental climate effects) [2]. The climate and energy nexus is a particularly salient issue within RWP rhetoric and politics, with European countries governed by RWP parties not ceding their strategic fossil fuel or favouring previous energy infrastructures designed around the use of fossil fuels rather than considering a transition to renewable alternatives [4]. Regardless of the increased attention directed towards the impact of RWPPs on climate policy, less is known about the linkages between the United Nations Transforming our world: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, with its 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) [5] (henceforth referred to as the 2030 Agenda and SDGs), and RWP in Europe. Addressing this gap,

this article draws on the experiences and expertise of a policymaker network engaged with sustainable development (SD) policy across Europe to explore policy and governance implications of RWPP influence on the implementation of the 2030 Agenda through an analytical starting point of ontological, axiological, epistemological and visionary expressions constituting differing or similar worldviews.

Due to the rise of RWP in Europe, the European Sustainable Development Network (ESDN) brought together public administrators from across Europe to discuss potential policy and governance implications on the 2030 Agenda and SDG implementation. The ESDN constitutes an informal network with over 400 members, bringing together policymakers from over 30 European countries. The ESDN focuses on policy learning and exchange between public administrators related to the challenges of and successes in implementing SD policy in their national context through organised events (conferences, workshops and peer learning platforms). Many of the ESDN's members have been active for several years within the network, in some cases since its inception in 2002, have been working in the field of SD policy for at least 15 years, and have seen many government cycles, providing them with invaluable knowledge and experience in understanding what contributes or hinders the implementation of SD policy.

Understanding policy preferences and political behaviour through the analysis of converging or conflicting discourses and worldviews is particularly prevalent within critical policy studies [6], and has gained increased attention in relation to SD (see e.g., [7–12]). A worldview can be understood as a “set of assumptions about physical and social reality that may have powerful effects on cognition and behaviour” [13] (p. 3), or as “a combination of a person’s value orientation and his or her view on how to understand the world and the capabilities it offers” [10] (p. 688). Research has identified cognition about a problem, personal values and worldviews as connected to attitudes and behaviour regarding support for environmental and climate change policy [14,15]. Thus, understanding worldviews as relational constructs formed and reproduced within societies through a set of shared beliefs, values and knowledge provides important ontological and axiological understanding not only of individual behaviour, but also of collective policy preferences. Based on the understanding that worldviews affect policy support and willingness to commit to behavioural changes [16,17] and lead to certain biases regarding policy and action, this paper understands discourses and strategies related to RWP and the 2030 Agenda as reflecting particular worldviews and understandings of the world.

The motivation for utilising the concept of worldviews as an analytical starting point to address the relation between 2030 Agenda implementation and rising RWP in Europe is twofold. First, achieving balance between ecological, social and economic objectives have, for the past decades, been addressed through a political and societal focus on new technology and ambitious SD strategies [18,19]. These strategies and policies have, however, often come under critique for representing “rhetorics which disguise well-known conflicts about concepts, goals and instruments” [20] (p. 3), rather than bringing about transformative change. Hence, the SD challenges are considered too “wicked” to be addressed by new technology and policy approaches, and researchers are calling for an understanding of how underlying factors, such as social values, beliefs, motivations and worldviews (tacit and known) are fostering or hindering solutions to solving complex sustainability challenges [18,19,21]. Utilising the theory of worldviews as an analytical starting point allows us to discern the similarities and differences between ontological, axiological, epistemological and societal vision, as is presented in discourses and strategies, not only on an individual level, but also as a shared and collective understanding that influences how individuals interpret and understand the society in which they live [22]. See Table 1 below.

In addition, since less is known about the potential impact of rising RWP influence on implementing the 2030 Agenda in Europe, and empirical policy and implementation evidence is lacking, using a worldview approach facilitates an informed discussion on the potential points of divergence or convergence between RWP and the 2030 Agenda.

**Table 1.** Analytical framework.

| Analytical Elements of Worldviews |  |
|-----------------------------------|--|
| Ontology                          | Understanding the nature of the issue (what is considered real). |
| Axiology                          | What is considered important (of value).                         |
| Societal Vision                   | How society should be organised.                                 |
| Epistemology                      | The role of science (how one can know).                          |

Source: Adopted from Hedlund-de Witt (2014) [7].

### 1.1. The Rise of Populism

Populism is gaining ground globally in some of the largest economies, and more noteworthy, in some of the world's longest standing democracies [23]. Europe is not exempt from the rise of populism, specifically on the right-wing side of the political spectrum; in fact, the continent has seen a sharp increase in populist influence over the past 20 years. A recent compilation of voter data from 31 European countries shows that the RWP vote share in national elections increased from under 5% to close to 15% from 1998 to 2018 [24]. Populism is a complex and contested phenomenon, often seen as a reaction of discontent towards conventional politics and globalism [25]. Populism has been discussed as an ideology [26], a discourse [27], a frame [28,29], a strategy, or, as it often is identified in mainstream journalism, a rhetoric [30]. Regardless of the analytical lens, populism is often defined through the presence of certain characteristics of politics. Studies on populism show that common tenets contain (i) a vision of society as divided into two groups, the "pure people" and the "corrupt elites"; (ii) belief in the internal homogeneity of the two groups; (iii) positing opposition between the two groups and (iv) trust in the "pure people" as the legitimate source of the general will [26]. Hence, populism is described as containing three core elements of anti-establishment, authoritarianism and nativism [31,32]. In practice, this manifests through a type of politics that intentionally attacks established political parties and agendas, particularly through the marginalisation of certain groups or "othering" and the creation of a "politics of fear" [3]. Although populist movements were gaining ground in the 1970s, they developed momentum through the economic recessions of the 1990s and late 2000s. Studies of populism often couple its rise with economic malaise, arising from recessions, growing levels of inflation, unemployment, austerity, income inequality, trade and financial openness alongside surges in immigration [33]. Evidence suggests that although several of these factors often precede the rise of populism, other less tangible factors may also have an impact, such as "a reflection of psychological state, circumstances and changing perceptions of cultural identity" [34,35].

Populism reflects cynicism towards and lack of trust in existing authorities; this could be discontent towards government officials and elected politicians or towards multinational corporations, media and scientific experts. RWPP rhetoric often contains expressions of being the voice of the "ordinary people", while propagating mono-culturalism over multiculturalism, national self-interest over international cooperation, and traditionalism over liberal social values and cosmopolitanism [32]. In this sense, populism, which is often related to fears about globalisation and the failure of current mainstream parties to address social problems, becomes opportunistic in responding to the growing fear and discontent of citizens by providing "simple answers to complex questions" [25]. To bring nuance to the picture, some scholars argue that populism is a form of democratic expression, as it entails mobilisation and critique against current neoliberal policies and a system that has failed to deliver on its promises [23]. Ascribing to this argument, populist movements may have the potential to bring people, who are otherwise disconnected from mainstream politics, back into national conversations, thereby overcoming their sense of alienation. Although context dependent and unique, RWP in Europe tends to include a strong advocacy of neo-nationalism, articulated and justified in the name of exclusion and often racialized rhetoric of "the people", the demonization of a perceived threat or enemy (internal and/or external) and support for authoritarian leaders who rise to power on the basis of protecting and strengthening the nation [23]. Most often, RWP rhetoric resorts to nativism and

identifying external threats rather than providing durable alternatives [36]. Hence, RWP, particularly in Europe, could pose a threat to democratic, liberal norms and values [37]. In this article, populism is understood in the context of RWPPs in Europe (although diverse) and a particular understanding that contains the core elements of creating a societal divide between “the people” and the corrupt elite (or external threat), the emphasis on the internal homogeneity of and opposition between identified groups and “the people” as a legitimate source of political will.

### 1.2. Implementing the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs

Encompassing all levels of society and providing a governance agenda for SD, the 2030 Agenda and SDGs set an ambitious, multidimensional and holistic agenda, emphasising integration and balance between economic, social and environmental ambitions. Implementation of the 2030 Agenda has been described as a particularly complex challenge for governments and policymakers [38], with further complexity added as trade-offs within targets and between goals emerge [39]; among the most prominent include trade-offs between goals of economic prosperity or energy security and climate change [40]. Moreover, research has further pointed to implementation challenges caused by the differing formulations of goals and targets, from being aspirational to precise [41], coupled with the governance efforts of translating global initiatives into local contexts [42]. As the responsibility of the implementation of the 2030 Agenda lies with national governments, in keeping with UN governance, public policy is tasked with the challenge of balancing economic, social and environmental objectives. Research has pointed out that balancing objectives of SD, as emphasised by the 2030 Agenda, may be impacted by an inherent tension between worldviews of achieving infinite growth as opposed to operating within a system demarcated by environmental boundaries [11,43]. The potential conflict between narratives of degrowth (and redistribution of wealth) and narratives of economic growth as “the main driver providing employment for a growing global population” [44] (p. 7) is hence said to permeate “conventional SD discourse and the SDGs” [44]. The narrative concerning growth is further coupled with a focus on efficiency, for example as seen in SDG 7 (affordable and clean energy) and technological solutions, as present in SDG 9 (industry, innovation and infrastructure) and SDG 13 (climate change) [44]. Hence, discussing the worldviews present within the 2030 Agenda is not done in absence of contention. On the one hand, the 2030 Agenda promises to leave no one behind and bring about transformative change [5]. On the other hand, it has been criticised for offering a “mere reformist change within the current techno-capitalist global structure” [44] (p. 7).

### 1.3. Worldviews of RWP and the 2030 Agenda

Building on the analytical starting point of worldviews, utilising formulations from the 2030 Agenda [5] and the literature review of RWP in Europe, Table 2 summarises similarities and differences of worldview elements. As the table utilises the formulations from the 2030 Agenda Resolution, the presented overview can be said to depict the intended portrayed worldview which may or may not correspond to de facto policy and governance.

As seen in Table 2, the 2030 Agenda harbours a type of egalitarian (justice and inclusion) and cosmopolitan (international) worldview, whereas the RWP tendencies in Europe seem characterised by a nativist and traditional worldview. The 2030 Agenda and RWP appear inherently antagonistic, mostly in terms of discourses and rhetoric, but both could be seen as political responses to environmental, social and economic issues [25]. A recent study mapping climate agendas of RWPPs in Europe shows that climate and energy policy is relatively “simplistic or underdeveloped” [2] (p. 35) in RWP party programmes throughout Europe, potentially due to the relatively recent development of such parties and a lack of historical experience of policymaking and governance. The study also points out that RWPPs often use “ideological frames to justify non-action, e.g., anticipated economic decline, nationalist preferences or focus on homeland affairs” [2] (p. 35), which would indicate a need to understand underlying factors and perceptions (worldviews) forming such ideological frames. Moreover, research on “populist radical right parties” implies that “the danger” does not necessarily

lie in the concrete actions (or lack thereof) proposed by populist parties, but rather their impact on the political agendas of mainstream political parties [1,45].

**Table 2.** Overview of similarities and differences in worldview elements.

| Worldview Elements | The 2030 Agenda  | Right-Wing Populism  |
|--------------------|--|--|
| Ontology           | Structural drivers, economic, social and environmental.                                  | Structural drivers, primarily economic and social, discontent toward “ruling elite.”   |
| Axiology           | Inclusion, cosmopolitanism, justice and fairness; “leave no one behind.”                 | Cultural homogeneity, justice for the “ordinary people”, exclusion of “others” not seen as part of “the people”, traditionalism. |
| Societal Vision    | Implemented within nations, participatory, international collaboration and partnerships. | Nativism, protectionism, hierarchical and authoritarian tendencies (being the “voice of the people”).                            |
| Epistemology       | Policy driven by science.  | Science as a consensus of the elite.   |

## 2. Methods

This paper is based on a literature review and two workshops conducted within the ESDN between May and November 2019. The aim of the literature review was to survey the current nature and understanding of the rise of RWPP influence in Europe and consisted of academic sources and reports and grey literature (mainly periodicals, newspaper articles and, in some instances, blogs). The review did not survey party manifestos of individual RWPPs, as the recent study by Schaller and Carius, Mapping climate agendas of right-wing populist parties in Europe [2], was seen as a comprehensive account of RWPP agendas in terms of climate policy, and the authors spoke at and contributed to the workshop. The literature further aimed at identifying potential relations between RWPPs and sustainability policy in Europe. The literature review constituted the basis of a discussion paper [46], which, together with invited speakers and their presentations, informed the workshop content.

Additional data was derived from group discussions (two collaborative group work sessions, where each session contained a set of five groups each consisting of four to seven participants) at a workshop held in May 2019, and from plenary discussions held at a workshop in November 2019. The following questions were asked:

1. Which motives and perceptions behind populism should be addressed more intensively by SD?
2. How should this be done in practice?
3. How would current SD policy need to change in the context of rising populism?
4. How can this be accomplished in practice and by whom?

Instead of focusing on how SD policy could address drivers of RWP, question 3–4 looked more at how current sustainability policies would need to change to be better able to address the reasons behind the rise in RWPPs. The results from the first workshop informed the follow-up workshop. The second workshop looked more closely at how SD policy could provide opportunities to address democratic challenges to EU policy and politics. Within this workshop, however, there were no separate group activities, but rather questions were asked and answered in plenary, so that everyone could comment on the topics relating to perceived influencing factors of RWP and appropriate SD policy responses. The workshop reports can be accessed through the ESDN website (see supplementary materials).

The expertise and role of the ESDN members as national policymakers, as well as the insights from SD experts, resulted in a highly informed discussion on challenges of implementing the 2030 Agenda amidst rising RWP influence, as well as potential governance and policy responses. The sessions were designed to foster peer learning between policymakers and the results were recorded and documented in the subsequent Workshop Report [47]. The results were grouped thematically according to perceived influencing factors and appeal of RWP in Europe and perceived RWP critique (points of divergence) of SD policy and 2030 Agenda implementation. The analytical framework of worldviews facilitated

collation of the results on policy and governance implications. Rather than discerning individual responses, the analysis focused on commonalities of discourse and larger narratives of policy and governance that could be linked to a discussion on diverging or converging worldviews regarding the 2030 Agenda and RWP influence in European politics as identified by the policymakers attending the workshops.

### 3. Results

Based on the group and plenary discussions, the results below constitute the observations and reflections of policymakers attending the workshops. The collated results are thematically presented, using the analytical framework with connections made to the literature review.

#### 3.1. Addressing Influencing Factors and Appeal of RWP in Europe

The workshop discussions placed particular emphasis on structural changes, such as depopulation of rural regions, perceived changing cultural identity, fear of change and aspects which could be related to a “democratic dilemma” linked to a perceived gap between voters’ ideals and those of elected representatives. The proposed policy responses considered the need to ensure the justness and inclusiveness of policy. In relation to a frequently discussed topic of fear as a perceived influence on the increased support of RWPPs in Europe, it was argued that this should be met proactively through the inclusion of emotion and emotion management in governance processes and through more inclusive policymaking. The narrative concerning inclusive policy was further coupled with both establishing appropriate communication channels and recognising redistributive properties or unintended side effects of subsidies and taxation incentives. Workshop participants specifically stated that there was a need for redistributive policies to combat inequalities, and a need to be clear and transparent in communicating not only trade-offs, but also potential benefits of sustainability policy. The discussion of influencing factors and proposed policy responses are summarised in Table 3 below.

Connecting the workshop discussions to the intended worldview of the 2030 Agenda (see Table 2), one finds a reinforcement of the fairness, participatory and inclusive values, and societal vision. In relation to the previous critique of the diverging worldviews of growth and degrowth in the 2030 Agenda, the policy and governance responses above diverge from or seek to reconcile the potential negative consequences of the growth paradigm insofar as they propose redistributive measures and transparency regarding trade-offs and potential “winners and losers” of any transition.

In the presence of structural challenges and a growing fear of change, the workshop participants highlighted the strategic tactic of RWPPs in capitalising on such developments to build political momentum, these appeals are summarised in Table 4. It was noted that one of the appeals of RWP was to address the undercurrents of fear by shifting blame towards a perceived enemy rather than tackling potential structural causes, thereby providing an immediate outlet for feelings of marginalisation. Overall, workshop discussions highlighted how this “fear-based narrative” could have long-term detrimental consequences for society and the people within it, and that countermeasures were needed [47]. Hence, proposed measures were identified in a proactive stance of targeting structural drivers, but also the need to target faulty analysis and labelling RWP rhetoric for what it is, for example, xenophobic. Moreover, one observed appeal was the tendency of RWP parties to address complex issues with simplistic solutions. Participants noted that such an appeal could be linked to loss of voter faith arising from the previous shortcomings of mainstream parties in terms of their ability to address pressing and complex challenges, such as income disparities and unemployment. This appeal of RWP in Europe was considered particularly precarious in relation to 2030 Agenda implementation, as the simplistic solutions RWP proposed often contained short-term economic targets (often related to support of fossil fuel dependant industries) and in advocating for cultural homogeneity. This can be seen as a point of diverging worldviews, where the 2030 Agenda stipulates the need for inclusive governance and policymaking (“leave no one behind”). The focus on the long-term, intergenerational aspect of sustainability found in the 2030 Agenda potentially cannot be reconciled with the short-term

solutions proposed by RWPPs. Moreover, the simplistic solutions and rhetoric of RWPPs, as perceived by workshop participants, was often associated with neo-nationalistic agendas and scepticism towards international collaboration, and often the “corrupt elites” were linked to international coalitions or supranational organisations. This would reinforce the understanding of a divergence between the cosmopolitan axiology of the 2030 Agenda and the nativist societal vision of RWP.

**Table 3.** Overview of perceived influencing factors, proposed policy and governance responses.

| Influencing Factors of RWP in Europe   | Policy Response  | Governance Response  |
|--|--|--|
| Structural changes to society (de-industrialisation, migration patterns, economic inequality and unemployment, “forgotten regions” due to depopulation). | Focus on integrating “just transition” into SD policies, consider aspects such as redistribution of wealth and job displacement. | Co-benefit communication regarding SD, talking about trade-offs and being clear and transparent with winners and losers of any transition.   |
| “Fear of change” due to perceived changing of cultural identity and fear of unknown.   | Policy and governance need to be inclusive, understanding perceptions and motives can help address undercurrents of fear.        | Processes should consider emotions/emotion management. Politicians should listen to and understand people and include views of young people. |
| “Democratic dilemma” in perceived gap between voters’ ideals and those of elected representatives manifested through voter discontent.                   | Portraying SD as a viable solution in addressing reasons behind loss in voter faith in democracy and their sense of exclusion.   | Establish appropriate channels of communication to address loss of voter faith and perceived exclusion.                                      |

**Table 4.** Overview of the perceived appeals of RWP in Europe.

| Appeals of RWP in Europe   | Policy Response  | Governance Response  |
|--|--|--|
| Addresses the undercurrents of fear through scapegoating rhetoric and creating a perceived enemy in the form of corrupt elites or an external threat to “traditional society”. | Target faulty analyses and rhetoric.   | Steer SD dialogue and communication towards providing solutions that address concerns giving life to RWP rhetoric and provide different way forward.                 |
| Addressing complex issues with often simplistic solutions.   | Achieve political consensus regarding 2030 Agenda implementation and make it more concrete, practical and local. | Communicating policy goals and targets that are concrete to voters in a way that is understandable and includes positive results.                                    |
| Tactical in portraying political stance as rooted in the “will of the people”.   | Ensure ownership and civil participation in implementing SDGs.   | Fostering wider societal participation in SD policymaking, which increases buy-in and ownership.   |
| Contributing to mobilisation of previously alienated voters.   | Utilise momentum of mobilisation to reach out to previously alienated voters.                                    | Communication and participation to include those who believe the mainstream political system has left them behind. Foster engagement and participatory policymaking. |

According to workshop participants, counterbalancing this populist appeal required achieving a general cross-party consensus on 2030 Agenda implementation and further action on making the 2030 Agenda more tangible, “where changes can be seen and felt” [47] (p. 17). The group discussion also stressed the importance of transparency and communicating positive examples of how complex issues have been addressed to decrease the growing feelings of discontent towards governing parties. Two of the central appeals discussed were the strategy of RWPPs to claim representation of “the will of the people” and bringing in voters who feel unrepresented by mainstream parties. The workshop discussions connected this appeal to a systemic failure, which exacerbates a potential democratic dilemma of voters expressing discontent as they perceive possible incongruence between their own ideals and those of elected representatives. In addressing these appeals, the discussants pointed to the need for urgent reforms in ensuring policy that is representative of its constituents. Therefore, the 2030 Agenda and its narrative of participatory and inclusive governance could be used to foster local ownership and collective mobilisation around SD. The mobilisation of previously alienated voters could bring unrepresented voices into democratic processes rather than excluding them [23].

### 3.2. Addressing RWP and the 2030 Agenda

Focusing on transformation towards sustainability in times of rising populism, the presentations and group discussions addressed the RWPP critique on SD, climate and environmental policies, presented in Table 5. In RWP rhetoric, climate and SD policy was often seen as being part of the discourse of the “elite” and the establishment that reflects a cosmopolitan and urban project requiring complex and technocratic implementation, in conflict with the homogenous, traditional and materialistic narrative. It was argued in the workshops that the 2030 Agenda could become an easy target for RWPPs, as it is based on complex science, is future-oriented (targets can appear abstract and intangible) and the discourse tends to take place among the “scientific elite”. Because of these factors, the 2030 Agenda could be susceptible to right-wing populists viewing it as a “consensus of the elite”. The ambitious and complex nature of the 2030 Agenda was therefore seen as susceptible to the RWP appeal of proposing simplistic solutions to complex problems, and examples of loss of voters’ faith due to governments stipulating “unachievable targets” of climate change mitigation were voiced [48]. Moreover, participants argued that the presence of conflicting policies within SD policy could provide fertile grounds for RWP critique. As a policy and governance response, the participants argued that governments should avoid such conflicts through streamlining sustainability policy by, for example, the use of mechanisms of policy coherence.

**Table 5.** Overview of perceived critique by RWPPs of climate and sustainability policy in Europe.

| RWP Critique  | Policy Response  | Governance Response   |
|---|--|---|
| Climate and sustainability challenges appear technical, over-ambitious and complex. The future-oriented approach can open up critique regarding tangibility.                                | Policy needs to provide clear scenarios and not be conflicting e.g., abolishing fossil fuel subsidies.   | Mechanisms of policy coherence and integration.   |
| Discourse on climate and sustainability challenges appear “technocratic”, driven by science upheld by a “consensus of the elite”, and largely framed as an urban or cosmopolitan endeavour. | Ensure that policy measures are inclusive and do not place unnecessary burdens on e.g., rural populations.   | Strive for a new regime of a “SDG civil participation” and ownership, diversity, include younger generations, industry and civil society groups.                                      |
| Climate policies seen as “economically unfavourable”, “socially unfair”, imposing costs and leading to a dismantling of “statehood” and security.   | Develop climate policies that are fair and just.   | Highlight the socio-economical aspects of SDGs, focus on transparency in terms of mitigating impacts on potential winners and losers to foster burden-sharing in a socially just way. |
| Discourse surrounding challenges of climate change and SD tends to be fear-based narratives that create a sense of urgency, but also opening up critique.                                   | 2030 Agenda implementation needs to concentrate on building a narrative of the “good life”, focusing on opportunities and incentives that bring alternatives and proposes concrete outcomes for all. | Communication centred around concrete outcomes of SD policies. Transparency regarding communicating winners and losers of policies.   |

Most of the discussion groups concluded there was a need for sustainability policy to provide clear scenarios and display concrete actions on different spatial and temporal scales. The potential critique of the 2030 Agenda being technocratic and remaining an urban endeavour opened up discussions on the redistributive properties of sustainability policies and on how governance mechanisms and policy processes would need to ensure diversity of participation and ownership of SDG implementation. Highlighting the socio-economical aspects of the SDGs to ensure socially just policies was further mentioned as a potential response to critiques of the lack of “fairness” of climate and sustainability policy. Moreover, one reoccurring discussion theme focused on the negative impact of the fear-based narrative often utilised by RWPPs, but also by climate and sustainability policies: participants indicated there was a need to create positive narratives of “the good life in 2050” in connection with the SDGs.



## 4. Discussion

Analysis of RWP and the 2030 Agenda shows that they both appear to be responses to similar structural challenges. The environmental, economic and social problems addressed by the SDGs are the very societal issues described as triggers or harbingers of populism. However, in relation to axiology and societal vision, RWP is often linked to strong emphasis on national interests over cosmopolitanism, but also a provision for the “ordinary people” at the expense of those defined as the “threat” to a particular lifestyle. Where the 2030 Agenda expresses tenets of egalitarianism and cosmopolitanism, RWP often is connected to traditionalism and nativism. Understanding the drivers, appeals and critique, furthermore, offered a reflective opportunity to reconsider sustainability policy and to be proactive in the face of increasing RWP influence. Rather than addressing RWP reactively, sustainability policy needs, according to the key actors charged with its implementation in Europe, to adopt and evolve into becoming more practical, tangible and inclusive, while being more open about the need to address socio-economic trade-offs and mitigate inequalities. Instead of assimilating RWP rhetoric to rid it of its oppositional power, it became evident that the differences should be acknowledged and that there is a need to surround SD with a positive narrative rather than succumb to the new politics of fear.

### 4.1. Governance and Policy Challenges

One of the major discussion themes regarded the appeal of RWP to those who feel alienated by mainstream politics and governing parties. Essentially a structural issue, the lack of representation, participation and inclusive governance, the democratic dilemma or perceived feeling of “being left behind” appeared to be an underlying factor driving increased RWP influence. The importance of considering factors that contribute to the appeal of RWP and potential policy responses becomes salient in the light of previous research stating that one of the most “dangerous” responses to RWP is the tendency of mainstream parties to adopt RWP discourses and agendas to stifle its oppositional power [1,45]. The discussions addressing the appeal of RWP were, in contrast, emphasising proactive responses in addressing underlying factors and utilising a potential mobilisation of constituents previously marginalised in political processes. The reoccurring call for inclusive participation indicates that the key message of “leave no one behind” still proves a difficult notion to implement in policy and governance processes.

Recognising the increased RWP voter support as a legitimate critique of previous policymaking and structural issues may provide momentum to redesign governance processes or consider the redistributive and equality perspective of SD policies. One of the discussion points in the second workshop, however, asked whether the current governance structures in place were equipped to handle the transformational changes that the 2030 Agenda requires. It was thrown into question whether such participatory approaches are inclusive or representative of society. Hence, there was consensus that the governance systems would need to change to accommodate participatory approaches for effective policy design and implementation, especially considering the transformative nature of the 2030 Agenda. The internal policy inconsistencies in the 2030 Agenda should not be forgotten, as suggestions regarding the need for redistributive policies would indicate an attempt to modify the potential negative consequences associated with the worldview of SD as driven by growth [44], indicating a need to reconcile different worldviews within the 2030 Agenda and policymaking responsible for its implementation.

### 4.2. Complexity and Science–Policy Interface

A major concern that arose during the workshops was how the complexity and connection to an international scientific consensus made the 2030 Agenda vulnerable in the face of rising RWP influence in Europe. Although science often is heralded as key to bridging different worldviews, an overreliance on natural science, which excludes alternative worldviews and knowledge from,

for instance, social sciences, may have contributed to an understanding of climate and SD policies as reductionist or technocratic [7,8], rendering it susceptible to critique from RWPPs. Considering the workshop discussions, the science–policy challenge may be less related to the epistemological understanding of what can be known (the science behind SD policy) and more about the trust in institutions and actors that communicate science. Linking this to one of the factors influencing the gap between voters’ ideals and those of elected representatives, the complexity and vast extent of available information may further impact the ability of voters to make informed choices and thus heighten a potential democratic dilemma [49]. Understanding fear and discontent as sources of legitimate societal critique was seen during the workshop as a chance for policymakers to utilise this momentum to design and promote sustainable solutions considerate and inclusive of alternative worldviews. This topic opened a discussion about broadening the science–policy interface to include an understanding of emotions, and thereby ensure policy that is representative of its constituents while fostering legitimacy and inclusive policymaking, signalling the need for increased attention to the role of emotions in politics [50]. In contrast, the workshop discussants also stressed the importance of science in targeting what they considered faulty and overly negative analysis used by RWP to gain voter support. Considering the key role of science in policymaking, therefore, led to discussions on how the policy–science interface could be made more inclusive, transparent and accessible, and on how to reconsider what to base policy on (for example, considerations of emotions, such as fear) and find appropriate channels and means of communication to make science more accessible and transparent, while eliminating technocratic hurdles to citizen engagement.

Moreover, the focus on short-term or simple solutions to complex issues, often coupled with RWPP agendas, could constitute a point of conflict in 2030 Agenda implementation, as the SDGs address the role of future generations and long-term strategic changes. However, workshop participants noted that RWPPs often lacked viable alternatives to address systemic failures once in government, indicating that RWP was seen more as a strategic opposition designed to mobilise political support rather than a governing force capable of affecting previous work done in SDG implementation. For instance, a keynote presenter at one of the workshops argued that, while populists can succeed very well if they find enemies and new targets to attribute blame, this type of rhetoric, fear mongering and heightened tension is very draining to society and the people within it, and failure to identify enemies would lead to loss of voter support. Hence, the workshop participants noted the importance of not succumbing to similar fear-based discourses in communications surrounding 2030 Agenda and SDG implementation.

## 5. Conclusions

The results of this paper show that implementing the 2030 Agenda in times of rising RWP was of considerable concern to the high-level policymakers active within the ESDN. Five years has passed since the 2030 Agenda was adopted and the message from the policymakers seems clear: more needs to be done, particularly in terms of proactive policy responses and governance, to address the prevalent structural inequalities and democratic dilemma to make sure the Agenda’s objective of “leave no one behind” is delivered in practice. The results of this article show that the political reality does not always echo the sentiments of the egalitarian and inclusive worldview in which the 2030 Agenda and SDGs are framed. The question remains whether this gap is due to the lack of capacity in institutions to address the transformative challenges, or due to clashes within the SD discourse itself.

Understanding the expressed discontent and subsequent political mobilisation around RWPPs could potentially offer an opportunity for governing parties to reconsider current policies and governance mechanisms in light of the need to tackle issues relating to democratic dilemmas, potential injustices and lack of transparency. Considering the potential similarities of an ontological nature of the perceived problem to be addressed, the 2030 Agenda and SDGs may offer an alternative to RWP in mobilising political support to overcome structurally based societal challenges. However, changes in how SD is communicated are paramount to avoid risks of pigeonholing SD as a “consensus of the elite”. A proposed governance response is to create positive narratives around SD and the 2030

Agenda and foster participatory co-creation of the future of SD policy. This can be done by articulating the potential of SD for other worldviews, addressing the fear of being left behind or not listened to by government and ensuring people's well-being, safety and prosperity. To make "better" SD policies, governance mechanisms need to be inclusive, participatory and take account of different worldviews that may be perceived as being hostile to SD. However, upon closer examination, the perceived fears driving RWP in Europe and this worldview, as perceived by workshop participants, can be addressed and answered by the 2030 Agenda. Communication of SD, therefore, is important, because what seems to be two opposing worldviews, SD and RWP, may not actually need to stand in opposition to one another, nor be perceived by the other as "bad" or as "corrupt elites", as they both seek to address the fears people have expressed.

In using the framework and the reflective analytical approach of worldviews, we were able to discern both points of convergence and divergence between RWP and the 2030 Agenda. Such an analysis enabled us to understand ways in which RWPPs growing influence in Europe may impact the implementation of the 2030 Agenda, as seen through the eyes of the core actors charged with the implementation of SD policy in Europe over the past 15 years. The unique insights that the ESDN members have as experts in implementing SD policy in Europe allowed them to view the RWP worldview as not necessarily being inherently antagonistic, rather they overwhelmingly focused on how SD policies, so far, have not been communicated or implemented in a way that matters to those who tend to vote for RWPPs. However, as it explicitly states in the 2030 Agenda and is arguably the main premise of the entire document serving as its core foundation, no one should be left behind as the world transitions to a more sustainable path. In understanding the perceived worldviews of those who vote for RWPPs, these policymakers see the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs as viable answers to solving the concerns that form the basis or appeal of RWP worldviews.

**Supplementary Materials:** The empirical material for this article can also be found in Workshop Reports, with parts of Workshop outcomes shared in Quarterly Reports available at [www.sd-network.eu](http://www.sd-network.eu).

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