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Reinforcing unsustainable welfare in Europe? Growth-centrism, Eurocentrism and anthropocentrism in the 2024 EU Europarty election manifestos

Viktor Lovén and Joe Whelan

Abstract

There is an emerging body of literature on sustainable welfare suggesting that Europe needs sustainable welfare policies to mitigate the crises of environmental destruction and growing social inequalities. However, research about how such policies are politically embraced within the EU context is less developed. Therefore, based on sustainable welfare as a normative framework, this article focuses on political parties at the EU level and evaluates the ideologies and discourses that underpin their election manifestos. Critical discourse analysis and theories of postcolonial intersectionality are used to examine the 2024 election manifestos of what were then the three largest Europarties in the EU: European People's Party (EPP), Party of European Socialists (PES) and Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe Party (ALDE). The findings indicate that the manifestos focus on economic growth, European superiority and the subordination of nature and non-humans. In contrast, the normative framework of sustainable welfare denotes a combination of social and environmental sustainability over economic growth and values solidarity with nature, non-humans and people in all parts of the world. Therefore, this article suggests that the Europarties do the direct opposite of aligning with sustainable welfare–reinforcing unsustainable welfare in Europe.

Keywords

discourse analysis, Europarties, political manifestos, postcolonial intersectionality, sustainable welfare

Introduction

Climate change threatens both human and planetary wellbeing and must be acted upon urgently to secure a liveable and sustainable future (IPCC, 2023). While addressing the environmental crisis, European welfare states must simultaneously address a range of other crises, including rising inequalities and

Social Work and Social Policy, Trinity College Dublin, Dublin, Ireland

Corresponding author:
Joe Whelan, Social Work and Social Policy, Trinity College Dublin, The University of Dublin, College Green, Dublin 2 D02 PN40, Ireland.
Email: JWHELAN9@tcd.ie

ageing populations (Paulsson et al., 2024). These multiple challenges of social, economic and environmental sustainability are all interconnected and need to be studied and addressed interconnectedly (Laurent, 2021; Sabato and Mandelli, 2018).

Moreover, it is not sustainable to address current challenges with traditional welfare policies that prioritise economic growth (Hvinden et al., 2022; Paulsson et al., 2024; Whelan, 2024, forthcoming). Economic growth has led to higher standards of living in some nations, with longer and healthier lives and very high levels of comfort, but these benefits have come with both social and ecological costs (Mailhot and Perkins, 2022). The pursuit of economic growth has been associated not only with rising emissions, environmental destruction, global warming and loss of biodiversity, but also with exploitative economic systems, social problems and greater inequality of wealth and income (Whelan, 2022, 2024; Gough, 2017; Kallis et al., 2020; Murphy, 2023; Paulson and Büchs, 2022). To adapt to current challenges, a normative framework of sustainable welfare suggests that Europe must transform into a region that is decoupled from growth and meets human needs within environmental limits (Gough, 2017; Koch, 2022; Schoyen et al., 2022). In this respect, this article moblilises *sustainable welfare* as a normative framework.

Sustainable welfare combines social and ecological issues, prioritises them over economic issues and aims to decouple welfare from growth through social policies such as minimum and basic incomes and universal basic services, fiscal policies such as higher taxes on wealth and environmentally impactful products such as meat, and labour market policies such as working time reductions (Koch, 2022). Sustainable welfare also broadly promotes solidarity with nature, non-humans and people in distant parts of the world, acknowledging that the world requires equal distribution of welfare and resources both within countries and across rich and poor countries (Schoyen et al., 2022).

Deploying sustainable welfare as a normative framework, the main objective of this article is to evaluate the ideologies and discourses that underpinned the 2024 election manifestos of three of the most established and largest Europarties in the EU: the European People's Party (EPP), the Party of European Socialists (PES) and the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe Party (ALDE). Discourses in the context of this study are denoted as shared ways of apprehending the world, through highlighting certain perceptions, norms and values, while subduing others (Dryzek, 2022). In this respect, this article examines what is both highlighted and subdued in the manifestos of the three Europarties.

The context: Limits to growth-led welfare

European welfare systems are likely to turn to economic growth to find solutions for the current challenges of climate change, deep and rising inequalities and 'burdensome' demographic developments of ageing populations. Indeed, growth is the central policy goal for most governments and has been the traditional silver bullet for almost any welfare state crisis (Corlet Walker et al., 2021). Welfare and growth are in a symbiotic relationship, where growth relies on welfare to contribute to healthy and educated workers and increased productivity, while it is simultaneously considered crucial to stabilise and legitimise welfare states through providing employment and rising wages along with financing welfare services and benefits (Büchs and Koch, 2019; Farnsworth and Irving, 2016; Gough, 2017).

The symbiotic relationship can be seen across the political spectrum. The political left and right disagree on many issues, but may for different reasons share policies of pursuing full employment and economic growth, which creates the wealth they distribute (Fitzpatrick, 2016). Social policy actors also continue to reinforce the advantages of employment and economic growth (Bonvin and Laruffa, 2022), which inherently value wage labour higher than unpaid labour (Mailhot and Perkins, 2022). If the relationship between growth and welfare has traditionally been symbiotic, less growth may appear to threaten both the financial stability and political legitimacy of the welfare state (Gough, 2017).

Growth may, however, only play a marginal role in stabilising welfare states. The dependency of welfare on growth tends to be taken for granted even though welfare states can arguably function without growth, if there are alternative purposes or alternative means of financing them (Laurent, 2021). Welfare states could potentially, for example, finance welfare without growth through policies such as tax reforms, private finance regulations, price controls, universal public services and job guarantees (Olk et al., 2023) or through reducing welfare demand by promoting more preventative, local and relational welfare (Corlet Walker et al., 2021).

Moreover, not only should it be possible for welfare states to decouple from growth— current global trends undoubtedly require it (Corlet Walker et al., 2021; Murphy, 2023). Such a decoupling requires deliberate proactive design of new policies that pursue equity, justice, sustainability and sufficiency goals, prioritising human needs and sufficiency for all over the maximising of individual wants and consumer preferences for some (Gough, 2017). However, an understanding of the dynamics behind this redesigning is only beginning to develop within social policy research (Corlet Walker et al., 2021) and may not even have begun to develop within political parties. Therefore, while a growth-led welfare state model is clearly reaching the limits of environmental sustainability and intergenerational justice (Bonvin and Laruffa, 2022), parties across the political spectrum, whether through apathy or ignorance, tend to ignore obligations to nature, non-humans and future generations by predicating their policies on growth (Fitzpatrick, 2016).

Given that growth-dependent welfare is unsustainable for nature, humans and future generations, a normative framework of sustainable welfare suggests new innovative policies that successfully combine social and ecological priorities, are decoupled from growth and meet human needs within environmental limits (Gough, 2017; Koch, 2022; Paulsson et al., 2024; Schoyen et al., 2022). Traditional policy instruments do not fit the current context of economic and ecological crises (Hvinden et al., 2022). Therefore, a new generation of welfare policies may better adapt to present challenges and acknowledge that it is not only today's welfare state citizens who have the right to wellbeing, but also nature, non-humans, future generations and people in other parts of the world.

This new generation of policies could, for example, begin to value socially and environmentally beneficial jobs higher than socially and environmentally harmful jobs (Gough, 2017; Murphy, 2023). Moroever, such policies can reject dominant values of individualism, consumption and competition to reimagine work, time, income, care and welfare through valuing other diverse contributions to society through socially useful activities that promote social inclusion (Murphy, 2023). Laruffa et al. (2022) propose welfare models that enable citizens to live, work and care differently, with participation income as a potential key policy. They suggest a broader view of participation, such that a citizen can participate in society in other ways than through employment and that care and social reproduction are valued forms of participation. However, this new generation of policies appear to be absent from policy at the level of the Europarties.

What are the Europarties?

For clarity and context, Europarties are extra-parliamentary organisations that assemble national parties to pursue shared political objectives within EU politics (Johansson and Raunio, 2022). They are broadly invisible to most European citizens (Raunio, 2022) and are not directly elected in EU elections (Hackemann, 2023), yet they are arguably in a powerful position to shape EU laws, policies and agendas (Johansson and Raunio, 2022). Europarties decide on resolutions and produce transnational election manifestos (Ahrens and Miller, 2023) that state their positions on EU agenda issues (Hackemann, 2023). These manifestos are valuable sources of data, because they provide important indications regarding the values and priorities of European political families (Jadot and Kelbel, 2017) and the different visions that compete to determine the future of the EU (Cooper et al., 2019).

Since the politicians in the EU make laws and create frameworks, it is important to investigate what norms and values they reinforce in their political manifestos and what knowledge they choose to include or exclude

when they define problems and suggest strategies for the future. Political parties not only reflect public opinion and political debates, but also shape them (Derndorfer et al., 2022). In their election manifestos, they set policy agendas and propose solutions to address societal challenges (Zúñiga, 2018). Even though political parties do not determine public policy solely, they are one of the central actors in designing and formulating it and they influence how social, economic and environmental policies are prioritised (Derndorfer et al., 2022).

Similar to how Europarties are increasingly influential within EU politics, the EU is also increasingly influential within its member states. Both social policies and climate policies are still primarily the responsibility of the member states, but the EU is to a larger extent coordinating and regulating these policy areas to create synergies between social, economic and environmental issues (Sabato et al., 2022). Since the EU is increasingly influencing its member states and the Europarties are increasingly powerful in EU policy making, it is becoming more and more crucial to study the Europarties.

The research in this article focuses on the 2024 election manifestos of three well established and influential Europarties: Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe Party (ALDE), European People's Party (EPP) and Party of European Socialists (PES). Between them, these parties have controlled the majority of seats in the European Commission since the 1950s (Johansson and Raunio, 2022) and prior to the 2024 election they held 25 of the total 27 Commissioners (European Commission, 2024). Their respective political groups were the largest groups in the European Parliament, holding approximately 60% of the total seats (European Parliament, 2023). Following the 2024 EU elections this figure decreased to 56%, with the EPP and PES remaining the largest, but the ALDE group dropping to fifth place, overtaken by both the Patriots for Europe and the European Conservatives and Reformists (European Parliament, 2025).

Method

The manifestos of the three Europarties mentioned above were examined using critical discourse analysis (CDA) based on Fairclough's (1995) three-dimensional model for empirical research in communication, culture and society. This comprises of describing the text, interpreting the discursive themes and explaining them in a wider sociocultural context. These three dimensions were examined separately and systematically. In the first instance, the text in the manifestos were described through examining wording and vocabulary along with highlighted and suppressed information. This included not only a language observation of how social, economic and environmental challenges are conceptualised and articulated, but also a content observation of highlighted and suppressed statements and information and the most preferred concepts in the manifestos. The text references were then systematically coded and sorted into categories.

Following this, the text references for each category were analysed and interpreted and each category was given a discursive theme label. Finally, after further interpreting the discursive themes, they were explained within a wider sociocultural context to examine their potential implications for contemporary social policy, the welfare state and society at large. Discourses not only reflect existing social structures and power relations in society, but they also play a role in reproducing or changing these structures and relations (Fairclough, 1995; Leotti et al., 2022). Therefore, this last dimension of the critical discourse analysis not only highlighted existing power structures that shape the discursive themes in the manifestos, but also discussed how these themes may shape future power structures in society.

Theoretical and conceptual framework

The critical discourse analysis was guided by a theoretical framework of postcolonial intersectionality and a conceptual framework of the sustainability trilemma. The first framework enabled a move beyond Eurocentrism and anthropocentrism to find and interpret discourses from more global and counter-hegemonic perspectives; the latter not only provided a framework for the coding and categorising of discourses, but also contributed to interpreting the relationships between the sustainability dimensions and to explain the sharp contrast

between the manifestos and a normative framework of sustainable welfare.

During the interpretative and explanatory phases of the analysis, postcolonial intersectionality arguably contributed to promoting counter-hegemonic perspectives, alternative socio-ecological relations and expanded power asymmetries. The use of this framework enabled a more profound critique of the values and long-held beliefs that are agreed upon as universal and 'common sense' in European political communication across the political spectrum. Postcolonial intersectionality goes beyond gender, race and class and includes coloniality, international relations and wider combinations of socio-ecological inequalities (Lozano Lerma, 2019), which can contribute to an expanded interconnectedness of race, gender, class, species and environmental violence (Tola, 2022), treating human oppression of non-humans and nature as similar to racism, sexism, ableism and other forms of oppression (Rowe, 2016).

The effects of the postcolonial intersectionality framework re-emerges in the findings section and the focus on the similarities between the anthropocentric, Eurocentric, racialised and capitalistic-normative dimensions of the manifestos under scrutiny are returned to again in the discussion. The findings, therefore, not only highlighted how anthropocentrism, Eurocentrism and growth-centrism are connected to each other, but also how they are underpinned by an overarching Western ontology of separation that sees and constructs the world through a lens of 'us and them'. An ontology of separation divides the world into binaries where one pole is subordinated to the other, for example the non-human to the human, the 'uncivilised primitives' to the civilised Europeans, the other to the self, the community to the individual, the black to the white and the feminine to the masculine (Escobar, 2020).

This ontology is in sharp contrast to the normative framework of sustainable welfare, which is more connected to the many relational ontologies that exist around the world. Relational ontologies prioritise equality, cooperation and the diversity of all life forms, where people are humble parts of nature instead of anthropocentric promoters of economic growth (Kothari et al., 2019). These ontologies value cooperation and respect for all other beings rather than competitiveness, power, growth, ownership and domination over others (Escobar, 2020). However, the biocentric focus in these models is often ignored in academic and policy domains in the West (Van Norren, 2020).

Finally, the descriptive and interpretative phases of the analysis were guided by a conceptual framework of the complex relationship between the three sustainability dimensions—referred to here as the sustainability trilemma. The trilemma has been called a three-way conflict between biosphere, society and economy (Gough, 2017), a welfare-growth-transition trilemma (Laurent, 2021) and an eco-social-growth trilemma (Sabato and Mandelli, 2018). Laurent (2021) elaborates on the trilemma and suggests that two of the sustainability dimensions tend to be highlighted while the third is often suppressed. With this in mind, the *social democracy dimension* combines the social and economic dimensions, stabilising the welfare state through economic growth without consideration for destabilising the environment. The *green growth dimension* prioritises growth and environment over welfare, using the ecological transition to increase economic growth with trickle-down prosperity. Finally, the *just transition dimension* prioritises welfare and environment, abandons economic growth and uses the power of the welfare state to make the ecological transition just and sustainable. Where these dimensions are present, or indeed suppressed, is noted in the findings that follow.

Findings

As noted, the interpretative phase was guided by the frameworks of the sustainability trilemma and postcolonial intersectionality. The former contributed to interpreting themes of sustainability relations, such as the social democracy, green growth and just transition dimensions, and the latter contributed to finding and interpreting themes of Eurocentrism and anthropocentrism. The themes found in the respective manifesto are further elaborated in the following sections.

Discursive themes in the PES manifesto. The social democratic PES manifesto aims for a social, democratic and secure Europe that is equal and socially just with a strong and competitive economy, using words such as social, people, support, protect and rights. The PES manifesto promotes 'solutions for a better quality of life' (PES Manifesto, 2024: 5), 'open and democratic societies' (PES Manifesto, 2024: 12) and 'a fairer world' (PES Manifesto, 2024: 18). The manifesto promotes well-funded, accessible and efficient public services to foster wellbeing, safety and security for the most vulnerable (PES Manifesto, 2024: 9). It seeks to create quality jobs, raise salaries and boost the purchasing power (PES Manifesto, 2024: 6) and to support businesses and secure a strong and competitive European economy (PES Manifesto, 2024: 8).

The PES manifesto displays discursive themes from all three trilemma dimensions, which are summarised in this article through the following discursive labels: *protect our welfare states and social market economy* (social democracy dimension), *a green deal with a red heart* (just transition dimension) and *green investments to create new jobs* (green growth dimension). The social democracy theme connects welfare and growth and highlights the fight against 'unemployment, poverty and social exclusion' (PES Manifesto, 2024: 6), securing the 'right to quality jobs with fair wages by guaranteeing workers' rights' (PES Manifesto, 2024: 4). It aims to invest in 'quality green jobs, sustainable wellbeing and a dynamic economy' (PES Manifesto, 2024: 3). The just transition theme connects welfare and ecology in a green social deal through explicitly acknowledging that 'social justice and climate justice are interconnected' (PES Manifesto, 2024: 7). Finally, the green growth theme is seen in the focus on green and digital investments to ensure that Europe's economy is 'innovative, competitive and circular' (PES Manifesto, 2024: 8).

In addition to the three discursive themes associated with the sustainability trilemma, two other main themes were found in the analysis of the PES manifesto. Benefitting from postcolonial intersectionality theories, which provides tools to reveal global power relations and wider combinations of socio-ecological inequalities, the analysis found discursive themes of Eurocentrism and anthropocentrism, which are summarised in this article through the following discursive labels: *a strong Europe is best for the world* and *nature exists for the ben*eignty' (PES Manifesto, 2024: 8), 'the EU's external borders' (PES Manifesto, 2024: 15) and 'Europe's place in the world' (PES Manifesto, 2024: 19). This assumes that the EU way should be world leading, with further efforts to 'strengthen the diplomatic and political role of the EU on the global scene' (PES Manifesto, 2024: 19). The reasoning mooted for taking more global responsibility is to benefit Europe's own security (PES Manifesto, 2024: 19), protect its own farmers from unfair competition (PES Manifesto, 2024: 10) and 'defend EU values and interests' (PES Manifesto, 2024: 19). Similarly, there is an anthropocentric theme that humans must take care *efit of humans*. The manifesto aims to 'strengthen Europe's soverof nature for the benefit of humans. Instead of highlighting the climate and biodiversity crises as threats to nature, the crises are highlighted as 'real threats to food security and to the livelihood of farmers' (PES Manifesto, 2024: 10).

The PES manifesto seeks a just transition and a 'Green Deal with a red heart, allying social and ecological policies' (PES Manifesto, 2024: 7). However, economic objectives are also prioritised in an effort to combine all dimensions through a Europe where 'social, economic and environmental progress go hand in hand' (PES Manifesto, 2024: 3). There is a focus on the social democracy dimension to protect the symbiotic relationship between welfare and growth and since the PES manifesto assumes that welfare depends on growth, it also prioritises the green growth dimension for the purpose of securing economic sustainability for future welfare. Economic growth is at the centre of the manifesto, assumed to be the enabler to protect both welfare and nature, with a need to become greener and more socially just to be sustainable for the future. It is, however, questionable what levels of social and environmental justice the policies set out in the PES manifesto can actually achieve. Improvements based on growth-centrism, Eurocentrism and anthropocentrism appear neither green nor

red-hearted in actuality and may end up impeding what they aim to improve.

Discursive themes in the EPP manifesto. Social sustainability is highlighted in the Christian democratic EPP manifesto through an aim to unite, to 'strengthen families' (EPP Manifesto, 2024: 20), to protect European 'core values' (EPP Manifesto, 2024: 2) and to fight 'for a strong Europe that protects its people' (EPP Manifesto, 2024: 2). The EPP manifesto also highlights economic sustainability through promoting the European social market economy, which has 'brought prosperity, jobs and social peace to Europe' (EPP Manifesto, 2024: 9). The EPP stands for 'a competitive Europe that boosts its economy and creates quality jobs, while building a good economic future for everyone' (EPP Manifesto, 2024: 2).

The EPP manifesto contains two themes from the trilemma dimensions, which this article summarises and defines with the following discursive labels: *balancing social and market interests* (social democracy dimension) and *business and nature in symbiosis* (green growth dimension). These themes appear to be in concert with one another, but economic growth is clearly prioritised over both social and environmental issues. The EPP implies that in order to run the welfare states of the EU there must be 'conditions for economic growth and prosperity to finance them' (EPP Manifesto, 2024: 18). Furthermore, welfare improvements such as fair and good working conditions, a skilled workforce and 'an efficient, effective and accountable public administration' (EPP Manifesto, 2024: 10) are not primarily linked to the wellbeing of citizens, but framed as a requirement for strengthening European competitiveness and economic performance (EPP Manifesto, 2024: 10). In other words, welfare is assumed not only to depend on growth, competitiveness, innovation, technology and prosperity to provide a good economic future and a better life for everyone, but also to exist for the purpose of Europe remaining competitive globally.

Similarly, green transition and climate protection initiatives are assumed not only to depend on growth, technological investments and economic competitiveness to succeed, but also to exist for the purpose of future economic competitiveness in Europe. The manifesto suggests that 'without climate protection, our economy cannot remain competitive in the long term, but without a competitive economy there can be no sustainable climate protection either' (EPP Manifesto, 2024: 14). In other words, green transition and climate protection initiatives may not be urgent to protect biodiversity and natural resources and secure the survival of the Earth, but to secure the competitiveness of European business and growth for future generations.

This, in turn, relates to an anthropocentric theme of nature only being mentioned in relation to economic perspectives, which was found in the manifesto and summarised in this article through the discursive label *nature aids the social market economy*. The EPP takes pride in having 'shifted the climate agenda to being an economic one' (EPP Manifesto, 2024: 13). The reason behind protecting biodiversity and precious natural resources like water, air and forests is not because the EPP seeks an end to exploiting nature, but because resources are crucial conditions for innovation and 'increasingly pivotal in economic competition' (EPP Manifesto, 2024: 12). Nature is viewed as either a contributor or threat to the social market economy, inferior to the economic, financial and social needs of the citizens: 'Forests provide jobs, ensure economic welfare, store carbon, offer health benefits and combat desertification' (EPP Manifesto, 2024: 18) and wolves and bears, droughts and natural disasters are threats to food security and the jobs of farmers and livestock breeders (EPP Manifesto, 2024: 17–18).

Finally, a strong Eurocentric theme was found in the EPP manifesto, which is summarised in this article through the label *Europe above all*. The EPP stresses the need for Europe to protect 'its own interests' (EPP Manifesto, 2024: 2), its Judeo-Christian culture, heritage and values (EPP Manifesto, 2024: 19) and 'the European way of life' (EPP Manifesto, 2024: 2). Europe is considered superior to the rest of the world regarding its 'common values, the social market economy, and political stability' (EPP Manifesto, 2024: 16). The manifesto describes Europe as a world leader that must shape and lead the future and remain globally competitive through trading with *like-minded*

partners (EPP Manifesto, 2024: 2). European economic competitiveness is even prioritised over people in other parts of the world. For example, the war in Ukraine and the conflicts in the Middle East are highlighted not for their humanitarian consequences, but for their economic consequences that put 'new strain on our growth perspectives' (EPP Manifesto, 2024: 9).

Furthermore, the EPP aims for a strong Europe that protects external borders and prevents illegal immigration. Legal immigrants, on the other hand, can 'become part of our community by integrating themselves and by learning our languages and our values' (EPP Manifesto, 2024: 20). This statement opens up the possibility for immigrants to be a part of the European family, but the offer is conditional, and they are only welcome into this assumed superior culture *if* they are integrated and know the language and values, which is seen as their own responsibility, since *they* need to integrate *themselves*.

This Eurocentrism is further displayed in the investment plan for Africa, where the EPP aims to export Europe's assumed superior social market economy to avoid future immigrants with non-European values. The investment plan seeks to address more effectively the 'root causes of migration' and to help African societies through fostering 'economic prosperity and social development' (EPP Manifesto, 2024: 6). The claim that Europe has the solutions to save the rest of the world relates to new imperialism discourses. Such discourses assume that democracy, freedom and prosperity is threatened by African governments and individuals being incapable of harnessing European notions of 'law and order, markets, good governance, transparency and democracy' (McEwan, 2019: 184). New imperialism can be seen in the claim that the world needs 'European leadership in climate and environmental protection not only to safeguard our planet, but also to promote economic prosperity and food security' (EPP Manifesto, 2024: 2).

The EPP manifesto is riven with the assumption that Europeans and the European economy are superior to both nature, non-humans and people in other parts of the world. In an effort to unify European people and to protect the European way of life, the EPP simultaneously makes it clear through their manifesto what groups are excluded from Europe. For example, the EPP highlights Europe's Judeo-Christian heritage and points out that 'anti-Semitism and radical Islamism spread division and intolerance in our societies' (EPP Manifesto, 2024: 7), but the EPP neither warns against other forms of religious radicalism nor against islamophobia and other religious phobias.

Discursive themes in the ALDE manifesto. Social sustainability is highlighted in the liberal ALDE manifesto through efforts to 'keep Europe free, safe and democratic' (ALDE Manifesto, 2024: 4) and to protect 'individual rights, freedom, and rule of law' (ALDE Manifesto, 2024: 21). Economic sustainability is also highlighted, with the aim to 'boost economic growth' (ALDE Manifesto, 2024: 10) and to advance free trade and the European Single Market that is considered to be 'the backbone of our competitiveness and ability to create jobs' (ALDE Manifesto, 2024: 12).

The social democracy theme in the ALDE manifesto, summarised in this article through the label *maintain welfare to remain competitive*, is underpinned by the relationship between welfare and growth, but where welfare appears inferior to growth. The ALDE aims to maintain the welfare model, invest in the skills of all citizens and uphold world class schools, daycares and hospitals (ALDE Manifesto, 2024: 2). However, of these welfare issues, the manifesto only highlights the importance of skills investment, schools and education, partly in relation to fostering equal opportunities for all, but more strongly in relation to the labour market, for example to provide the human resources needed 'for the European digital sector to compete globally' (16). The ALDE favours growth and competitiveness over welfare also in other areas, aiming for successful migration and integration policies not out of solidarity, empathy, or the benefit of migrants, but to solve the European problem of an ageing population and worsening labour shortages. Anti-immigration is considered bad for business, which is why ALDE stands against populist anti-migrant rhetoric and policies that

'worsen our competitiveness in the global labour market' (ALDE Manifesto, 2024: 25).

The green growth theme is summarised in this article through the discursive label *business and technology save the planet*. The ALDE seeks to 'fight climate change by reducing the use of fossil fuels and stimulate our economic growth' (ALDE Manifesto, 2024: 14). Assuming that business and technology can and will save the climate, the ALDE seeks to provide businesses with incentives to invest in sustainable production to decouple economic growth from the use of natural resources (ALDE Manifesto, 2024: 18) and the negative climate and health impacts (ALDE Manifesto, 2024: 2). This relates to a strong anthropocentric theme in the manifesto, which is summarised in this article through the label *nature only exists in relation to the economy*. This theme was not apparent because the analysis found statements about an asymmetrical relationship between humans and nature, but rather because there was a lack of statements about nature. The ALDE manifesto only addresses the environment in relation to the economy, stressing the importance of using natural resources as little as possible because an overuse is not only causing climate change and harming biodiversity, but also 'making products more expensive and harder to get' (ALDE Manifesto, 2024: 18). The ALDE manifesto calls for resources to be used more efficiently—not to protect nature and save the planet, but to enable the economy to save the planet.

The economy is also present in the Eurocentric theme that was found in the ALDE manifesto and summarised in this article through the label *competitive European economy through cooperation with like-minded.* The ALDE party emphasises European values and aims to 'strengthen the EU's role on the global stage' (ALDE Manifesto, 2024: 5) and to work 'in your and the EU's best interest while setting standards worldwide' (ALDE Manifesto, 2024: 8). It seeks collaboration with 'like-minded countries to strengthen our global influence' (ALDE Manifesto, 2024: 6) and to reduce dependency on regimes that do not share European values: 'The cost-of-living crisis, the pandemic and global lockdowns and conflicts have shown that we rely too much on countries that do not share our values' (ALDE Manifesto, 2024: 8), which according to the ALDE puts European democracy, economy and way of life in danger.

The ALDE assumes that economy and technology, based on a logic of competitiveness, free market and growth, can solve not only economic challenges, but also social and environmental ones. A circular and sustainable economy 'will not only improve our quality of life, but also secure vital resources for our businesses, make less waste and protect the environment' (ALDE Manifesto, 2024: 18).

Discussion: The opposite of sustainable welfare?

Political parties must constantly adapt their ideologies to contemporary contexts. The current interconnected challenges of social inequality and environmental destruction are internationally agreed issues to be addressed through the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development with its three dimensions of social, economic and environmental sustainability (United Nations, nd). Political parties align with these dimensions, by seeking to simultaneously achieve economic growth, environmental sustainability and social justice and well-being, but often end up prioritising one objective at the expense of the others (Sabato and Mandelli, 2018). The findings presented here affirm this claim by demonstrating that the examined manifestos explicitly aim to achieve social, economic and environmental sustainability, but implicitly centre on economic growth at the expense of the others. In addition to the growth-centrism, the examined manifestos also promote Eurocentric and anthropocentric themes of European superiority and subordination of nature and non-humans.

The evaluation of the manifestos in the light of the normative framework of sustainable welfare indicates that the three manifestos appear to be in sharp contrast with the main tenets of the framework. While sustainable welfare prioritises the social and environmental dimensions over economic growth, the three manifestos centre on economic growth at the expense of social and environmental sustainability. Furthermore, sustainable welfare is

solidaristic to nature, non-humans and people in other parts of the world, while the manifestos promote European superiority and the subordination of nature.

The growth-centrism that was found in the manifestos confirms previous research. The EU frames social and environmental goals in a way that 'subordinates them to the economic rationality of growth and competitiveness' (Laruffa and Nullmeier, 2025: 164) and European societies tend to prioritise this rationality at the expense of environmental sustainability and social justice (Sabato et al., 2022). Moreover, every party family tends to link environmental issues with economy and technology and prioritise the latter over the former (Derndorfer et al., 2022). The green growth discourse has emerged as the dominant EU policy response (Hickel and Kallis, 2020; Jessoula and Mandelli, 2022) and is promoted internationally by the OECD, the World Bank and the UN (Carrosio and De Vidovich, 2023). The danger here is that through operating within this green growth paradigm, the EU may give little attention to welfare goals and only promote environmental goals that are not contradictory to economic goals (Jessoula and Mandelli, 2022). Furthermore, relying on growth, competitiveness and other structural conditions of the global political economy may impede efforts to resolve the current social and environmental crises, because it relies on the same institutions and capitalist logics that promoted these crises in the first place (Schulze Waltrup et al., 2023).

In addition to affirming the growth-centrism at the level of European politics, this article suggests that the EU is also underpinned by discursive themes of Eurocentrism and anthropocentrism. To help explain these themes in a wider sociocultural context, theories of postcolonial intersectionality point in the direction that growth-centrism, Eurocentrism and anthropocentrism are all interrelated types of power asymmetries that separate 'us from them' and 'humans from nature'. These centrisms are based on the same legacies of domination, oppression and hierarchy that inform the structural superiority of humans over nature, white over non-white, man over woman, owner over worker, rich over poor and the former European coloniser over the formerly colonised 'rest of the world' (Paulson, 2022). Economic growth was built on the exploitation of both people and nature, and it relies on colonialism, anthropocentrism, patriarchy, discrimination and capitalism's fundamental need to divide and exploit (Mailhot and Perkins, 2022). The creation of an inferior non-European has been necessary to establish the idea of a European identity and moral superiority, which reflects Europe's colonial heritage, with its roots in Christian ideals of solidarity and unity, combined with a pride in European progress and values (Paré, 2022).

It should be noted that European politics is in flux and that this article has methodological limitations regarding data collection, since only the manifestos of three Europarties were analysed, while seven were excluded. In this respect, the analysis is neither a complete examination of European political alignment with sustainable welfare nor of the examined Europarties' history, visions and strategies. Since the findings are merely an exploration of the discourses in the 2024 election manifestos of three Europarties, they cannot be generalised for European political parties at any level of governance. To address these limitations and expand the empirical grounds for further conclusions about European political alignment with sustainable welfare, future research may investigate additional manifestos and policy documents on all levels of governance and interview politicians and decision makers to further understand how discourses are interpreted and transformed into practice and concrete real-life initiatives.

However, despite the data collection limitations, this article may still be relevant for scholars, policymakers and practitioners. It has sought contribute to the emerging body of literature on sustainable welfare and the following two areas that are relatively under-researched: the interconnectedness of social, economic and environmental sustainability in party manifestos (Derndorfer et al., 2022) and political barriers for a transition towards welfare decoupled from growth (Corlet Walker et al., 2021). The article may also encourage a further rethinking of the purpose of welfare. Welfare *reforms* may not be sufficient, but rather a new welfare paradigm of interdependence, solidarity and social citizenship—a reimagination of welfare (Murphy, 2023).

The findings highlight how the political scene in Europe reinforces boundaries of belonging. This underlying logic of inclusion and exclusion, that Europeans are perceived and treated differently from others based on the idea of European identity, can be described as an 'invisible psychological and institutional mechanism of selective solidarity' (Paré, 2022: 53). It is important to be able to see and understand the dynamics behind this mechanism. All social policy interventions should focus on the right for humans to fully belong to society, not only through addressing individual problems, but also through examining the underlying logic that promotes the foundational boundaries of belonging (Lorenz, 2017).

Boundaries of belonging relate to social deservingness and decisions about who deserves to get welfare and what those people have to do to get it. These decisions not only inform how the welfare state apparatus is constituted, but also reflect how that particular society perceives social deservingness, generosity and solidarity (Whelan, 2021). In a similar way, the Europarties decide who deserves to be included in future Europe, which informs how the EU is constituted and reflects how the EU perceives social deservingness, generosity and solidarity. The parties explicitly state that they aim for a Europe for all, but their growth-centrism, Eurocentrism and anthropocentrism suggest otherwise, promoting wider legacies of domination and social hierarchy and reinforcing separational discourses that shape the boundaries of belonging and selective solidarity throughout Europe. Since the three largest political families in Europe establish and naturalise these discourses, they are likely to affect national and regional policies to continue prioritising mainstream in-groups and further marginalising out-groups.

Conclusion

This article contributes to critical awareness of how social, economic and environmental issues are communicated in the election manifestos of some of the most dominant decision makers in the EU, the Europarties. The three examined Europarties all seek to fight climate change, social inequalities, xenophobia and authoritarian politics to secure a free, open and democratic Europe. However, they use rhetorical devices that ultimately exacerbate what they aim to fight. Moreover, any reinforcement of us and them potentially plays into the hands of xenophobic, nationalistic, climate change denying, authoritarian parties, because it naturalises the basic assumptions that underpin the visions and strategies of these parties and strengthens the credibility of anti-relational discourses. Similarly, their reinforcement of green growth discourses that subordinate nature to humans and the economy can justify for example marine life destruction in the strive to open up commercial deep-sea mining of minerals that are in high demand for the green technologies that are crucial in the green transition—thus aiming to save the environment by destroying it.

Using theories of postcolonial intersectionality, this article may contribute to revealing and problematising some of the discursive themes and underlying assumptions that otherwise tend to be uncritically taken for granted in policy analyses. The pursuit of human wellbeing and social justice is inadequate if it only addresses the needs of its citizens without including the needs of nature, non-humans and people in distant parts of the world (Gough, 2017). However, the three examined manifestos fail to include these needs. They care for European citizens while neglecting others, they perceive Europe as the superior continent with a mission to save the rest of the world and they suppress nature as only existing in relation to providing for, or being a threat to, people and the economy. Therefore, the pursuits of human wellbeing and social justice in the manifestos are likely to be inadequate and reinforcements of *unsustainable* welfare.

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ORCID iD

Joe Whelan https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7551-3623

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