



Sweden's conflicting green leadership in the European Union

Gunnhildur Lily Magnusdottir & Marie Widengård

To cite this article: Gunnhildur Lily Magnusdottir & Marie Widengård (30 Apr 2024): Sweden's conflicting green leadership in the European Union, *European Politics and Society*, DOI: [10.1080/23745118.2024.2345689](https://doi.org/10.1080/23745118.2024.2345689)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/23745118.2024.2345689>



Published online: 30 Apr 2024.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



Sweden's conflicting green leadership in the European Union

Gunnhildur Lily Magnúsdóttir ^a and Marie Widengård^b

^aDepartment of Global Political Studies, Malmö University, Malmö, Sweden; ^bSchool of Global Studies, University of Gothenburg, Gothenburg, Sweden

ABSTRACT

This article examines the nuanced dynamics of green leadership within the European Union (EU), focusing on Sweden. Sweden has long been heralded as an exemplar of environmental and climate leadership within the European Union as well as a frontrunner in the adoption of green policies, notably in the realms of bioenergy and biofuels. However, its leadership stance has come under scrutiny due to the inherent conflicts within green initiatives, often referred to as 'green-green dilemmas' that arise when environmental actions, despite their sustainable intentions, clash over competing interests. Drawing on a variety of sources we delve into the complexities surrounding Sweden's green leadership. The article highlights how Sweden's enthusiastic endorsement of bioenergy and biofuels, integral to its climate action strategy, has sparked debates and raised questions about Sweden's perceived green leadership within the European Union. Sweden's approach to navigating these conflicts, alongside its efforts to negotiate and balance economic interests with environmental ambitions, offers a compelling insight into the challenges of maintaining green leadership in the face of conflicting green agendas.

KEYWORDS

Green leadership, Swedish reputation, negotiation style, forest member states, EU Commission, EU climate and sustainability politics

Introduction

States that set ambitious environmental goals and advocate for stringent international standards are at the forefront of driving the global climate transition. Among these, a select few ascend to leadership roles in international negotiations, distinguishing themselves as exemplars of green leadership. Yet, green leadership is a nuanced, multi-dimensional concept that resists a one-size-fits-all definition. It encompasses a spectrum that ranges from classifying states as pioneers, followers, or laggards, to acknowledging leadership in relative terms – identifying leaders among those who are less effective in their green efforts (McCauley et al., 2023; Liefferink & Wurzel, 2017, Wurzel et al. 2019, Benulic et al., 2022). These green domains are often arenas of conflict, where divergent goals and priorities collide, highlighting the so-called 'green-green dilemmas' and conflicts that arise when different environmental concerns and approaches are at odds with each other (Eskjaer & Horsbol, 2023).

Sweden represents a fascinating case within this context. Historically celebrated as an environmentally progressive state and a beacon of green leadership within the European Union, (EU), (Jänicke & Wurzel, 2019; Magnúsdóttir, 2011; Magnúsdóttir and Kronsell 2021; McCauley et al., 2023), Sweden's green reputation and perceived leadership has however in recent years been under scrutiny, where environmental organisations, Swedish opposition politicians, as well the EU Commission have questioned its enthusiastic endorsement of bioenergy and biofuels as pillars of climate action. This article delves into these concerns, shedding light on the complexities surrounding Sweden's position as a green leader.

We aim to dissect the layers of Sweden's green reputation and its perceived leadership role in the EU, with a particular focus on the politics surrounding bioenergy, biofuels, and forestry. Our investigation revolves around how Swedish politicians champion their country's green leadership and the perceptions held by other EU member states and the EU Commission, highlighting the pivotal role of reputation in the realm of green leadership. Central to our inquiry is whether Sweden continues to be seen as a green leader in the EU, identifying who maintains this perception and analysing the basis of their views. Through this analysis, we enrich our comprehension of the nuances and foundations of Sweden's green leadership and environmental reputation.

Building on this exploration of green leadership, our study delves into the nuanced relationship between a state's self-perception and reputation, focusing particularly on instances where a state's environmental strategies and ambitions diverge from its well-established green image (Wurzel et al. 2020; Kilian & Elgström, 2010; Liefverink & Wurzel, 2017; Delreux & Ohler, 2021; Lucarelli, 2014; Gupta & van der Grijp, 2000). While much of the leadership literature focuses on elite perceptions, it is essential to also consider contrasting views, such as those emanating from the media and non-governmental organisations (Mišák, 2013). Analysing these varied perceptions, both self-portraying and others' perception, is vital, as the perception of leadership plays a pivotal role in conferring actual leadership. This is particularly relevant within the EU, where negotiations between member states are influenced not only by tangible metrics like voting power and economic strength but also by the more nuanced dynamics of a state's reputation (Magnúsdóttir, 2011; Bendel and Magnúsdóttir 2017; Wurzel et al. 2020; Gupta & van der Grijp, 2000; Kilian & Elgström, 2010; Mišák, 2013). This article not only explores how Sweden is perceived by other EU member states and the EU Commission but also gives insights into how Swedish politicians portray Sweden as a green leader in the European Union. We also investigate Sweden's negotiation style and the potential for forming alliances in negotiations within the Council of the European Union. Accordingly, this article aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of Sweden's green leadership and negotiation strategies within EU's complex political landscape, through interviews with civil servants at the Permanent Representations of different EU member states and experts at the EU Commission, analysis of governmental responses and media coverage.

Following this introduction, we outline the theoretical framework that guides our study, emphasising strategies for exercising green leadership and influencing multilateral negotiations. We then detail the methods and materials used in our research, followed by an analysis of Sweden's self-portrayal, reputation, and leadership within the EU context. We conclude by discussing our main findings and their broader implications for understanding the multifaceted nature of green leadership.

Strategies of green leadership

The foundation of our conceptual framework is the premise that Sweden has been recognised as an environmentally progressive state and perceived as a green leader within the EU (Benulic et al., 2022; Hysing, 2014; Magnusdottir, 2011; McCauley et al., 2023). Our approach starts with a broad understanding of what constitutes environmentally progressive actions and green leadership, suggesting that states setting ambitious environmental goals across different policy areas, such as agriculture, climate, transport, energy, and forestry, are considered environmentally progressive green states. Green leadership, however, is not an automatic evolution for these states. We define it broadly as the ability to persuade other states to adopt a similar path, leveraging one's reputation and domestic green examples as persuasive tools. This aligns with leadership definitions in international negotiations, highlighting leadership as: 'an asymmetrical relationship of influence in which one actor guides or directs the behaviour of other states towards a certain goal over a period of time' (Underdal, 1994, p. 178; Young, 1991). Leadership scholars also emphasise that leadership in international negotiations cannot be built only on coercion and that coherence, credibility, and legitimacy are essential ingredients of a successful leadership (Kilian & Elgström, 2010, p. 259; Liefferink & Wurzel, 2017; Gupta & van der Grijp, 2000).

When it comes to green leadership states often try to exercise what is known as directional leadership based on favourable reputation and expertise or instrumental leadership based on mediational skills, and the ability to frame national interests as common interests. Both leadership styles rely on soft power, contrasting with structural leadership that depends on quantitative resources like military strength, financial power, or voting numbers (Malnes, 1995, pp. 96–97; Magnusdottir & Thorhallsson, 2011; Midttun & Olsson, 2018, p. 2017).

Liefferink and Andersen (2005) outline four strategies which environmentally progressive member states, including Sweden, have been known to use within the EU (see also Liefferink & Wurzel, 2017; Wurzel et al. 2020). These strategies can be considered tools for making your voice heard and in some cases as a basis for green leadership. These strategies, which are useful for our analysis, deepen our understanding of Sweden's actions, self-perception, reputation, and potential leadership role. The first strategy is when a state acts as a 'pusher-by example' or leads by example. The pusher-by-example is a directional leadership based on maintaining a favourable reputation, demonstrating expertise and knowledge, and unilaterally implementing ambitious domestic policies, aimed at directing/encouraging other states to follow the path of the leading state (Liefferink & Andersen, 2005; see also Malnes, 1995, pp. 96–97; Underdal, 1994; Liefferink & Wurzel, 2017). Leaders who employ this strategy are commonly understood to be ambitious, active and influential in international negotiations (Ohler & Delreux, 2021). Knill et al. (2012) stress that within the EU, leadership status rests on a comparison to other states. This is especially important for member states, such as Sweden, which enjoy limited quantitative voting power and might tactically try to upload their national legislation to the EU level to promote their national interests. Early examples of a pusher-by-example strategy are Sweden's stringent acidification legislation, which influenced the development of a common European acidification framework and Sweden's leading position in the revision of EU's chemical legislation, REACH (Magnusdottir, 2011; Midttun and

Olsson 2018). Another example is the EU itself, which has aimed to push-by-example with ambitious climate goals as e.g. outlined in the European Green deal (Oberthür & Homeyer, 2023), although NGOs, green politicians, and states in other parts of the world have challenged the legitimacy of EU's climate leadership (Bäckstrand & Elgström, 2013; Delreux & Ohler, 2021; Kilian & Elgström, 2010; Lucarelli, 2014).

The second strategy, also an important element for green leadership, is to act as a 'constructive pusher', which entails building alliances with the EU Commission or other EU member states. The constructive pusher is ready to compromise national standards and accept slightly lower EU standards (Lieverink & Andersen, 2005). The constructive pusher can be perceived as an incremental frontrunner, less direct than the pusher-by example. The constructive pusher has an instrumental style of leadership based on mediational skills, which involve: '... fostering beneficial coalitions in order to achieve common ends' (Kilian & Elgström, 2010, p. 2016; cf. Underdal, 1994; Malnes, 1995). Bäckstrand and Elgström (2013) call this a 'leadiator', a leader-and-mediator role. This type of instrumental leader, or mediator, actively searches for opportunities to build bridges, thereby increasing its chances of being influential (Ohler & Delreux, 2021). Such leaders aim to develop shared values, find common ground and generate collective strengths and solidarity (Partzsch, 2017). How states perceive each other matters for how and what they negotiate (Mišák, 2015). Being constructive and sensitive to perceptions may involve shifts in self-perception and self-portraying (Lucarelli, 2014).

The third strategy is that of a 'defensive forerunner'. The purpose here is not to set an example for others to follow, but rather to protect one's own environment, maintaining environmental standards, instead of adapting them to the EU's level (Lieverink & Andersen, 2005). The so-called 'Danish Bottle Case' is a classic example of a defensive-forerunner strategy and green-washing since the Danish interests were not solely environmental but also economic. Danish beer manufacturers were instrumental when Denmark banned all drinking cans and bottles, which could not be recycled in Danish recycling machines. The Commission perceived the ban as conflicting with the goals of the single market. The European Court of Justice acquitted Denmark, and even though Denmark had not proposed to introduce its recycling system at the EU level, the issue nevertheless influenced the drafting of the Packaging Waste Directive (Magnusdottir, 2011, Liefferink and Wurzel 2017: 45). Environmentally progressive states may thus sometimes fall into this category, because they may: 'see their own models as better than alternative models or to protect domestic interests from outside influence' (Dyrhaug, 2021) but they do not automatically exercise direct leadership.

The fourth strategy relevant for our analysis is the 'opt-outer' – strategy (Lieverink and Andersen 2005). This strategy is a less direct or proactive defence of national interests than the defensive-forerunner strategy since an opt-outing state tries to get an exemption from EU legislation that is deemed to negatively impact national environmental or economic interests. Member states which either act as opt-outers or defensive forerunners may e.g. argue that some trade barriers on the internal market may be allowed if they are necessary to protect human, animal, or plant health (Articles 36, 95(3) and 100a (4)). Opt-outers may also want to protect their energy sources and mixes, and oppose common rules that: 'would not take into consideration their specific characteristics' (Mišák, 2015).

EU member states often combine one or more of these strategies, and their approaches can also change overtime. Being a green leader, is therefore not a static position as preferences and environmental ambitions can shift (Lieverink & Wurzel, 2017). This is especially evident in EU negotiations, where alliances tend to be issue-specific and economic interest may override environmental priorities (Wurzel et al. 2020; Liefferink & Wurzel, 2017). Environmental issues are also subject to changes in technology, public perception, and governmental changes. A leadership position can be vulnerable in environmental politics especially if the politics are '... subject to epistemic contestation' or interpretations (Renckens et al., 2017, p. 1432). This fluid concept of green leadership can result in states being celebrated for their environmental and climate action or, conversely, criticised for obstructing adequate action. This discussion propels us into the realm of green conflicts, often referred to as 'green on green conflicts' or 'green-green dilemmas', where environmentally friendly initiatives can clash due to competing interests, resulting in one potentially undermining another. Such conflicts have predominantly been analysed through case studies focusing on the deployment of renewable energy infrastructure like wind turbines and solar panels, with a particular emphasis on their negative effects on wildlife and biodiversity (Burch et al., 2020; Dulluri & Raț, 2019; Voigt et al., 2019). Efforts have also been made to classify common types of green conflict, underscoring the complexity of balancing environmental goals (Eskjaer & Horsbol, 2023). The concept of green leadership is increasingly complex in this regard, as it emphasises the role of leaders in navigating conflicting goals. The complexity arises not just from the clash of goals themselves, but from divergent views on what defines an authentic green transition and different shades of green. The challenges of green leadership become more pronounced within this context. It brings to light the intricate responsibility leaders have in mediating between competing priorities and the potential dichotomy in leadership perception – being championed for leadership in certain areas while criticised in others. This nuanced landscape of green leadership has not been thoroughly explored, particularly in terms of how green conflicts influence the perception and reputation of green leaders. Our contribution to the green leadership literature aims to delve into these complexities, examining how divergences between a state's strategies and its established green reputation can affect its standing as a green leader, using the Swedish example as a focal point.

Methods and material

Our research is a qualitative explorative study of Sweden's green reputation and its perceived leadership role in the EU, situated in discussions surrounding the legislative proposal for the new regulation for a taxonomy for sustainable economic investments (Regulation (EU) 2020, p. 852). The study was carried out via a qualitative text analysis of the following material; three central official governmental responses (GoS), from the Swedish government to the taxonomy proposal from the EU Commission, Swedish media material primarily from the biggest morning newspaper, Dagens Nyheter, and the Swedish public service television, (SVT), and 21 semi-structured interviews. The analysis was anchored in our theoretical framework, allowing us to identify recurring themes in the material based on key concepts from the leadership literature, such as; reputation, expertise, self-portrayal, example-setting, role model, leadership, and green conflicts.

We started the text analysis by examining official governmental responses and media content from Dagens Nyheter (DN), Sweden's leading morning newspaper, to illuminate both formal and informal negotiation processes related to bioenergy, biofuels, and forest policy. Our sources spanned from 2020 to 2023, with a focus on discussions surrounding the legislative proposal for the new regulation for a taxonomy for sustainable economic investments (Regulation (EU) 2020/, p. 852). This legislation was crucial for Sweden due to its significance for classifying forest-based biofuels, stemming from the European Commission's initial reluctance to classify forest-based bioenergy as a sustainable source of renewable energy. In this first part of the analysis, we also incorporated brief interview responses from Swedish parliamentarians across the political spectrum, collected in 2023. These interviews, alongside the media and government materials, aim to enrich our understanding of Sweden's positions, priorities, and self-perception, highlighting the multifaceted and contested nature of green leadership.

In the second part of the analysis, we moved on to probe other member states and Commission's perceptions of Sweden by interviewing civil servants at the EU Commission and several EU member states in 2021–2023. The interviews were semi-structured and organised around an interview guide, with questions aimed at apprehending respondents' perceptions of Sweden's reputation, role, negotiation style and leadership abilities. The interview guide did not stipulate any specific definitions of central concepts such as image, reputation, green leadership, or perception, leaving respondents free to conceptualise and interpret these terms as they saw appropriate. This had the strength of providing material that could be analysed with the help of the leadership literature but also minimised the potential influence of the interviewer on respondents' views and perceptions.

A central criterion when selecting respondents for our interviews was that they should be experts in biofuel, bioenergy, and forest policies. Most of the respondents from other EU member states were experts at their respective Permanent Representations to the EU in Brussels and therefore involved in negotiating biofuel, bioenergy, and forest policies in the Council of the European Union on behalf of their state. We started the interview process by selecting respondents from various member states – those with similar forest interests and those with other interests – as well as experts at DG Energy at the Commission. We grouped respondents representing individual states into two main groups to secure their anonymity and follow current ethical standards. This was important since the experts interviewed oversee a very specific policy area and they would therefore be easily identifiable if further distinction was made between the member states. The first group includes the aforementioned forest states, which share similar interests with Sweden. We refer to them as 'FG-states' in our reflections. The second group are respondents from states with different interests, which are primarily states which do not have strong forest interests and/or have advocated for sharper sustainability criteria with the Commission. We refer to them as 'OFG-states', thus 'outside the forest group-states'. Respondents working at DG Energy of the Commission are referred to as 'Commission'. The interviews were anonymous, which allowed respondents to speak more freely, although we acknowledge that our positions at Swedish universities may have influenced how they spoke about Sweden. Interviews were recorded via Zoom or conducted over the phone and then notes taken. Respondents gave a formal consent, allowing us to use the interview material in our research.

Sweden's green leadership: historical foundations and contemporary challenges

Hysing (2014) identifies three interconnected reasons behind Sweden's historical recognition as an environmental frontrunner, forming the foundation of its green leadership. The first is Sweden's comparatively high level of environmental performance. For many years Sweden ranked among the top 10 nations in the world, according to the Environmental Performance Index, most notably due to its climate strategies and reductions in greenhouse gas emissions. Sweden is recognised as a leader in the just transition within the EU, distinguished by its role as a frontrunner in providing renewable jobs supported by fair conditions, being the top contributor to climate finance, and ranking as the fifth lowest CO₂ emitter per capita in the union (McCauley et al., 2023, Eurostat 2021). Second, Sweden was among the first states to establish comprehensive environmental legislations and institutions, including green tax exchanges and concrete plans for an ecologically sustainable welfare state in the 1990s (Hysing, 2014, p. 265). Third, Sweden's frontrunner status has not only been built on domestic activities and environmental performance but also on its proactive pusher-by-example behaviour and instrumental green leadership on the international stage. Sweden, for instance, hosted the first global environmental conference, the United Nations conference on the Human Environment in 1972, and a 50-year anniversary summit in 2022, and has actively advocated for recognition of the historical responsibility of industrialised states for environmental problems since the Rio Earth Summit in 1992 (Hysing, 2014, Eckerberg 2000).

In its early days as an EU member, Sweden leveraged its green reputation and example-setting behaviour as a power resource within the EU, both in Council negotiations and when interacting with the Commission, resulting in uploading of stringent Swedish environmental policies to the EU level. Examples of Sweden acting as a leader include the aforementioned revisions of EU's chemical legislation, REACH, and the development of a European acidification policy (Magnusdottir, 2011). In recent years Sweden has, along with the other Nordic EU member states, taken a leading role in the work on emission reductions within the EU and tops the list for emission reduction targets for sectors such as transport, waste management and housing (Midttun & Olsson, 2018, p. 213).

Sweden's progress in bioenergy and biofuels has historically aligned with its green reputation and leadership (Bäckstrand & Kronsell, 2015). Entering the EU with existing expertise and infrastructure for ethanol production and use, Sweden was able to quickly implement EU legislation and targets and to secure EU funding for further biofuel development (Hillman et al., 2008 Silveira & Johnson, 2016;). Swedish biofuels actors even claimed to be constrained by EU legislation since Swedish progress and expertise on renewables were far ahead of the other EU member states (Silveira & Johnson, 2016). While Sweden managed to capitalise on experience, its preferences have not always been aligned with the EU Commission's visions. Sweden's early focus on ethanol did not have a strong counterpart in the EU where biodiesel was preferred due to the prevalence of diesel vehicles and agri-businesses' focus on rapeseed (Silveira & Johnson, 2016, p. 184).

Eklöf (2011) highlights three tenants underpinning Sweden's approach to biofuels. Most prominent was the idea of the 'green gold' metaphor which promoted the idea

that Sweden's forests, when combined with cutting-edge science and strong industries, helped transform forests into both profitable and climate-responsive resources. Sweden's large forest and pulp-and-paper industries, along with its domestic car industry, joined forces so that; 'the nation could take advantage of its unique strengths' (Eklöf, 2011, p. 797). The second tenet was the belief in ecological modernisation, which stresses the compatibility of economic growth and environmental protection. Third, Sweden's biofuel promotion was built on Sweden's specific sense of moral responsibility *vis-à-vis* the rest of the world. This meant that Sweden's general green reputation propelled Sweden to take a moral frontline position and act firmly and decisively in a global arena, which in turn helped demonstrate its capacity for leadership (Eklöf, 2011). The Swedish government has continuously portrayed Sweden as a world-leading forest nation with unique experiences and opportunities to produce sustainable bioenergy and biofuels (Holmgren & Arora-Jonsson, 2015). Forest-based bioenergy and biofuels, however, are not a niche specific to Sweden. Several other forest states in the EU share Sweden's forest views and interests, such as Finland, Austria, and Slovenia, which together have formed an informal strategic partnership, 'For Forest', to deepen cooperation and lobbying within the EU (Euractiv October 19, 2022). Also, Sweden's green leadership status has in recent years been challenged by actors who have contrasting visions and aspirations (Delreux & Ohler, 2021). Hysing (2014) previously observed that Swedish policies have sometimes contradicted recommendations from environmental authorities, leading to criticism from environmental organisations and casting Sweden not as a progressive environmental leader but perhaps as; 'a fading green star' (Hysing, 2014, p. 271). Therefore, green leadership is not an inherent attribute but one that must be continuously cultivated and maintained.

Self-portraying as a unique green leader in midst of green conflicts

This section delves into the intricate landscape of green conflicts, with a particular focus on Sweden's position and self-perception in forest management, bioenergy, and biofuel politics within the European Union. Leveraging its vast forest resources and considerable expertise, Sweden has portrayed itself as a unique green leader in the EU, advocating for policies and practices that reflect its national interests and environmental stewardship. In order to deepen our understanding of this self-portrait we narrow our focus down to Swedish responses to the Commission's proposal for stricter standard for sustainable renewable energy produced from forests, which was not in line with Swedish forest interests. We examine governmental responses, statements by Swedish politicians and criticism from environmental organisations that Sweden faced in this process. By navigating through the tensions between environmental advocacy, economic interests, and policymaking, this discussion also aims to shed light on the complex dynamics of green conflicts, illustrating the challenges of aligning national priorities with collective environmental goals in the EU.

In November 2020, the EU Commission presented its first proposal for the Taxonomy for Sustainable Economic Acts (Regulation EU 2020/852). The taxonomy was intended to be a classification tool defining which economic investments were sustainable in the context of the European Green Deal (Regulation EU 2020/852). In its first proposal the Commission suggested classifying bioenergy and biofuels merely as transitional solutions

and stipulated that only improved forest management would be classified as sustainable forestry. The Commission also proposed a new forest strategy aimed at radically restructuring forestry. This meant for example, further restrictions on clear-cutting, protection of old forests and a monitoring system to control forests across the EU. The proposal was met with harsh critique from the Swedish forestry, bioenergy and biofuel industries, and the Swedish government¹ (Euractiv October 8, 2021). Sweden objected to the phrase: ‘improved forest management’ because it: ‘implies that the main part of the current forestry in Sweden would not be classified as sustainable’ (GoS, 2020). Early in 2021, Sweden formed an alliance with EU members with similar forest interests and issued a joint written appeal to the Commission. The joint appeal was signed by Sweden, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Finland, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovak Republic, and Slovenia. It emphasised that: ‘... all forms of solid, gaseous and liquid bioenergy fuels that are sustainable under the Renewable Energy Directive (Directive 2018/, p. 2001/EU) must be declared long-term sustainable energy sources also under the taxonomy’ (GoS, 2021, see also GoS 2022). Furthermore, the Swedish and Finnish prime ministers appealed to the EU Commission to delete the concept of ‘close-to-nature forestry’ from the taxonomy (DN May 22, 2021). The close-to-nature forestry concept runs counter to the dominant clear-cut practices in Sweden and would therefore risk lowering Swedish forestry production and, in turn, bioenergy and biofuels resources. This position of Sweden, sparked media debate and criticism from environmental organisations, questioning Sweden’s green leadership and whether its reputation as an environmental leader was founded on genuine expertise and exemplary behaviour, or if it has become a facade for promoting national economic interests over environmental concerns (DN May 22, 2021, DN June 20, 2022) Sweden’s biggest morning paper, the liberal Dagens Nyheter, e.g. exemplified that in recent years Sweden repeatedly tried to convince the Commission to not let biodiversity take precedence over other interests, such as wood production (DN June 14, 2021). In this context, Sweden was portrayed as a country putting the brakes on policy reforms, by objecting to the Commission’s high ambitions. Swedish ministers, however, continued to portray Sweden as a leader in the field despite its minority position. The Swedish government’s position was that all types of bioenergy and biofuels that meet the sustainability criteria as outlined in EUs Renewable Energy Directive (Directive 2018/, p. 2001 EU) should also be sustainable in the proposed taxonomy, along with other established practices such as waste-to-energy and clear-cutting forestry approaches (GoS, 2020). In brief, Sweden’s initial lobbying efforts, alongside those of allied member states, were effective. In the revised proposal for the taxonomy demands for ‘improved forestry’ had been removed and bioenergy was no longer categorised as merely a transitional solution. Sweden’s stance, however, attracted criticism from environmental organisations, leading some to label Sweden not as a green leader but as a laggard in climate and biodiversity issues within the EU (Contexte Energie, 2021, Euractiv April 16, 2021, Euroactiv May 31, 2021, DN May 22, 2021). The Worldwide Fund for Nature (WWF) also claimed the Commission was: ‘strongly influenced by unbalanced lobbying activities from Finland and Sweden’, resulting in an outcome which: ‘... goes against environmental science, discredits taxonomy and creates a catastrophic precedent. By putting so much pressure on the Commission, they seem to be publicly positioning themselves as laggards on climate and biodiversity issues in the EU’ (DN May 22, 2021, author’s own translation from Swedish). In stark contrast to its reputation as a constructive

green leader and pusher-by-example, Sweden was also portrayed as an obstacle to stricter framing of sustainable forestry in Europe (Euractiv May 31, 2021, Commission 2023).

When the Green Party left the Swedish government, a two-party minority government led by the Social Democratic Party, in the autumn 2021, former ministers from the Green Party criticised the green reputation of Swedish practices and negotiation tactics in the taxonomy process. They argued that these tactics potentially opened the door to the worst kinds of energy sources. The former Finance Minister from the Green Party even stated: 'By pushing for a weakening of forest protection, Sweden of course opens up for other countries to dilute the taxonomy – the fossil gas countries, for example, who want fossil gas' (DN November 26, 2021, author's own translation from Swedish). Meanwhile, the government defended the Swedish forestry model and its contribution to energy and the Minister of Trade and Industry asserted: 'It is my opinion that Swedish forestry is leading in sustainability' (DN November 26, 2021, author's own translation from Swedish). This portrayal persisted beyond the governmental change in autumn 2022, with the current three-party liberal conservative government of the Moderate Party, the Christian Democratic Party and the Liberal Party, emphasising that Sweden's economic interests must go hand in hand with its environmental ambitions; '... otherwise Sweden will not be a realistic leader or role model for other states, although the EU is our most important co-operation partner' (parliamentarian from the Moderate Party, March 2023). Accordingly, there seems to be a relatively broad consensus among the political parties about the self-portrayal of Sweden as a leader in sustainable forest management despite criticism from the Green party. A parliamentarian from an opposition party remarked:

Currently, the majority of Swedish political parties do not agree with EU's forest and biofuel politics and feel that the Commission does not take the specific conditions of Sweden as a forest nation into consideration (...) and Sweden's broad environmental reputation probably helps in this policy area where we do not agree with the Commission (parliamentarian from the Centre Party, April 2023, author's own translation from Swedish).

The current liberal conservative government has also more recently faced criticism for its reactive climate politics, including a downsized climate budget that jeopardises Sweden's climate goals for 2030 (DN, April 17, 2023, SVT, April 2023). During its six-month term as the EU Council Presidency in the first half of 2023, the Swedish government was criticised for allowing the forest industry to frame Swedish forest management as sustainable and vital for biodiversity (Ljungström, 2023). Sweden continued to successfully defend Swedish interests. In 2023, the EU agreed to revise the Renewable Energy Directive, increasing the renewable energy target to 42.5 per cent from the previous 32 per cent (EU Commission, 2023). However, this faced controversy, and the Swedish Council Presidency was criticised by the environmental organisations; WWF, Fern, and Birdlife for prioritising forest economic interests over sustainability. Initially the European Parliament sought to restrict the burning of treetops and branches for energy, but the Council of the European Union, led by the Swedish Council Presidency opposed this, resulting in a decision that such practices remain sustainable (DN, March 31, 2023; EU Commission, 2023). This outcome is interesting given the fact that states with similar forest interests were initially in a minority position. In line with the leadership literature, we argue that this success did not only stem from the formal role as of the Swedish Council Presidency

but also from instrumental leadership skills, such as mediation activities and ability to frame Swedish interest as common European interests. This achievement is particularly notable given Sweden's minority position. This complex backdrop prompts a closer examination of Sweden's reputation and leadership within the EU, particularly in relation to biofuel, bioenergy, and forestry politics. We aim to understand how Sweden's stance is perceived by other EU member states and the EU Commission, exploring questions of leadership and negotiation style in these critical policy areas.

Probing European perceptions of Sweden's green leadership

We now turn to explore the perceptions of Sweden's leadership, negotiation style, and reputation within the context of forest-based biofuel and bioenergy politics. Through interviews with civil servants in Brussels, we aim to uncover how Sweden is viewed by other EU member states and the EU Commission, examining its approach to negotiations and possible alliances in Council negotiations. Our investigation specifically targets experts in renewable energy politics from the Permanent Representations of various member states and the Directorate General for Energy of the EU Commission.

Our interviews with respondents from other EU member states cautiously indicate that Sweden is still generally perceived as a general green leader, and expert. It does perhaps not come as a surprise that some states within the forest group even consider Sweden a role model (interviews with FG-states and OFG-states 2021-2022). Members of the forest group appear to rely on Sweden's leadership, especially when interacting with the Commission: 'Sweden is the leader of this group of countries with forests and similar biomass interests. We rely heavily on Sweden for leadership within the group, and Sweden does exercise leadership' (FG state April 2022). The interviews with other member states, also indicate that the many contestations related to biofuel, bioenergy and forest politics have not had significant effects on Sweden's green reputation and there does not seem to be any substantial differences between the perceptions of the forest states and states outside the forest group, representing other interests and viewpoints. This is interesting, not only because Sweden has been criticised in media and labelled as a laggard by environmental organisations, but also since a reputation as a green leader is generally linked to ambitious strategies – pushing-by-example, thus referring to successful domestic examples. A respondent from the forest group however states that Sweden still applies this pusher-by-example strategy in Council negotiations and exemplifies; '... in Sweden we do this, and it works fine' (FG-state, April 2022). Responses from states outside the forest group (OFG-states) support this claim about the pusher-by-example strategy and an OFG-respondent says that Sweden refers:

... to examples from home, thus, this is how we have done it in Sweden, we have national examples that work, when trying to convince others. This strategy has diminished in the last couple of years, perhaps some states find this annoying or arrogant ... (OFG-state, April 2022).

This is in line with the image portrayed by Swedish politicians and in the governmental responses we examined, where Sweden is still portrayed as an ambitious green leader and the Commission does not take the specific conditions of Sweden as a forest nation into consideration (interviews with the Swedish parliamentarians April 2023, author's own translation). Accordingly, it is a fine balance between being self-confident and

appearing arrogant although the latter; 'has not been so obvious in recent days' (OFG state April 2022). Another respondent similarly states that; 'Sweden doesn't have this, I don't know, imperial approach' (FG state April 2022).

The interviews also indicate that Sweden is not to be considered an isolated member state with unique interests, or what the leadership literature calls a 'preference-outlier' (Renckens et al., 2017), since it shares interests with other forest states. However, there are obstacles to Sweden's leadership other than initially being in a defensive minority position. A possible obstacle to Sweden's leadership might be a somewhat inflexible negotiation style, which some respondents, primarily from states outside the forest group, mentioned. Sweden is perceived to be the most vocal of the three Nordic member states in the Council working group; 'Of the three Nordic states, Sweden is the most vocal one. Finland usually agrees after Sweden has presented its arguments and Denmark is on the other side, but not very vocal' (OFG-state March 2022). This is in line with our own previous research on the general negotiating style of the Nordic EU members in environmental politics. This previous research revealed notable differences in the negotiating style of the Nordic states, with Sweden generally being perceived as the most vocal and proactive of the three states in question, as well as having the strongest self-image as a self-proclaimed green leader (Bendel & Magnúsdóttir, 2017 Magnúsdóttir & Thorhallsson, 2011;). Several respondents both from the forest group and other member states, also confirm that Sweden tends to stick firmly to its national position, which is also in line with our previous research on Sweden's negotiating style in the Environmental Council of the European Union (Magnúsdóttir, 2011). Respondents point out, for example, that Sweden's negotiation style is; 'more fixed to certain national interests and positions that they will stick to all the way' (FG-state March 2022) and that; 'Sweden has this very straightforward, very honest and Nordic approach, which is a bit different than the Southern countries where, you know, you should read between the lines and you should, like, try to understand what is the real rationale behind the position' (OFG-state March 2022). Sweden is said to be less compromising than its closest ally, Finland, and this firmness can lead to a deadlock; 'Sweden is very well respected and knowledgeable and ... has often or usually a very clear vision or views on how we should move forward. This can also mean that we and other countries step back since we feel that there is no ground for moving forward where Sweden wants to go' (OFG-state, January 2022).

Responses from the Commission affirm Sweden's role as a leader of the forest group as well as Sweden's general green reputation (Commission, January–March 2022). Respondents from the forest group claim that the Commission listens to Sweden, even if viewpoints: '... go against the Commission strategy ...' (FG- states 2022). A respondent from the Commission mentioned that Sweden's green reputation probably helps in scientific discussions, even when Sweden has chosen a different path than the Commission, such as in forest management. Sweden's reputation, expertise and thorough preparations are deemed important (Commission February 2022). The respondent also mentioned that the Swedish experience in forest management; '... opens doors, but if Sweden tries to block proposals, then reputation is not enough'.

Historically Sweden has relied both on its green reputation and on forming a close relationship with the Commission (Bendel & Magnúsdóttir, 2017 Magnúsdóttir, 2011;) to make its voice heard and even exercise green leadership within the EU. The relationship

with the Commission is generally important for member states with limited voting power in the Council of the European Union, such as Sweden, but the relationship becomes complex when the Commission is not an ally. A respondent from a forest state revealed that: '... the Commission is not on our side. In our experience, the Commission is preoccupied with technical details that prevent us from reaching our goals of carbon neutrality rather than supporting us' (FG-state March 2022). This quote articulates the self-perception, expressed by Swedish politicians, that members of the forest group are defensive forerunners protecting their national green practices, which the Commission does not understand. They believe the Commission is hindering proper climate work but they prefer soft persuasion rather than acting as opt-outers or trying to block policy changes. A respondent from forest states pointed out that their group could have reached a blocking minority in Council negotiations; '... although that is obviously not how we usually negotiate in Brussels' (FG-state, March 2022). This perception of Sweden (and similar forest nations) as misunderstood is especially interesting in the context of the criticism for its reluctance to embrace stricter sustainability criteria in the taxonomy. It demonstrates the fluid nature of a green leader, who can simultaneously be perceived as a green leader who pushes-by-example and as a defensive forerunner who argues for alternative understandings of what it means to act green. It also illustrates how narratives of good environmental and climate practices can be reframed with the help of an established green reputation. Sweden's perception ultimately hinges on how one defines a just and sustainable green transition.

Concluding discussion

In this article, we explored the relationships between perceived green leadership, leadership strategies, and the dynamics and tensions that a green image can provoke. Our analysis suggests that Sweden's green reputation remains largely intact despite public controversies. Respondents typically portrayed Sweden in positive terms, as a well-prepared, constructive, and knowledgeable expert.

The question of green leadership cannot be detached from the green reputation. More research is warranted on how Sweden relied on its green reputation in its attempt to exercise instrumental and directional leadership during its time as Council Presidency in the first half of 2023. However, by positioning itself as a leader and referring to extraordinary Swedish forest interests and success examples, Sweden navigated the space between being a pusher-by-example and a defensive forerunner. This dual role brings into focus the green-green dilemma and green conflict perspectives, where Sweden's transition approach is framed as both green and ambitious, yet its leadership is questioned due to accusations of regression or preservation of the status quo.

From a critical standpoint, Sweden's resistance to align with the Commission's initial proposals on European green transition initiatives, which challenged forestry practices, bioenergy, and biofuels, reveal a complex picture. This behaviour could be interpreted as promoting national forest-industry interests over more stringent EU legislation. Thus, the concept of green leadership becomes fluid, open to interpretation based on what constitutes effective and just leadership. The narrative of leadership often morphs into a political myth, bolstering a leader's influence (Dyrhaug, 2021), yet the advisability of 'following the leader' remains debatable (Torney, 2019). This brings us to the necessity

of a reflective approach towards categorising states as leaders or laggards (cf. McCauley et al., 2023), considering the diverse perceptions of what a ‘good’ green transition entails. The assumption that ‘bio’ implies ‘good’ faces scrutiny (Asdal et al., 2021), as not all biofuel, bioenergy, or bioeconomy initiatives are unequivocally beneficial or uncontroversial (Partzsch, 2017). This also brings to light the intricate duty of leaders to balance competing priorities. This balancing act exposes leaders to a potential dichotomy in perception: they may be celebrated for their leadership in certain domains yet face criticism in others. This dichotomy underscores the multifaceted nature of green leadership, where success in one area does not guarantee universal acclaim, reflecting the broader challenge of achieving consensus on environmental and climate priorities and actions.

Furthermore, the discourse on green leadership extends to notions of green democracy and justice, concepts firmly grounded in the European Green Deal, which among others aims for a green transition where; ‘... no person and no place left behind’ (EU Commission 2019). This debate suggests that being ‘just green’ requires more than policy and practice – and that green leadership should be recognised not only among policymakers but also by NGOs and the European public (Abram et al., 2022; Kabisch & Haase, 2014). This underscores the need for further research into the democratic and justice foundations of green leadership, exploring Sweden’s reputation beyond the realm of policymaking to include wider societal perspectives. This integration of green-green dilemmas and green conflict perspectives into our conclusion highlights the complexity of navigating green leadership in a world where the criteria for sustainability and justice are continually evolving and contested.

Notes

1. The Swedish government from 2014 to 2021 was a coalition minority government of two left parties. The government was led by the Social Democratic Party and the other governmental party was the Green Party. The Green Party left the government in November 2021 due to budgetary conflicts, which resulted in a single party government of the Social Democratic Party between November 2021 until the next parliamentary elections in September 2022 (SVT, November 25, 2021). The parliamentary elections in September 2022 resulted in a government change to a liberal conservative minority government led by the Moderate Party. The other two current governmental parties are; The Liberal Party and The Christian Democratic Party. The liberal conservative government is supported by the Sweden Democratic Party, which is not formally a governmental party.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This article is a part of a research project (2019-02023) funded by the Swedish Research Council for Sustainable Development (FORMAS).

ORCID

Gunnhildur Lily Magnúsdóttir  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-8583-9504>

References

- Abram, S., Atkins, E., Dietzel, A., Jenkins, K., Kiamba, L., Kirshner, J., Kreienkamp, J., Parkhill, K., Pegram, T., & Santos Ayllón, L. M. (2022). Just transition: A whole-systems approach to decarbonisation. *Climate Policy*, 22(8), 1033–1049. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14693062.2022.2108365>
- Asdal, K., Cointe, B., Hobæk, B., Reinertsen, H., Huse, T., Morsman, S., Måløy, T., (2021). The good economy': A conceptual and empirical move for investigating how economies and versions of the good are entangled. *BioSocieties*, 18, 1–24.
- Bäckstrand, K., & Elgström, O. (2013). The EU's role in climate change negotiations: From leader to 'leaditor'. *Journal of European Public Policy*, 20(10), 1369–1386. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2013.781781>
- Bäckstrand, K., & Kronsell, A. (2015). *Rethinking the green state: Environmental governance towards climate and sustainability transitions*. Routledge.
- Bendel, J., & Magnusdottir, G. L. (2017). Opportunities and challenges of a small state presidency: The Estonian Council Presidency 2017. *Administrative Culture*, 18(1), 18–27.
- Benulic, K. S., Kropf, M., Linnér, B. O., & Wibeck, V. (2022). The meaning of leadership in polycentric climate action. *Environmental Politics*, 31(6), 1016–1036. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09644016.2021.1970087>.
- Burch, C., Loraamm, R., & Gliedt, T. (2020). The “green on green” conflict in wind energy development: A case study of environmentally conscious individuals in Oklahoma, USA. *Sustainability*, 12(19), 8184. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su12198184>
- Contexte Energie. (2021). Document Contexte - Taxonomie verte: Bruxelles dévoile ses nouveaux critères. https://www.contexte.com/article/energie/info-contexte-les-nouveaux-criteres-de-bruxelles-pour-classifier-les-activites-vertes_129146.html?utm_medium=email&utm_source=transactional&utm_campaign=newsletter_energie.
- Delreux, T., & Ohler, F. (2021). Ego versus alter: Internal and external perceptions of the EU's role in global environmental negotiations. *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies*, 59(5), 1284–1302. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcms.13182>
- DN. (2021, June 14). Miljökommissionär ger Sverige fel i forskarstrid om skogen. *Dagens Nyheter* [online]. <https://www.dn.se/sverige/miljokommissionar-ger-sverige-fel-i-forskarstrid-om-skogen/>.
- DN. (2021, May 22). Löfvens vädjan: Stryk förslag om naturnära skogsbruk. *Dagens Nyheter* [online]. <https://www.dn.se/sverige/lofvens-vadjan-stryk-forslag-om-naturnara-skogsbruk/>.
- DN. (2021, May 22). Löfvens vädjan: Stryk förslag om naturnära skogsbruk. *Dagens Nyheter* [online]. <https://www.dn.se/sverige/lofvens-vadjan-stryk-forslag-om-naturnara-skogsbruk/>.
- DN. (2021, November 26). MP-ministern kritiserar regeringens arbete: “Allvarligt oroad över skogen”. *Dagens Nyheter* [online]. <https://www.dn.se/sverige/mp-ministern-kritiserar-regeringens-arbete-allvarligt-oroad-over-skogen/>.
- DN. (2022, June 20). Efter påtryckningar: Så motarbetar regeringen EU:s lag om skogsskydd. *Dagens Nyheter* [online]. https://www.dn.se/sverige/efter-patryckningar-sa-motarbetar-regeringen-eus-lag-om-skogsskydd/?fbclid=IwAR1O1WP0YnvV9GV3ehfVzJVTxObgnRbU2wMfrjEG-XgakAGZ_mASRxNIKE.
- DN. (2023, March 31). Svidande kritik mot EU-uppgörelse om bioenergi: Skogen hotas. <https://www.dn.se/varlden/svidande-kritik-mot-eu-uppgorelse-om-bioenergi-skogar-hotas/>.
- Dulluri, A., & Raț, D. (2019). The green-green dilemma: Reconciling the conflict between renewable energy and biodiversity. *The Journal of Health, Environment, & Education*, 6–14. <https://doi.org/10.18455/19002>
- Dyrhaage, H. (2021). Political myths in climate leadership: The case of Danish climate and energy pioneership. *Scandinavian Political Studies*, 44(1), 13–33. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9477.12185>
- Eckerberg, K. (2000). Sweden: progression despite recession. In W.M. Lafferty & J. Meadowcroft (Eds.), *Implementing sustainable development. Strategies and initiatives in high consumption societies* (pp. 209–244). Oxford University Press.
- Eklöf, J. (2011). Success story or cautionary tale? Swedish ethanol in co-existing science-policy frameworks. *Science and Public Policy*, 38(10), 795–806. <https://doi.org/10.1093/spp/38.10.795>

- Eskjaer, M. F., & Horsbol, A. (2023). New environmental controversies: Towards a typology of green conflicts. *Sustainability*, 15(3), 1914. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su15031914>
- Euractiv. (April 16, 2021). LEAK: EU to table 'climate taxonomy', leaving gas and nuclear for later. <https://www.euractiv.com/section/energy-environment/news/leak-eu-to-table-climate-taxonomy-leaving-gas-and-nuclear-for-later/>.
- Euractiv. (May 31, 2021). Environmentalists 'up in arms' about Finnish-Swedish defence of forest industry. https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/short_news/environmentalists-up-in-arms-about-finnish-swedish-defence-of-forest-industry/.
- Euractiv. (October 19, 2022). Finland and three other member states launch a forestry lobbying group. <https://www.euractiv.com/section/energy-environment/news/finland-and-three-other-member-states-launch-a-forestry-lobbying-group/>.
- Euractiv. (October 8, 2021). Six EU countries 'strongly' condemn Commission's EU forest strategy. <https://www.euractiv.com/section/climate-environment/news/six-eu-countries-strongly-condemn-commissions-eu-forest-strategy/>.
- EU Regulation 2020/852 of the European Parliament and the Council. <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/reg/2020/852/ojEU> Directive.
- EU Renewable Energy Directive 2018/2021 of the European Parliament and the Council. <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32018L2001>
- European Commission. (2019). Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, The European Council, The Council, The European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions: The European Green Deal. <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=COM%3A2019%3A640%3AFIN>.
- European Commission. (2022). *Climate strategies & targets* [online]. https://climate.ec.europa.eu/eu-action/climate-strategies-targets_en: EU. 2023].
- European Commission. (2023). *Shedding light on energy*, 2023 edition. <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/interactive-publications/energy-2023#renewable-energy>.
- Eurostat. (2021). Share of energy from renewable sources, 2021. <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/interactive-publications/energy-2023#renewable-energy>.
- GoS, 2020. *Sweden's response to the consultation*. <https://www.regeringen.se/4afba9/contentassets/c1026c41d4ca474e9620dbf830dc5c40/se-comments-on-the-commission-draft-of-taxonomy-delegated-acts.pdf>.
- GoS. (2021). Sustainable Bioenergy in the Commission's upcoming Delegated Act on Taxonomy. <https://www.regeringen.se/493f96/contentassets/3b542e3a05a640d2807adc79ceb96a6a/ministers-letter-on-bioenergy-in-taxonomy>.
- GoS. (2022). <https://www.regeringen.se/493f96/contentassets/3b542e3a05a640d2807adc79ceb96a6a/ministers-letter-on-bioenergy-in-taxonomy>.
- Gupta, J., & van der Grijp, N. (2000). Perceptions of the EU's role. Is the EU a leader? In J. Gupta, & M. Grubb (Eds.), *Climate change and European leadership: A suitable role for Europe?* (pp. 67–81). Kluwer Academic Publishers.
- Hillman, K. M., Suurs, R. A., Hekkert, M. P., Sandén, B. A. (2008). Cumulative causation in biofuels development: A critical comparison of The Netherlands and Sweden. In F. Geels, M. Hekkert, & S. Jacobsson (Eds.), *The Dynamics of Sustainable Innovation Journeys* (pp. 73–92). Routledge.
- Holmgren, S., & Arora-Jonsson, S. (2015). The Forest Kingdom – with what values for the world? Climate change and gender equality in a contested forest policy context. *Scandinavian Journal of Forest Research*, 30(3), 235–245. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02827581.2014.1002216>
- Hysing, E. (2014). A green star fading? A critical assessment of Swedish environmental policy change. *Environmental Policy and Governance*, 24(4), 262–274. <https://doi.org/10.1002/eet.1645>
- Jänicke, M., & Wurzel, R. K. W. (2019). Leadership and lesson-drawing in the European Union's multi-level climate governance system. *Environmental Politics*, 28(1), 22–42. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09644016.2019.1522019>
- Kabisch, N., & Haase, D. (2014). Green justice or just green? Provision of urban green spaces in Berlin, Germany. *Landscape and Urban Planning*, 122, 129–139. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.landurbplan.2013.11.016>

- Kilian, B., & Elgström, O. (2010). Still a green leader? The European Union's role in international climate negotiations. *Cooperation and Conflict*, 45(3), 255–273. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0010836710377392>
- Knill, C., Heichel, S., & Arndt, D. (2012). Really a front-runner, really a straggler? Of environmental leaders and laggards in the European Union and beyond — A quantitative policy perspective. *Energy Policy*, 48, 36–45. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.enpol.2012.04.043>
- Liefferink, D., & Andersen, M. (2005). Strategies of the 'Green' Member States in EU environmental. In A. Jordan (Ed.), *Environmental policy in the EU* (pp. 129–142). Routledge.
- Liefferink, D., & Wurzel, R. (2017). Environmental leaders and pioneers: Agents of change? *Journal of European Public Policy*, 24(7), 951–968. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2016.1161657>
- Ljungström, A. (2023). Skogslobbying under EU ordförandeskapet in *Sveriges natur: Sveriges största natur- och miljötidning*. Retrieved April, 2023, from <https://www.sverigesnatur.org/aktuellt/skogslobbying-under-eu-ordforandeskap/>.
- Lucarelli, S. (2014). Seen from the outside: The state of the Art on the external image of the EU. *Journal of European Integration*, 36(1), 1–16. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07036337.2012.761981>
- Magnusdottir, G. L. (2011). *Small states' power resources in EU negotiations: Nordic Eco-entrepreneurship within the environmental policy of the EU*. Lambert Academic Publishing.
- Magnusdottir, G. L., & Kronsell, A. (2021). *Gender, intersectionality and climate institutions in industrialised states*. Routledge.
- Magnusdottir, G. L., & Thorhallsson, B. (2011). The Nordic states and agenda-setting in the European Union: How Do small states score? *Review of Politics and Administration*, 7(1), 205–225.
- Malnes, R. (1995). Leader and Entrepreneur in International Negotiations: A Conceptual Analysis. *European Journal of International Relations*, 1(1), 87–112.
- McCauley, D., Pettigrew, K. A., Todd, I., & Milchram, C. (2023). Leaders and laggards in the pursuit of an EU just transition. *Ecological Economics*, 205, 107699. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ecolecon.2022.107699>
- Midttun, A., & Olsson, L. (2018). Eco-modernity Nordic style: The challenge of aligning ecological and socio-economic sustainability. In *In sustainable modernity* (pp. 204–228). Routledge.
- Mišík, M. (2013). How can perception help us to understand the dynamic between EU member states? The state of the art. *Asia Europe Journal*, 11(4), 445–463. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10308-013-0364-4>
- Mišík, M. (2015). The influence of perception on the preferences of the new member states of the European Union: The case of energy policy. *Comparative European Politics (Houndmills, Basingstoke, England)*, 13(2), 198–221.
- Oberthür, S., & Homeyer, v. I. (2023). From emissions trading to the European Green Deal: The evolution of the climate policy mix and climate policy integration in the EU. *Journal of European Public Policy*, 30(3), 445–468. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2022.2120528>
- Ohler, F., & Delreux, T. (2021). Role perceptions in global environmental negotiations: From reformist leaders to conservative bystanders. *The International Spectator*, 56(3), 7–23. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03932729.2021.1939971>
- Partzsch, L. (2017). Biofuel research: Perceptions of power and transition. *Energy, Sustainability and Society*, 7(1), 1–10. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s13705-017-0116-1>
- Renckens, S., Skogstad, G., & Mondou, M. (2017). When normative and market power interact: The European Union and global biofuels governance. *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies*, 55(6), 1432–1448. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcms.12584>
- Silveira, S., & Johnson, F. X. (2016). Navigating the transition to sustainable bioenergy in Sweden and Brazil: Lessons learned in a European and international context. *Energy Research & Social Science*, 13, 180–193. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.erss.2015.12.021>
- SVT. (2021, November 25). Miljöpartiet lämnar regeringen - ny statsministeromröstning kan vänta. <https://www.svt.se/nyheter/inrikes/miljopartiet-lamnar-regeringen-ny-statsministeromrostning-vantar>
- SVT. (2023, April 21). Johan Rockström om Sveriges klimatpolitik: "Tar enorma risker". <https://www.svt.se/nyheter/inrikes/rockstrom-sverige-tar-enorma-risker>.

- Torney, D. (2019). Follow the leader? Conceptualising the relationship between leaders and followers in polycentric climate governance. *Environmental Politics*, 28(1), 167–186. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09644016.2019.1522029>
- Underdal, A. (1994). Leadership theory: Rediscovering the arts of management. In W. Zartman (Ed.), *International multilateral negotiation: Approaches to the management of complexity* (pp. 178–197). Jossey-Bass Publishers.
- Voigt, C. C., Straka, T. M., & Fritze, M. (2019). Producing wind energy at the cost of biodiversity: A stakeholder view on a green-green dilemma. *Journal of Renewable and Sustainable Energy*, 11(6), 063303. <https://doi.org/10.1063/1.5118784>
- Wurzel, R. K., Liefferink, D., & Torney, D. (2019). Pioneers leaders and followers in multilevel and polycentric climate governance. *Environmental Politics*, 28(1), 1–21.
- Wurzel, R. K., Liefferink, D., & Torney, D. (2020). *Pioneers, leaders and followers in multilevel and polycentric climate governance*. London: Routledge.
- Young, O. R. (1991). Political leadership and regime formation: On the development of institutions in international society. *International Organization*, 45(3), 281–308. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818300033117>