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Restoring Nature, Preserving the Status Quo? The Political Economy of Paradigmatic Tensions in the EU Nature Restoration Law

Anne Hatahet[1]

Abstract

The EU Nature Restoration Law (NRL), adopted in 2024 after an unusually contentious legislative process, represents the most ambitious biodiversity legislation in over three decades. This article explains why the NRL encountered such backlash despite strong scientific consensus and broad public mobilisation. It argues that contestation stemmed from the NRL's partial challenge to the dominant green growth paradigm by introducing post-growth elements constraining productivist land use. The study develops a mid-level analytical framework extending paradigm shift theory to biodiversity policy and advancing post-growth scholarship at the policy level, highlighting the analytical value of partial paradigm shifts. Using the NRL as a critical case study, it combines process tracing, narrative analysis, and semi-structured interviews to analyse the interplay of institutions, interests, and ideas. The findings show that post-growth elements triggered defensive mobilisation and were progressively weakened, revealing structural, political, and financial barriers to transformative environmental governance in the EU.

Keywords: paradigm shift, degrowth, green growth, environmental governance, biodiversity

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1. Introduction

The biodiversity crisis has garnered growing attention in recent years due to the alarming rate of biodiversity loss, ecosystem degradation, and the increasing recognition of biodiversity's central role in climate regulation, food security, and ecosystem resilience (EEA, 2020; IPBES, 2019).

In 2024, the European Nature Restoration Law (NRL), the first "Nature" legislation in 30 years, was adopted after a lengthy and contentious legislative process (Regulation 2024/1991). Proposed by the European Commission (hereafter, Commission) in June 2022 as part of the EU Biodiversity Strategy for 2030, the NRL proposal (hereafter, Proposal) marked the first comprehensive international law to introduce legally binding targets and deadlines for ecosystem and landscape-wide restoration (Cliquet et al., 2024; Commission, 2022a). It pursued three main objectives: nature recovery, achieving the EU's objectives on climate change mitigation and adaptation, and meeting international commitments (Article 1). To this end, it introduced, first, an overarching objective to restore at least 20% of the EU's land and sea areas by 2030, and all ecosystems requiring restoration by 2050 (Article 1). Second, building upon the Birds and Habitats Directives, it extends restoration obligations beyond specific species and Natura 2000 sites to include ecosystem-specific targets for terrestrial, coastal and freshwater ecosystems (Article 4), marine ecosystems (Article 5), urban ecosystems (Article 6), river connectivity and floodplains (Article 7), pollinators (Article 8), agroecosystems (Article 9) and forest (Article 10). The law also introduced non-deterioration clauses to prevent further degradation in both restored and yet-to-be restored areas (Articles 4&5). Those objectives are to be met by Member States (MS) through the design and implementation of National Restoration Plans covering up to 2050, with intermediate deadlines set in Article 12. Collectively, these measures mark a significant shift from earlier approaches based on voluntary and conservation measures (Paleari, 2024).

Initially welcomed by scientists, NGOs, businesses, and citizens (with the Restore-Nature Campaign gathering almost 2 million signatures) (Cliquet et al., 2024), the NRL rapidly became one of the most politicised pieces of EU environmental legislation. As Politico reported, "the mounting backlash against the Commission's NRL has no parallel" (Weise & Guillot, 2023).

Politicisation was most acute in the European Parliament (hereafter Parliament), where it was rejected in key committees and only passed in plenary after substantial amendment on 12 July 2023. In the Council, several MS also voiced strong opposition (Weise & Guillot, 2024; Aubert & Underwood, 2024). A political compromise was eventually found in trilogues in November 2023, and the Parliament adopted the final text in February 2024. However, formal approval by the Council was delayed until 17 June 2024, due to last-minute withdrawals under pressure from farmer protests and electoral tensions (Ignini, 2024; Le Monde, 2024). Thus, the NRL was narrowly secured and came at the cost of several weakened provisions and the introduction of loopholes that grant increased flexibility to economic stakeholders (Cliquet et al. 2024).

While broader political dynamics, such as the war in Ukraine, growing backlash against the European Green Deal (EGD), and the electoral climate of the 2024 European Elections (Bocquillon, 2024), help contextualise the opposition, they do not fully explain the intensity of resistance faced by a biodiversity regulation that was supported by almost 2 million signatures.

This raises a central question: Why was the NRL so contested, ultimately leading to the dilution of its objectives?

This paper argues that the contestation stems from the fact that the NRL embodied a partial attempt at a paradigm shift by displacing the dominant productivist logic and reconfiguring the relationship between nature and economic activity. In doing so, the Proposal moved beyond the green growth paradigm towards elements of a post-growth approach, and it was precisely these elements that triggered resistance.

To substantiate this argument, this paper draws on theories of policy paradigm shifts (Hall, 1993; Oliver & Pemberton, 2004; Kern, 2016) and ecopolitical projects (Buch-Hansen, 2018; Buch-Hansen & Carstensen, 2021) to assess the extent to which the NRL represented a paradigm shift. Second, using a multi-method approach, combining process tracing, narrative analysis, and semi-structured interviews, it analyses the interplay of institutions, interests, and ideas to identify which actors, factors, and justifications have influenced the legislative outcome and to assess whether the incorporation of post-growth principles explains the contestation and politicisation of the law.

By doing so, the paper contributes to three strands of research. First, it extends the study of paradigm shift to biodiversity policy, an area where this approach has rarely been applied. Secondly, it contributes to the literature on eco-political projects by applying this perspective at the policy level rather than the systemic level. Finally, it discusses the NRL's implications for future paradigm shifts, shedding light on the structural and political barriers that constrain a systemic ecological transition.

The argument unfolds as follows: Section 2 presents the theoretical framework, defining green-growth and post-growth and their application to the NRL. It also reviews the literature on policy paradigms and eco-political projects to understand the conditions and dynamics of a paradigm shift. Section 3 outlines the methodology used. Section 4 presents the empirical analysis, focusing on how the interplay of institutions, interests, and ideas led to the dilution of the NRL's transformative elements and identifies the key sites of conflict. Section 5 discusses the findings and reflects on the broader implications of the NRL's trajectory for the EU's capacity to enact governance that respects ecological limits before concluding.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1 Positioning the NRL in the literature

The NRL is part of the EGD which is "a new growth strategy that aims to transform the EU into a fair and prosperous society, with a modern, resource efficient and

competitive economy where there is no-net emission of greenhouse gases in 2050 and where economic growth is decoupled from resource use" (European Commission, 2019:2). The EGD has been studied under paradigm shift theory (Schunz, 2022; Fitch-Roy & Bailey, 2023, Buch-Hansen & Carstensen, 2021, De Sadeleer, 2025). Following Hall's (1993) seminal work, a policy paradigm is a coherent set of ideas that shapes policy goals and the instruments used to implement them. Policy changes occur at three levels: First-order change (changes to settings of the instruments), second-order change (changes both instruments and settings while the overall goals of the policy remain unchanged), and third-order change, or paradigm shift, which involves a more discontinuous, radical reordering of goals, instruments, and their settings. While views differ on whether the EGD constitutes a paradigm shift, it is widely seen as embedded in green growth logic, relying on technological innovation, economic competitiveness, and market incentives to reconcile growth with environmental protection (ibid).

Two shortcomings stand out in the literature of paradigm shift. First, its application only addresses paradigm shifts in economic or energy/climate policies, leaving aside its application to EU environmental governance, particularly in the context of biodiversity. Second, most existing literature focuses on shifts within capitalist productivism, such as the transition from Keynesianism to Neoliberalism, or the shift towards green growth (Hall, 1993; Oliver & Pemberton, 2004; Kern, 2016; Fitch-Roy & Bailey, 2023), although green growth is increasingly challenged by post-growth theories (Kallis et al., 2025; Vogel & Hickel, 2023). Here, a recent strand of scholarship extends this analysis to what Buch-Hansen & Carstensen (2021) term ecopolitical project theory. This approach introduces a fourth-order change to Hall's framework, which challenges the dominant societal logic shaping state-market-environment relations. Within this framework, the post-growth paradigm emerged as a counter-hegemonic project that calls for sustainable and socially equitable societies that can function well without economic growth (ibid). While such a shift has yet to occur, and consequently remains largely theoretical, it provides a conceptual basis for analysing attempts to move beyond green growth in EU policy.

Within this theoretical landscape, this paper presents the NRL as an outlier in the EGD, both in ambition and in controversy. Despite being the most far-reaching biodiversity legislation in over three decades (European Parliament, 2023a), most emerging scholarship has addressed its implementation challenges (Penca & Tanasescu, 2024; Lees & Pedersen, 2025; Ockendon et al., 2025) or legal implications (Cliquet et al., 2024; Hoek, 2022; 2024; Sowery, 2025). Except for Cliquet et al. (2024), little has been said about the legislative process itself, the institutional struggle, political backlash, and competing narratives that shaped the law's trajectory.

This paper addresses that gap by analysing the NRL as an attempted partial paradigm shift from green growth to post-growth in EU biodiversity policy, allowing for an analysis of how such a shift unfolds and, in the NRL's case, ultimately fails. It does so by contributing to two bodies of literature. First, it applies paradigm shift theory to identify the dynamics and patterns of contestation found in third-order changes (see section 2.3). Second, it builds on ecopolitical project theory (Buch-Hansen & Carstensen, 2021; Buch-Hansen, 2018) to identify the coalitions, discourses, and enabling conditions for a macro-transformation from green-growth to post-growth. Bridging these two strands of theory enables a grounded, mid-level analysis of how an attempted move towards post-growth can emerge, face resistance, and be diluted. This framework makes it possible to trace the actors, institutional dynamics, and discursive strategies at play, ultimately explaining why the NRL provoked such intense political contestation.

The next section aims to define the competing paradigms to tackle the environmental crisis.

2.2 Competing paradigms to address the environmental crisis: Green Growth vs. Post-Growth.

The NRL offers a case study of paradigmatic tensions over how to address the environmental crisis. The terms green growth and post-growth are used here to capture, respectively, the dominant paradigm underpinning the EGD and the umbrella of emerging alternatives that seek to move beyond the current productivist

logic, without focusing on GDP decrease. This section outlines the core features of both paradigms, introducing an analytical framework to interpret which logics are embedded in the NRL, providing a lens to assess whether the subsequent backlash against the Proposal can be interpreted as resistance to a potential shift in paradigm.

2.2.a. Green Growth

Green growth assumes that a sustainable economy can exist within capitalism, by decoupling resource-use and emissions from GDP growth through technological innovation, clean investments, and market incentives (Kallis et al., 2025, p.e64). Within this paradigm, biodiversity is addressed under frameworks such as the Birds and Habitats Directives, which ensure the protection of specific species or zones, rather than on the holistic restoration of ecosystems (Halleux, 2023). It frames biodiversity as "natural capital", a stock of resources that support economic productivity and economic resilience (Kanianska, 2017). Ecosystems are important because of the services they provide to the economy rather than their intrinsic value. As such, environmental management becomes a productive investment (ibid), where environmental objectives are evaluated through a cost-benefit analysis and should not hinder economic development. This is reflected in the Water Framework Directive, which allows derogations in the stringency of environmental objectives when the associated costs are deemed disproportionate or when they risk undermining economic activity (Directive 2000/60/EC). Similarly, the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), which is strongly linked to biodiversity, incorporates environmental objectives whilst promoting a productivist, profit-based farming model (Rac et al., 2024).

Whilst this logic has prevailed in addressing environmental issues within growth-oriented institutions, it has come under increasing scrutiny. High reliance on technological solutions is expensive, if not impossible (Grabbe & Moffat, 2024), and empirical evidence suggests that absolute decoupling of GDP from environmental degradation is not occurring at the scale and speed required to stay within planetary boundaries (Hickel & Vogel, 2023; Hickel & Kallis, 2020). These shortcomings provide the entry point for post-growth thinking.

2.2.b. Post-growth

Post-growth considers that addressing the ecological crisis requires structural shifts in the political-economic ideas and institutions that govern the interaction between economic and political actors in society, structuring the relationship between economy and ecology (Buch-Hansen & Carstensen, 2021). Grounded in ecological economics, this perspective encompasses a variety of approaches (Raworth, 2017; Kallis, 2018) which broadly seek to design an economic system that operates within planetary boundaries through the "planned reduction of energy and resource use (…) in a way that reduces inequality and improves human well-being" (Engler et al., 2024, p.1).

Applied to environmental protection, proponents argue for a democratic downscaling of production and consumption to ensure both ecological regeneration and social equity (Sekovska, 2019; Latouche, 2009; Scoones, 2024). In biodiversity policy, post-growth addresses the systemic drivers of ecosystem degradation, namely resource extraction and land-use changes tied to unsustainable consumption and production patterns (Hahn et al. 2022; Otero et al, 2020). Key sectors include agriculture, fisheries, and forestry. For instance, industrial farming has led to overreliance on chemical inputs, degradation of wildlife habitats, and harm to soil and human health, which post-growth scholars argue is environmentally and socially unsustainable (Sevkovska, 2019). They instead advocate for a transition from productivist models that prioritize intensive, centralised, and profit-oriented agriculture towards a model that enhances natural resources, as a basis for value creation (ibid). A distinctive feature of this paradigm is its emphasis on the intrinsic value of nature, whereby nature is not considered separate from human needs, aligning it with Earth-centred governance (Sowery, 2025). Consequently, it inverts the prevailing relationship between economics and ecology by subordinating economic activity to ecological integrity.

2.2.c. The NRL: partial shift towards post-growth

The Proposal can arguably be understood as the closest legislative attempt to move beyond green growth logic embedded in the EGD, as it introduces elements resonating with post-growth thinking.

It introduces new conceptual ground by shifting from conservation to restoration, thereby acknowledging and repairing the damages caused by economic activity. It does so by adopting a holistic approach covering a large range of ecosystems, including those previously left outside traditional conservation frameworks, such as agriculture, urban, and forestry ecosystems, and acknowledges their interdependence. As such, it recognises the systemic nature and drivers of the environmental crisis and aims to address them, aligning with post-growth thinking.

Nature is not merely framed as a productive asset, but as a subject of intrinsic value. Article 1(1) (a), for instance, states the goal of ensuring "long-term and sustained recovery of biodiverse and resilient ecosystems", a formulation that implicitly reflects an ethical, eco-centric stance (Sowery 2025). Moreover, it recognises extensive agriculture, intensifying management practices, the modification of hydrological regimes, urbanisation, pollution, and unsustainable forest and species exploitation, invasive alien species, and climate change as drivers of the decline of biodiversity (Recital 12).

The Proposal also introduces a non-deterioration principle in Articles 4 and 5, thereby requiring MS to prevent further degradation of land and marine ecosystems, and for areas with Annex I and II habitat types, regardless of their location in a protected area or not. Notably, exemptions from this rule are narrowly defined and exclude the common rationale of disproportionate costs; only force majeure, climate-related habitat transformation, or overriding public interest projects qualify. This marks a significant departure from previous EU environmental law, where cost-benefit rationality has dominated and aligns more closely with post-growth's rejection of economic trade-offs as the basis for environmental policy.

Moreover, MS are tasked with identifying funding, which for the first time calls for the phasing-out of environmentally harmful subsidies as a funding source (Recital

73). It reflects an ethical motivation to protect nature for its own sake, recognising its value beyond human use (ibid).

Importantly, the NRL sets legally binding restoration targets, both overall and for specific ecosystems, including those tied to economic sectors, thereby confronting the shortcomings of the productivist model and explicitly linking human activity to biodiversity loss. For example, the Proposal sets binding targets for the restoration of drained peatlands (30% by 2030; 50% by 2040, and 70% with a portion to be rewetted) and covering at least 10% of the Union's agricultural area with high-diversity landscape features by 2030 (Article 14 §2). This marks a significant step away from voluntary flexible mechanisms of EU environmental law, asserting instead a clear legal duty to act (Penca & Tanasescu, 2024; Cliquet et al., 2024). This directly aligns with post-growth emphasis to constrain productivist land-use activities through structural changes. Additionally, the NRL's reasoning is grounded in scientific evidence and recognises the benefits of the interconnectedness of ecosystems (Sowery, 2025). It relies on planetary boundaries framing, which is echoed in the Biodiversity Strategy, aligning with post-growth approaches (ibid). Finally, the Proposal includes participatory elements by requiring MS as part of their National Restoration Plan to ensure public participation (Article 12, (n)) as well as access to Justice (Article 16), signalling a more inclusive approach to ecological governance (Penca & Tanasescu, 2024).

Nonetheless, elements of green growth remain. Firstly, the Proposal is embedded in the EGD, and it presents restoration as an economic opportunity, citing return-on-investment ratios ranging from 4 to 38 euros for each euro spent (European Commission, 2022b). It emphasises co-benefits such as food security and climate resilience and continues to link nature's value to its service provision for human well-being. As pointed out by an NGO representative, the responsible Commission unit's name, "Natural Capital" symbolises this framing (interview 2). Moreover, financing is also expected to come from market-based instruments, and the Proposal falls short of naming economic growth as a root cause of ecological decline (Penca & Tanasescu, 2024).

This tension between the two paradigms can be explained by the use of instruments in ecological economics resembling those of environmental economics, which might lead to the subsumption of the emerging post-growth paradigm under the dominant green-growth framework (Biely, 2024). Whether such layering signals a transitional phase or a co-optation remains to be seen. Thus, the Proposal should be understood as a partial and contested attempt to integrate post-growth principles into an institutional architecture built to maintain green growth.

2.3. Paradigm shift and ecopolitical projects: conditions and dynamics

Having outlined the competing paradigms embedded in the NRL, this section turns to the theoretical conditions and dynamics of paradigm change to understand the political contestation that followed.

According to Hall (1993), policy paradigm shifts occur when the dominant paradigm loses its problem-solving capacity, leading to persistent policy failures. As anomalies accumulate, the paradigm gradually loses legitimacy, triggering competition between the failing paradigm and possible replacements. This creates a "marketplace for ideas" and a political contest in which rival parties would fight for control of policy (ibid.; Oliver and Pemberton, 2004). Crucially, Hall (1993) emphasises that such shifts rarely result from scientifically informed decisions alone. They are deeply politicised, influenced by electoral dynamics and institutional struggle, as actors adapt to changing political incentives (ibid). Paradigm shift mobilises more players, competing arguments, and financial questions, as they represent a discontinuity. These dynamics are particularly relevant in the context of the NRL, where scientific urgency, institutional ambition, and organised opposition collide.

In the case of a paradigm shift from green growth to post-growth, some conditions must be met: (1) the presence of a deep crisis which undermines the dominant paradigm anomalies into salient challenges; (2) the availability of a coherent and credible alternative paradigm, (3) the mobilisation of a broad coalition of social forces, capable of promoting the alternative paradigm and embedding it in institutions; and (4) the wider societal consent, or at minimum passive acceptance of

the new paradigm (Buch-Hansen, 2018). As such, a post-growth paradigm tends to shape discourse, mobilise new coalitions, and inform policy alternatives (Buch-Hansen & Carstensen, 2021). In the EU, however, green growth remains institutionally entrenched and politically dominant, supported by governments, market actors, and central institutions. In contrast, post-growth is supported by grassroots movements, segments of labour unions, left-wing parties, and parts of academics and citizens (ibid), many of whom lack comparable access to institutional power. As post-growth entails placing limits on resource-intensive economic activity and restructuring global trade, green growth supporters have little interest in supporting its adoption.

This reflects a deeper structural constraint: institutions themselves play a central role, not as neutral vessels, but rather "strategically selective' structures. They tend to privilege already institutionalised ideas, actors, and strategies, reinforcing the status quo (Buch-Hansen, 2018; Jessop, 1990). At the EU level, institutions tend to adopt distinct positions on environmental and climate policy. The Commission was relatively inactive on environmental matters until it renewed its ambition via the EGD (Steinebach & Knill, 2016). The Council often slows ambition, protecting national economic interests (Rosamond & Dupont, 2021; Wurzel et al., 2019). Conversely, the Parliament has traditionally been considered an environmental champion (Burns, 2019; Buzogany & Cetkovic, 2021). Nonetheless, institutions operate within the broader logic of the Single Market, which constrains more radical alternatives such as post-growth, reinforcing a logic of ecological modernisation rather than systemic transformation.

Moreover, vested interests can actively block change. As Oliver and Pemberton (2004) argue, paradigm shifts provoke defensive mobilisation by vested interests, who benefit from the status quo. These actors tend to resist or co-opt emerging ideas to anchor their position, which can lead to the failure of the paradigm shift or the selective absorption of paradigmatic elements into the existing framework, decreasing their transformative potential. The NRL is expected to reflect this dynamic, where nature restoration is accepted in principle but reframed or weakened in practice.

Additionally, Kern (2016) highlights the role of narratives in enabling or constraining policy change and representing ideas. A successful transition requires building a narrative around a crisis that will be able to establish a shared perception to justify the necessity for an alternative. However, multiple narratives can exist and compete, leading to a partial, layered, or internally incoherent change where old ideas persist alongside new ones (ibid). In environmental governance, this may result in the coexistence of post-growth ideas with green growth rationales. This logic aligns with Spash's (2020) application of Gramsci's concept of passive revolution, whereby the dominant paradigm often survives not by resisting change entirely but by absorbing and reframing counter-hegemonic elements. Biely (2024) deepens this analysis by showing how scientific paradigms in transition can evolve just enough to neutralise critique while maintaining their core logic. This helps explain why the post-growth elements of the NRL struggle to displace the dominant green-growth framing.

This theoretical framework informs the empirical analysis by treating the NRL as a site of tension between green-growth and post-growth. The analysis unfolds in three steps. First, it assesses whether the pre-legislative context met the conditions for a partial shift by examining institutional alignment, interest groups' coalitions, and early narratives. Second, it examines which elements were most contested during the legislative process and the position of key institutions and interest groups, and how these materialised into competing narratives. Finally, it analyses the outcomes of the legislative process. This approach explains why the NRL triggered backlash, how contestation was structured, and what the outcome reveals about the resilience of the dominant policy paradigm.

3. Methodology

3.1. Case selection

This paper examines the NRL as a crucial case study within the EGD (Gerring, 2007) to assess whether the contestation surrounding the NRL can be attributed to its partial paradigm shift from green growth to post-growth. The NRL is analytically

significant for two reasons. First, it is (1) the "first comprehensive piece of binding international legislation that holds legally binding targets for landscape-wide restoration" (Cliquet et al., 2024, p.1). Second, it became arguably the most politically contested environmental file of the EGD (Weise & Guillot, 2023). This combination of ambition and intense resistance makes the NRL a great case for testing theories of paradigm shift and ecopolitical projects, and for testing whether EU environmental governance is moving away from green growth logic towards post-growth approaches. If such a paradigmatic change were to be seen, then it should be visible here. Conversely, the law's high political contestation provides a window into how dominant policy paradigms are defended and what conditions are necessary for a paradigm shift towards post-growth.

3.2. Research design

Having established the rationale for selecting this case, this study adopts a single-case theory-testing design. It combines process tracing to reconstruct the causal sequences through which institutions, interests, and ideas shaped the outcome of the NRL, and narrative analysis to interpret how competing coalitions framed the law and its post-growth provisions. The study covers the NRL's development since the EGD release in 2019 (European Commission, 2019) until its official publication on August 18, 2024 (Regulation 2024/1994). Following a "process theory" methodology (Pierson, 2004; Ahlström & Monciardini, 2021), it examines events in temporal order to identify how ideas, interests, and institutions influenced the adoption, dilution, or rejection of paradigmatic elements of the law. Using temporal bracketing (Langley, 1999), the analysis distinguishes three phases:

- The pre-release of the NRL (2019 - June 2022).
- The legislative phase (June 2022 to the start of the trilogues in July 2023).
- The trilogue and adoption phase (July 2023 – August 2024).

Within each phase, a narrative analysis explores how ideas were mobilised over time. Using Snow & Benford's (2000) typology of diagnostic, prognostic, and motivational framing, this analysis identifies how coalitions, for and against, defined

the problem, proposed solutions, and mobilised support. The frames are interpreted through the lens of post-growth and green-growth paradigms.

This structure enables a systematic analysis of the NRL's emergence, the evolution of contestation during the legislative process, and how the final compromises reflect the balance of competing policy paradigms.

3.3. Data Collection

The empirical material is drawn primarily from documentary sources, complemented by semi-structured interviews with environmental NGOs, farmers' representatives, a European Parliamentary assistant, and researchers.

Different sources were used for each phase of analysis based on their relevance. For the pre-legislative phase, the analysis relied firstly on institutional documents produced by the Commission (European Commission, 2020; European Commission, 2022b) and, also, by the Parliament (European Parliament, 2021) and Council (Council, 2020). These sources were used to understand how the objectives were framed and the dynamics between institutions at the time. Additionally, the analysis relied on the consultation dataset (European Commission, 2021), which synthesises responses and reveals the trends behind the content of the Proposal whilst providing access to the position papers submitted by stakeholders, thereby allowing the identification of preferences and early contestation sites. These sources are particularly relevant because they provide the information to assess whether the conditions for a partial post-growth paradigm shift were present.

For the legislative phase, the analysis combines institutional records with more informal sources to capture the dynamics of contestations. Institutional documents include draft reports, amendments, and voting records from the Parliament and the Council's general approach and related preparatory documents. These are complemented by debates and public hearings in both institutions. Moreover, the analysis relies on media coverage (Contexte, Politico, Euractiv, Euronews, X), stakeholders' documents, and political party communication to better understand the

informal dynamics of contestation and the justifications used. Finally, for the final phase covering the trilogue and legislation's adoption, the official final compromise (Regulation 2024/1991) is analysed to identify whether the contested provisions were retained, diluted, or removed, and to assess how these changes reflected the balance between green growth and post-growth logics.

The data have been selected for their capacity to directly inform the policy process, the position of key actors, and the narratives visible around the NRL. As such, the combination of documentary sources with interviews gives a comprehensive view of both formal and informal dynamics, which are essential for analysing how post-growth elements influenced the trajectory of the NRL. The identification of post-growth vs. green growth elements draws directly on section 2.2.c.

Consequently, this methodology enables tracing the sequence of events to determine whether post-growth aligned elements were the most contested, when they entered the debate, which justifications different actors used to support or reject them, and how institutions mediated the conflicts. Nevertheless, the research design has limitations that reside in the access to information and in the scope of the research. First, the number of interviews remains limited and non-representative. However, this is mitigated through a triangulation of interviews, institutional reports, media, and stakeholder documents to reduce bias. Second, the lack of access to information from the Commission and the Council is acknowledged to restrain the range of perspectives available and the accuracy of institutional dynamics. Finally, considering the single-case nature of this study, this same framework should be used to analyse other potential paradigm shifts to confirm its capacity to offer broad generalisations.

4. Analysis and findings

4.2. Phase 1: 2019 to June 2022

This section analyses the pre-legislative phase of the NRL to identify the conditions enabling the NRL's emergence and whether tensions around its post-

growth elements were already visible. It evaluates whether the prerequisites of a partial paradigm shift towards post-growth were present: (1) crisis undermining the dominant paradigm's problem-solving capacity, (2) the availability of a coherent and credible alternative, (3) the coalition of broad forces, and (4) wider societal consent or passive acceptance (Buch-Hansen, 2018). It does so by examining institutional dynamics, interest groups' alignments, and early narrative framing.

4.1.a. Institutions

Before the NRL's release, there was an institutional consensus for more ambitious biodiversity legislation. Emerging from the EGD, the binding restoration objectives were outlined in the EU biodiversity Strategy for 2030, which aims to reverse ecosystem degradation and support a green recovery following COVID-19 (European Commission, 2020a). Crucially, the initiative was grounded in the recognition of the failure of previous voluntary, species and zone-based approaches to halt biodiversity loss (European Commission, 2016; 2018; 2022b; EEA, 2020; Maes et al.,2020), combined with a growing scientific consensus on the crisis' urgency and the need to move beyond a productivist system towards one that balances supply and demand within planetary boundaries (IPBES, 2019, Dasgupta, 2021).

These developments exposed the declining problem-solving capacity of the dominant paradigm and framed biodiversity loss as a crisis, creating space for new policy ideas and aligning with the first condition for a paradigm shift (Hall, 1993; Buch-Hansen, 2018). As a result, the strategy adopted a hybrid framing: it presented biodiversity restoration as essential to human and planetary health, called for reducing consumption and promoting sustainable supply chains within planetary boundaries, whilst recognising its economic benefits for Europe's recovery from COVID-19 (European Commission, 2020). This dual mandate enabled post-growth ideas' emergence within a green growth framework, setting the stage for a partial fourth-order change.

A key enabler of cross-institutional support was Ursula Von der Leyen's backing. As president of the Commission and European People's Party (EPP) member, her

support helped secure a cross-party consensus with left-leaning groups (Interview 2), in a context of heightened climate activism and public pressure for systemic change (Bocquillon, 2024). This momentum translated into the endorsement of the need for binding measures by both the Council and the Parliament (European Parliament, 2021; Council, 2020a). The Parliament's resolution explicitly called for ambitious legislation, positioning the EU as a global standard-setter, referencing planetary boundaries and structural reforms. The Council made its support conditional on the results of the impact assessment and financial feasibility (Council, 2020a). Hungary, however, rejected binding, top-down targets, describing them as scientifically unclear, economically disproportionate, and impeding national flexibility and legal boundaries, especially in agriculture and forestry (Council, 2020b). Already then, the source of financing for restoration measures raised concerns, foreshadowing one of the central challenges that would persist throughout the process. These concerns revealed early signs of tension within the Council. Following this endorsement, the Commission designed a dual-level target structure, judged to be both environmentally effective and economically efficient, thereby reflecting a balanced approach that combined ambitions with implementation flexibility to secure broad institutional support (interview, 2 & 3, European Commission, 2022b).

In sum, past policy failure, crisis framing, and a favourable political context enabled the inclusion of post-growth ideas within a green growth framework. However, early Council disagreement, particularly over financing and flexibility, revealed the fragility of this consensus.

4.1.b Interest groups

At the interest level, the consultative process revealed broad societal support for the NRL's objectives but also resistance from economic actors whose business models were exposed. This dynamic reflects the theoretical expectations that paradigm-challenging policies mobilise a progressive coalition while provoking contestation from actors embedded in productivist models (Buch-Hansen & Carstensen, 2021; Oliver & Pemberton, 2004).

Between late 2020 and mid-2021, the Commission organised several consultations: feedback on the Inception assessment (European Commission, 2020c), five workshops, and an online consultative process (European Commission, 2021). Interviews confirmed inclusive engagement starting in 2019. The consultation showcased a strong societal acceptance, gathering 111,838 responses, with over 90% from citizens (ibid). NGOs, scientists, civil society actors, and citizens, mobilised through the #RestoreNature Campaign (nearly 2 million signatures), advocated binding, outcome-based restoration targets with clear accountability and called for a European fund to finance the legislation. Restoration was framed as essential to address the interconnected crisis of biodiversity loss, climate change, and ensure human health and well-being, and food system resilience (Restore-Nature Campaign, n.d.; WWF et al., 2020). Their position opposed extractive practices and challenged productivist logics by framing nature as a non-market good governed by ecological limits, rather than a tradable asset (Restore-Nature Campaign, n.d. (b); Hache 2019). Moreover, support extended beyond the classic post-growth coalition. Endorsement came from international organisations (UNEP, 2022; IUCN, 2022) and companies (IKEA, 2021), reflecting wider demand for EU environmental policy change.

Conversely, opposition came from sectors most affected: foresters, farmers, and fisheries (European Commission, 2021; 2022b). While supportive of the goal of nature restoration, they rejected binding ecosystem-level targets, favouring voluntary, effort-based approaches. Central to their opposition was the need for financing, warning that restoration targets would not be reachable without adequate EU-level support. This was amplified by the impact of the war in Ukraine on farmers. They called for the equal consideration of economic, social, and environmental objectives and justified environmental actions based on cost-effectiveness and proportionality (COPA-COGECA, 2021; Europêche & EAPO, 2021; Finnish Forestry, 2021). Their position implicitly defends the existing growth-oriented model. According to farmers' representatives, the Commission appeared unresponsive to their concerns in the drafting phase, contributing to a sense of exclusion and fuelling resistance (Interview 1). This tension, among others, delayed the Proposal's release. Initially planned for 2021, the NRL was postponed after sustained lobbying and a leaked early draft

(European Environmental Bureau, 2022; Interview 1). Still, at this stage, the process remained largely non-politicised.

In sum, the consultation process revealed societal acceptance and a broad and cross-cutting coalition supporting binding restoration targets; however, it also revealed early, sector-specific resistance from actors embedded in productivist models. Showing early signs of paradigmatic tensions that would intensify during the legislative process.

4.1.c. Narratives

This section examines whether competing narratives emerged during the drafting of the NRL and to what extent a dominant interpretation shaped the pre-legislative debate, in line with Kern's (2016) framework. In this early phase, two narratives emerged. The first, advanced by economic actors likely to be most affected, acknowledged the need for restoration, but through a voluntary or incentive-based approach, stressing the need to balance economic, social, and environmental goals and provide financial assistance. However, their concerns were mainly framed as technical (COPA-COGECA, 2021; Europêche & EAPO, 2021).

Conversely, the dominant narrative, supported by institutions and a broad coalition of progressive interest groups, presented the NRL as a new credible alternative to past biodiversity measures. It built on the urgency of addressing the biodiversity and climate crises and the shortcomings of previous actions. Moreover, it strategically blended post-growth and green growth discourses, combining recognition of environmental limits and economic opportunities (European Commission, 2022a) to create a larger support base. The narrative positioned the NRL as key to ensuring long-term sustainability, well-being of citizens, and the economy, whilst demonstrating EU environmental leadership ahead of COP15 (ibid; European Parliament, 2021). It was reinforced by a favourable political context marked by rising environmental awareness and electoral gains for green and progressive parties (Gerhard Schminke, 2019).

This hybrid framing reflects favourable conditions for paradigm change by making new ideas resonate with prevailing political priorities and established institutional norms. As such, contestation remained limited during the pre-legislative phase. However, as the next section will highlight, the initial concerns from economic stakeholders materialised once the NRL entered the political arena.

4.2. Phase 2: 22 June 2022 – July 2023

This section examines the legislative phase, where backlash against the NRL intensified. It identifies the most contested provisions, key advocates and opponents, and whether conflicts reflected resistance to post-growth ideas.

4.2.a. Institutions

The release of the Proposal in 2022 exposed the fragility of the pre-legislative consensus. The Commission defended its Proposal and positioned itself as a mediator; hence, attention below is given to the Council and Parliament's dynamics.

In the Council, opposition reflected a predictable conservative stance to re-align the NRL with green growth (Rosamond & Dupont, 2021; Wurzel et al., 2019). Under the Czech Presidency, both technical and political concerns were raised: legal coherence, insufficient flexibility, human and financial resources, and implications for land-use practices (Council, 2022a). The most contested elements were the post-growth provisions: the outcome-based obligations (Articles 4&5), targets for urban, agricultural, and forestry ecosystems (Articles 6, 9, 10), and the non-deterioration principle (Art 4&5) (ibid, Council 2022b). These were criticised as disproportionate and potentially impeding infrastructure, green energy deployment, and national sovereignty in land and forest management. Moreover, the proposal's lack of clear financing reinforced the contestation around those provisions, making funding one of the key issues. Resistance came from the Netherlands, Finland, Poland, Italy, and Sweden, some of which adopted motions opposing the law (Swedish Parliament, 2022; Finnish Forest Industries Federation, 2022; Aubert & Underwood, 2024).

These concerns shaped the Council's general approach (June 2023), which introduced flexibility, delays, and exemptions, especially for marine, peatland, and forest targets. The non-deterioration's scope was reduced, the clause on access to justice was removed, and financing was relegated to existing funds, sidelining the CAP (Council, 2023; WWF, 2023a). The approach was adopted with a narrow-qualified majority, with Sweden as the Presidency voting against its own text, revealing deep division (Interview 2 & 3, WWF, 2023a). These changes reflect paradigm absorption: weakening post-growth provisions to align with green growth whilst supporting restoration goals (Spash, 2020; Biely, 2024).

In contrast, the Parliament became the primary contestation site, revealing ideological divisions (Guillot, 2023). From the outset, the political coalition patterns around the NRL aligned with Buch-Hansen & Carstensen's (2021) fourth-order dynamics: the progressive groups (S&D, Greens, the Left, and some Renew) framed the NRL as a science-based response to systemic ecological crisis and called to strengthen post-growth aligned provisions: higher overall restoration targets, EU fund, shortening deadlines; and adding new provisions on public participation and awareness-raising (European Parliament, 2022; 2023b; 2023c; Moore, 2023). Both coalitions stressed the importance of financing, but the progressive groups advocated for a dedicated EU fund, while the opposing coalition weaponised the proposal's lack of financing as evidence that the NRL's objectives would impose excessive costs on EU farmers. As such, the conservative bloc led by the EPP, and supported by ECR, ID, and some Renew, opposed provisions most aligned with post-growth logic. Specifically, it rejected the non-deterioration principle beyond Natura 2000, legally binding targets in Articles 4 and 5, and the ones for agroecosystems (Article 9), particularly for drained peatlands; and the requirement for high-diversity landscapes (Article 14§2) (European Parliament, 2023b).

Although there was initially a culture of consensus, a turning point occurred following the EPP Congress in March 2023, where its leadership under Manfred Weber strategically positioned the NRL as a legislative target ahead of the 2024 European Elections (Interviews 1,2,3,4; Guillot, 2023). The EPP reframed the NRL as a threat to farmers, food security, and economic development to capitalise on the electoral momentum of far-right, pro-farmers parties and build on the growing dissatisfaction with

the Green Deal, including the revision of the Pesticide Directive (Brzezinski, 2023; Interview 1, 2, 3, 4). This repositioning reflects Hall's (1993) observation that approaching elections intensifies competition between paradigms and triggers strong politicisation as actors adjust their positions in response to changing political incentives.

From there, the EPP formed an unprecedented alliance with the far right and some Renew and secured the Proposal's rejection in the AGRI and FISH Committee, an unusual procedural move (Lamy & Dupuy, 2023). Within the ENVI committee, the EPP withdrew from negotiations and pushed for outright rejection (EPP Group, 2023a). The ENVI vote was tied with 44 in favour (S&D, Greens, the Left, and some Renew) and 44 against (EPP, ECR, ID, and some Renew), revealing clear partisan polarisation and forcing the vote into plenary (Lamy, 2023a). The legislation ultimately passed, but in a significantly weakened form than the Council's. The agricultural article was removed altogether, the non-deterioration principle applied only to Natura 2000 zones, exemptions for construction, renewable and national security, and a suspension clause in case of exceptional socio-economic consequences (Article 22, bis) were added (European Parliament, 2023d).

In sum, the dynamics within the Council and the Parliament confirm that most of the contestation stemmed from provisions that align with post-growth ideas. The Council incrementally modified the legislation to align it with green-growth incentives, while the Parliament became a polarised battlefield.

4.2.b Interests

At the interest level, the legislative process crystallised two opposing blocs, mirroring the dynamics described by Buch-Hansen & Carstensen (2021) and Oliver & Pemberton's (2004).

The pro-NRL coalition, broadly aligned with the progressive bloc in the Parliament and the Commission, included the previously identified coalitions of Environmental NGOs, Scientists (Pe'er et al., 2023), and civil society (Eurelectric, 2023), all supporting post-growth aligned provisions. However, compared to phase 1, this coalition expanded to some farmers, dissociating with COPA-COGECA, and

supported the legislation as an opportunity to transition towards more sustainable production models (Earth4all, 2023). More surprisingly, numerous large corporations and financial institutions publicly endorsed an ambitious NRL, arguing that 'Business-as-usual is no longer an option for companies' (Vandewaetere et al., 2023). These cross-sector alliances illustrate how the NRL's politicisation expanded its support base beyond the classical post-growth coalition, consistent with fourth-order change dynamics (Buch-Hansen & Carstensen, 2021). The involvement of market actors, however, reflects mixed motivation: reputational strategies, and the Proposal's dual framing likely made such alliances more attractive.

Conversely, previously identified opponents adopted a defensive mobilisation, consistent with Oliver & Pemberton's (2004) expectations. European Landowners' Confederation raised more discreet objections linked to private property rights (Interview 1; Hoek, 2024). Though less visible, these positions shaped Council discussions and how contestation extended beyond productivist sectors to include legal and ownership-based resistance (ibid). However, central to the opposition was COPA-COGECA, which coordinated opposition among productivist sectors and had a significant influence on the EPP's campaign (Harvey, 2023; Carlile, 2023). Presenting itself as the representative of European farmers and agri-cooperatives, it has been criticised for advancing industrial agriculture and productivist interests (ibid). In the NRL debate, it consistently opposed binding targets and peatland rewetting, calling for flexibility, regional differentiation, and, above all, guaranteed financing, without which the legislation would fail to provide a scalable economic model at present (Copa-COGECA, 2022). Though framed in technical terms, this opposition reflected a defence of the productivist model. As a farmer's representative framed it: "*the conventional wisdom of the CAP was production, (…), but this legislation requires a new economic model that is not yet available, without necessary support*" (Interview 1). Their framing of the NRL as a threat to rural livelihoods and competitiveness became an important factor in the EPP's campaign, discussed in Section 4.2.c.

4.2.c Narratives

This section examines how the dynamics above crystallised into narratives. The two same narratives identified in the first phase re-emerged, albeit in a more polarised form. The opposing one ultimately prevailed, leading to a layered outcome in line with Kern (2016).

The progressive narrative shared by the Commission, Parliament's progressive coalition, and supporting interest groups remained but adapted to the opposing one. Beyond emphasising the NRL's objectives as a structural response to the shortcomings of the productivist system, it sought to debunk the opponents' claims and shifted more emphasis to the long-term economic benefit of restoration (SER, 2023; European Parliament, 2023a, WWF, 2023b; Interview 2,3,4). This hybrid framing, presenting restoration as a prerequisite for wellbeing and prosperity, mirrored the pre-legislative discourse, but became more defensive and reflected a partial move towards post-growth thinking.

By contrast, the opposing narrative framed around "Yes to Nature Restoration, no to this Law on Nature Restoration" (EPP, 2023e, COPA-COGECA, 2023) hardened and became increasingly polarised. In the Council, this stance remained less politicised. However, in the Parliament, the EPP, supported by COPA-COGECA, framed the NRL's provisions as a threat to farmers' survival and their production model. Building on the farmers' protests following the CAP reform and Pesticides Directive, it led a misinformation campaign portraying the NRL as a direct threat to food security, claiming restoration targets would reduce productive land, slow renewables and infrastructure developments, disrupt supply chains, and raise prices (Cliquet et al. 2024; da Silva, 2023; Liboreiro, 2023). This narrative turned into an ideological debate framed as "nature versus farmers" (Interview 4) with supporting figures such as Frans Timmermans accused of "sacrificing farmers on the altar of their ecological ideology" (Libeoreiro, 2023; EPP Group, 2023b; 2023c; 2023d. Therefore, the opposition placed short-term economic risks and productivity concerns above long-term eco-management, thereby delegitimising the law's post-growth elements.

These competing narratives reveal how paradigmatic tensions shaped the NRL's contestation. The supporting narrative framed restoration as a science-based and systemic necessity, whilst presenting the long-term economic benefits, reflecting a partial shift towards post-growth. Conversely, the opposing narrative progressively abandoned evidence-based lawmaking to shift into electoral, identity-based politics to protect the status quo. Framing the post-growth provisions as a direct threat to productivist models. This dynamic illustrates Hall's (1993) insight that when entering a contested realm, scientific evidence alone cannot drive change and supports Kern's (2016) argument that narrative conflict is central during paradigm tensions.

4.3. Final phase: outcomes from trilogues to adoption of the NRL.

This final section departs from the previous structure, as the institutional and interest dynamics identified in Section 4.2 largely persisted throughout the trilogue negotiations. Hence, this section synthesises the core issues discussed in the trilogue and examines the final legislation against the Proposal, identifying which elements remained, were removed, or absorbed into a green-growth compatible framework.

Trilogue negotiations between the EP, Council, and Commission began on 19 July 2023. Key issues included financing, agroecosystems restoration, the binding targets, especially for agroecosystems and terrestrial, coastal, and freshwater ecosystems, the non-deterioration principles, and the exemptions and temporary suspensions (Lamy, 2023b). These provisions were precisely the provisions most aligned with post-growth thinking and the ones identified as the most contested in phases 1 and 2. While the Parliament position was the least ambitious, it remained relatively aligned with the Council's. Consequently, the Commission acted as a mediator to safeguard key provisions. A compromise was reached on 9 November 2023, though formal approval was still needed. Despite the initial EPP opposition, the text was adopted in plenary on 27 February 2024 (Guillot, 2024a; European Parliament, 2024). In the council, Hungary's last-minute shift due to farmers' protests and electoral pressures postponed the vote, but Austria's change of position on 17 June 2024 secured the law's adoption (Lamy, 2024).

The final legislation kept core restoration objectives, which were celebrated by the progressive coalition; however, provisions most aligned with the post-growth paradigm were significantly diluted to preserve economic interests (Guillot, 2023; Cliquet et al., 2024). Article 1 retained its three original objectives and added the objective of enhancing food security, a notable concession to the opposition. The overall restoration target remains, though significant flexibility was introduced. For instance, while restoration of terrestrial and marine ecosystems (Articles 4 & 5) is not confined to Natura 2000 sites, MS may prioritise these until 2030, effectively limiting the law's transformative potential. Moreover, flexibilities are given to MS to reduce the objectives of restoration in certain cases.

The non-deterioration principles were strongly weakened: reframed from an outcome-based obligation to an effort-based one, MS must now only demonstrate that measures to prevent further deterioration of designated ecosystems were taken but won't be held accountable if those measures do not meet the targets. Additionally, two articles were added to ensure that restoration targets set out in Articles 4 and 5 can be lifted in the case of renewable energy deployment and National defence (Articles 6 & 7).

Regarding Agroecosystems (Article11), the most politically sensitive area, targets for the restoration of peatlands were kept but significantly lowered (30% by 2030, 40% by 2040, 50% by 2050 with only partial rewetting), and subject to change if they have a significant impact on infrastructure, buildings, climate adaptation or other public interests. Crucially, these obligations do not apply to farmers and private landowners. Additionally, a temporary suspension mechanism (Article 27) allows the Commission to halt agroecosystem obligations for up to a year in response to exceptional events affecting the availability of arable land needed for EU food production. Furthermore, the provision requiring 10% of agricultural area to include high-diversity landscape features by 2030 (Article 14 §2), has been deleted altogether.

Additionally, the article on ensuring access to justice has been deleted. For financing, after long debates between using financing from the CAP or by setting up a

European dedicated fund, the final decision was that one year after the regulation comes into force, the Commission will have to submit a report on the financing of restoration measures, thereby postponing a central element of the NRL's implementation.

Moreover, the language of the legislation has been changed to align more with green-growth framing and falls short of acknowledging nature's inherent worth beyond human utility (Penca & Tanasescu, 2025). Hence, in Recital (17), is reintroduced the principle of cost-effectiveness of Nature-based solutions and they should "simultaneously provide environmental, social and economic benefits" (Regulation 2024/1994, p.10), thereby applying COPA-COGECA's wording. Moreover, Article 9 (River connectivity) and Article 11 (agroecosystem) bring into the assessment the socio-economic benefits that weren't present beforehand.

These changes reflect the culmination of the opposing coalition's efforts identified since phase 1, to delete or weaken the post-growth provisions that threaten the productivist model. The opponents thus succeeded in securing institutional support for their framing, ensuring that the law's rationale shifted away from systemic ecological limits towards compatibility with economic growth imperatives.

Overall, the regulation constitutes a failed attempt at a partial post-growth paradigm shift. It maintains core objectives as defended by the supporting coalition, whilst many of the most contested provisions, especially those aligned with post-growth principles, were diluted, removed, or benefited from exemptions to better align with short-term economic considerations over structural change. This outcome is a case of paradigm absorption (Spash, 2020; Biely, 2024), whereby the NRL maintains the appearance of ecological ambition, but its post-growth elements were realigned with green growth, safeguarding the underlying productivist paradigm rather than enabling a structural shift in EU environmental governance. The next section discusses those findings.

5. Discussion

The findings and analysis section indicate that resistance to the NRL was primarily driven by its post-growth provisions, confirming that the NRL's contestation stemmed from the fact that it represented a partial paradigm shift towards post-growth. However, the contestation dynamics ultimately undermined and led to the failure of this partial shift. As such, this paper makes two contributions.

5.1. Theoretical Contribution

Firstly, the NRL's trajectory reveals that ecopolitical project theory (Buch-Hansen, 2018; Buch-Hansen & Carstensen, 2021) and policy paradigm theories (Hall, 1993; Oliver & Pemberton, 2004; Kern, 2016) offer effective analytical tools for identifying the mechanisms, patterns and actors inherent to a paradigm shift within EU environmental policy, including a shift from green growth to post-growth, albeit partial. In applying these frameworks to this case, this paper extends the understanding of paradigm shift theory to a new policy field and reinforces concrete policy examples of post-growth attempts at paradigm shift.

Crucially, this case positions partial shifts as analytically valuable cases for studying the resilience of dominant policy paradigms and broadens the understanding of why post-growth paradigm shifts fail. Their hybrid framing represents both a facilitating factor for the emergence of post-growth ideas but also renders them more vulnerable to absorption once entering the political arena. The failure represented by the NRL exposes structural dynamics that would also impede a full paradigm shift.

5.2. Practical contribution

The NRL also exposes the barriers facing post-growth agendas in the EU. Its failure to embed post-growth and the intense contestation that preceded this outcome exposed how structural, political, and financial dynamics converge to block transformative change. More generally, it places the NRL as a turning point, where the space for a full paradigm shift from green growth to post-growth in EU policymaking is becoming increasingly constrained, if not simply closing.

The NRL's fate suggests that deeper structural features of the EU's political economy tend to absorb transformative ideas that challenge its economic model. Post-growth logic is widely framed as a left-progressive position, which has proved difficult to advance in a context where institutions favour incrementalism and flexibility over structural change (Jessop, 1990; Buch-Hansen, 2018). Although the Commission proposed transformative provisions, the institutional architecture and the Single Market's neoliberal logic limit their scope and effect, confirming that post-growth "fixes" are insufficient and generate contradictions, unless the state-market-environment relations are recast across the policy spectrum (Buch-Hansen & Carstensen, 2021). This structural conservatism is visible in the Council's intergovernmental nature, which favours incrementalism and flexibility, in turn encouraging the preservation of the status quo. In the Parliament, cross-party compromise, most notably between the S&D and EPP (later extended to Renew), moderated the most ambitious policy positions whilst accommodating some progressive demands, limiting the scope for more radical policy alternatives (Wendler, 2019). The NRL exposed these institutional biases, which were amplified by the political context.

Politically, the NRL and its transformative provisions became a *scapegoat*, catalysing and crystallising a broader ideological shift to the right. Its unusually high politicisation, fuelled by the electoral context, broke the Parliament's traditional cross-party compromise, triggering a deep polarisation between progressive and conservative visions of the EU's role. As such, the alliance pattern and the justification used by the conservative factions in the NRL are now repeated in other files, such as the EU deforestation law (Guillot, 2024). This signals the consolidation of a polarised, ideologically driven position, whereby the left supports environmental policy, and the right supports business as usual and questions the legitimacy of EU environmental action altogether. These dynamics are also visible at the MS level. Essentially, this realignment, reinforced by the European Elections results, redefined the power balance towards the right, embedding a political climate that constrains transformative environmental policy and has led to rollbacks, as seen in the current Commission Omnibus (Niranjan, 2025). More broadly, since post-growth remains an ecopolitical

project with macro implications (Buch-Hansen & Carstensen, 2021), this suggests that post-growth proposals across EU policymaking will face sharper ideological divides and diminishing political space.

This political realignment also benefits and empowers vested interests, identified as gatekeepers to a shift towards post-growth. As Buch-Hansen & Carstensen (2021) argue, these actors already enjoyed privileged access to institutional arenas compared to post-growth advocates. In the NRL negotiations, groups like COPA-COGECA defended the productivist model and reshaped the legislation so restoration measures remained subordinate to the growth-oriented logic they defended. The current rightward shift further reinforces these privileges, as shown by the EPP-far-right coalition's attempt to restrict NGOs' financing after accusing the European Commission of paying NGOs to lobby other EU institutions on its behalf to promote environmental laws (Gros et al., 2025). This reflects a broader ideological turn away from progressive environmentalism, curtailing NGO's capacity to advance ambitious legislation, whilst consolidating an institutional environment that blocks post-growth ideas within the EU's policy logic.

Finally, the NRL revealed that financing represents a structural barrier, shaped by the EU's institutional design and political context, that can determine whether post-growth policies are even viable. Transformative biodiversity requires immediate large-scale investment for long-term results, yet this clashes with short political mandates. Moreover, disputes over who pays and how to finance such measures, as illustrated by the NRL, make post-growth legislation vulnerable to being framed as financially unrealistic. Under the current fiscal framework, multi-annual budgets require MS unanimity, making it difficult to secure the financing for transformative post-growth measures, especially in the current political context. This is already evident in the Commission's proposed NRL financing strategy, which relies on a voluntary credit market to attract private investment (European Commission, 2025). This approach aims to palliate the lack of dedicated financing and reverts to instruments inherent to the EU's neoliberal orientation. Discussions around the next Multiannual Financial Framework (2028- 2034) hint towards the discontinuity of the

European Fund for Biodiversity (LIFE programme) (WWF, 2025). Together, these dynamics show that without credible and stable financing mechanisms, the political space for post-growth measures will remain not just narrow but structurally blocked.

In the current institutional, political, and financial context, long-term ecological integrity struggles to compete with conservative narratives centred on short-term return, continued growth, and competitiveness. Therefore, this paper has not only explained why the NRL was contested but also identified the structural barriers that block a paradigm shift toward post-growth at the EU level. Ultimately, it positions the NRL as a turning point that marks both the closure of the window for post-growth paradigm shift and the reorientation of the EU's political stance towards right-leaning patterns.

5.3. Limitations and future research

This opens avenues for research into whether a shift towards a more right-leaning environmental paradigm is evident under the current Commission (2024-2029) and which actors are shaping it. The single-case study focus of this research can present some limitations in offering broader generalisation. Moreover, the NRL's contestation unfolded in a specific political moment, marked by green fatigue, the war in Ukraine, and the upcoming European Elections, making it difficult to disentangle the relative weight of each factor. Therefore, future research should, using this framework, investigate whether other legislations aligned with post-growth thinking, debated at the beginning of the 2019-2024 mandate, faced similar patterns of contestation and absorption. Likewise, comparing these dynamics with environmental files lacking the same transformative potential as the NRL, but negotiated during the same period, could help determine whether such resistance is tied specifically to post-growth content or to broader political conditions.

6. Conclusion

This paper shows that the unusually intense contestation around the NRL cannot be solely explained by external factors such as the war in Ukraine, green

fatigue, or the 2024 European elections, even though these played a reinforcing role. Rather, it stems from resistance to the law's attempt to integrate post-growth provisions. Aiming to displace the dominant productivist logic that underpins EU environmental governance, these provisions intended to reconfigure the relationship between nature and economic activity, thereby subordinating the latter to the former. In this sense, the NRL offers a unique case of a failed partial fourth-order paradigm shift by embedding post-growth elements within a green growth framework. By tracing the legislative process, this paper shows how these provisions gained traction under favourable political conditions but were constrained once they entered the political arena. The law's trajectory reveals how institutions, vested interests, financial questions, and ideological polarisation managed to absorb post-growth elements into the dominant growth paradigm. More broadly, the NRL's case marked a turning point in EU environmental governance, whereby it crystallised an ideological realignment to the right, revealing the narrowing space for an ecological transition aligned with post-growth in EU policymaking in the future.

Taken together, this paper contributes to paradigm shifts and ecopolitical project scholarship in several ways. Firstly, it extends their application to biodiversity policy, an area where such approaches remain underexplored. Second, it demonstrates that contestation patterns inherent to third-order shift are also applicable to the post-growth paradigm, thereby providing a concrete policy application of a shift in ecopolitical project. Second, it reveals the analytical value of a partial paradigm shift by showing that its contestation patterns give insights into the dynamics to be expected in the case of a full paradigm shift. Third, by establishing a case of failed partial paradigm shift towards post-growth in biodiversity policy, it provides insights into the resilience of the EU's growth-oriented political economy and the mechanisms through which it neutralises transformative alternatives. Providing empirical evidence from the NRL, this study enriches the understanding of the institutional, political, and financial barriers to post-growth in EU environmental governance and more broadly at the EU-level and identifies several avenues for research to deepen that understanding.

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