



Breaking the Gridlock: Overcoming Political Challenges to Restore Nature

1. Introduction

The state of nature continues to decline due to changes in land and sea use, overexploitation, harmful forestry practices, pollution, and climate change. Recognizing the intertwined crises of climate change and biodiversity loss, the European Commission proposed the Nature Restoration Law comprised of EU-wide and ecosystem-specific restoration targets¹. Despite opposition from conservative groups, a provisional agreement was reached in late 2023² and accepted by the European Parliament³. However, COREPER I reneged on this agreement in March⁴, causing a deadlock until Austria unexpectedly resolved the issue at the June 17 ENVI meeting⁵.

This briefing aims to (i) understand why the Council could not maintain the political agreement, focusing on key Member States, and (ii) analyse Austria's role in resolving the deadlock.

2. The Council of the EU (before June 17)

The ENVI meetings revealed opposition to the NRL from Italy, the Netherlands, Sweden, Finland, and Poland, with Austria and Belgium abstaining. After trilogues, Hungary withdrew its support, resulting in the loss of the law's qualified majority⁶. The reasons for Hungary's withdrawal⁷ included food security, protection of the agricultural sector, administrative burden, and subsidiarity issues. Farmers' protests in Brussels fueled populism, with some decision-makers siding with farmers despite studies showing environmental rollbacks harm everyone, including farmers⁸. Environmental ministers supporting the NRL urged reconsideration and a favourable vote at the ENVI meeting on June 17⁹.

¹ https://environment.ec.europa.eu/publications/nature-restoration-law_en

² <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-15907-2023-INIT/en/pdf>

³ https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2024-0089_EN.html

⁴ <https://www.wwf.eu/?13272441/Member-States-betray-deal-on-Nature-Restoration-Law-following-Hungarys-U-turn>

⁵ <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2024/06/17/nature-restoration-law-council-gives-final-green-light>

⁶ <https://video.consilium.europa.eu/event/en/27398>

⁷ <https://www.euractiv.com/section/biodiversity/news/environment-ministers-rally-to-save-nature-restoration-law-but-hungary-remains-defiant/>

⁸ <https://zenodo.org/records/11373475>

⁹ <https://www.gov.ie/pdf/?file=https://assets.gov.ie/293085/e29ea3b4-129d-4ccd-bbcc-cc00e5fcb2f6.pdf#page=null>

3. Member States

A recent poll shows that the public opinion is in fact largely favourable to restore nature and for the adoption of the NRL in Poland, Finland, Sweden, Italy, the Netherlands and Hungary.

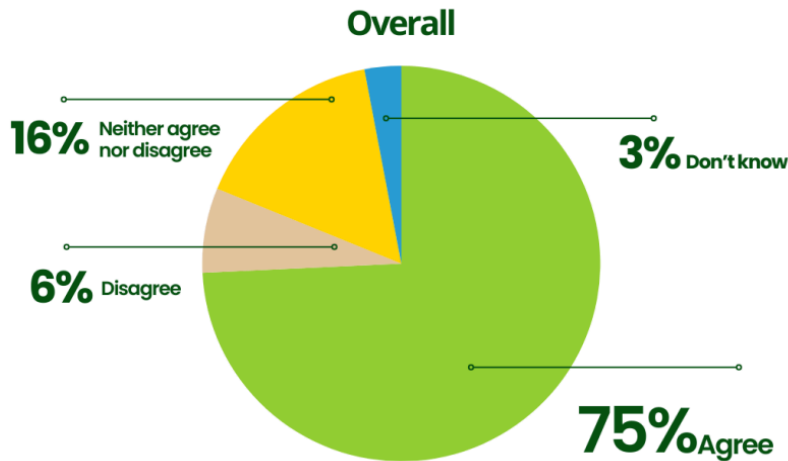


Figure 1: Overall public opinion showing 75% of respondents favourably for the adoption of the NRL¹⁰.

But what is happening in some of these countries to politicians failing their people?

We are now focusing on three Member States—Poland, Hungary and Austria—to analyse the political challenges that were faced.

On June 17, Austria successfully broke the impasse. Thus, we will also examine Austria’s political strategies to understand how they resolved the gridlock.

3.1. Poland

Public Opinion: 72% of the respondents are favourable to the adoption of the NRL¹¹.

State of play:

- ❖ The far-right government and ECR affiliated (PiS), which was deeply against the law, left office last October giving hopes for the Polish green light to the NRL. However, the new centre-right and EPP affiliated Prime Minister Donald Tusk is against the law aiming to appease farmers’ protest, despite the recommendations of his Ministry of Climate and Environment¹² and Polish scientists¹³.
- ❖ Nationally, the new government has a very strong environmental agenda, embracing the protection and restoration of natural areas and water courses.
- ❖ However, at EU level, 60% of Polish MEPs are “prehistoric thinkers” in the categorisation of CAN Europe’s Election Scoreboard, including the ones that form the basis of the government (Civic Platform and Polish People’s party). They voted against nature-related files¹⁴.

¹⁰ <https://www.restorenature.eu/File/Citizens-survey-nature-biodiversity-NRL-EU.pdf>

¹¹ <https://www.restorenature.eu/File/Citizens-survey-nature-biodiversity-NRL-EU.pdf>

¹² <https://oko.press/zielony-lad-wazne-glosowanie>

¹³ <https://oko.press/nature-restoration-law-tusk-jest-przeciw>

¹⁴ <https://caneurope.org/eu-parliament-scoreboard-2024/>

- ❖ Farmers' protests are ferocious in Poland, linking the European Green Deal with famine and eco terrorism, influencing deeply the position of decision makers.

3.2. Hungary

Public Opinion: 83% of the respondents are favourable to the adoption of the NRL¹⁵.

State of play:

- ❖ Hungary was voting in favour of the NRL, however, they flipped sides eventually, alleging sovereignty and subsidiarity issues, as well as cost of implementation.
- ❖ Political analysts draw several conclusions about the national aspects, which may be all true at the same time
 - Orbán saw the possibility of having an upper hand in a power game with the Commission by being the kingmaker of the file;
 - In the last EP vote, Fidesz (Orbán's party) realised that they were aligned with the left wing of the parliament rather than the ECR.
 - Hungarian people do not use Twitter so much. Therefore, the NRL has never gained a massive space in the media.
 - Lack of information in the public space and, thus, lack of either interest or pressure from citizens towards governmental actions in Brussels.

4. Austria - Breaking the Gridlock

Public Opinion: 77% of the respondents of another survey wants nature to be protected and restored, with three-quarters of them specifically calling for "binding goals" to restore nature¹⁶.

State of play:

- ❖ Austria has a government composed of political parties affiliated to EPP and Greens.
- ❖ Austria has 9 states, which in 2022 came to a position against the NRL. The Constitution says that conservation is a competence for states. So, Austrian Federal Env. Minister (Ms Leonore GEWESSLER) is in favour but is obliged to abstain.
- ❖ Before June 17, two federal states (Vienna and Carinthia) revisited the final text of NRL and now they are pro-NRL. Legal discussions were ongoing to define whether the official position could officially change.

Austria: How did they overcome the gridlock?

- ❖ First time in Austria that a state joint position was revisited and changed.
- ❖ The NRL debate gained traction in Austria. All eyes were on the Austrian position.
- ❖ Brussel-based NGOs could cast light on the role of Austria as a kingmaker and incentivise the pro-NRL position at EU-level.

¹⁵ <https://www.restorenature.eu/File/Citizens-survey-nature-biodiversity-NRL-EU.pdf>

¹⁶ <https://www.wwf.at/wwf-umfrage-grosse-mehrheit-besorgt-ueber-naturverlust/>

- ❖ Although there was no final answer about the legal affairs (i.e. if a position could be revisited), in a brave move, Ms Leonore GEWESSLER expressed her support for the NRL¹⁷ and voted in favour of nature¹⁸.

5. **Conclusion**

Despite large societal support and clear evidence that restoring and protecting nature is crucial to halt biodiversity loss, combat climate change, and enhance human well-being, the Nature Restoration Law faced a political gridlock, which prevented it from being adopted sooner.

We focused on three key Member States. Poland, despite its pro-EU, pro-environment leadership, votes against nature at the EU level, revealing a discrepancy that needs addressing through EU-level advocacy and international media exposure. Hungary's stance is unstable, driven by political manoeuvres, with little hope for change at the moment.

Conversely, Austria broke the gridlock and allowed the legislation to be adopted. Improvements in the position of some regions combined with a bold manoeuvre of the Environmental Minister Leonore Gewessler, who did not wait for a legal internal green light and took the responsibility to overcome the impasse and casted the final support of the NRL sealing the deal.

¹⁷ <https://x.com/lgewessler/status/1793978600011743370?t=RMO-K8jv8A4rupwyPKidHA&s=3>

¹⁸ <https://x.com/lgewessler/status/1802689681340944517>