

Farmer Protests in Europe 2023–2024

Manifestations d'agriculteurs en Europe 2023–2024

Die Bauernproteste in Europa in den Jahren 2023–2024



point de vue

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In 2023–2024, farmer protests gained momentum across much of Europe. Tractors blocked roads and supermarkets, protests received massive media attention, and slogans such as ‘no farmers, no food’ resonated widely in the public debate. Here, we document the recent upsurge in farmer protests, identify their triggers and causes, and highlight the need for a just transition to sustainable food systems.

The political economy of agriculture and the struggles of farmers have a long history of research (Resnick and Swinnen, 2023). Peasant protests have been an important form of collective action for farmers worldwide, to express concerns about economic, environmental, institutional and social challenges (Neogi *et al.*, 2021). Similarly, the European Union has a long history of farmer protests (Bush and Simi, 2001). In recent years, protests have occurred particularly in France and the Netherlands, where farmers have engaged in media-attracting protests such as dumping large quantities of milk in front of government buildings (France) or where farmers’ resentment of government policies on reducing nitrogen has led to the emergence of new political parties (Netherlands) (Van der Ploeg, 2020).

Thus, while farmer protests are not a new phenomenon, they gained considerable and exceptional momentum and intensity towards the end of 2023 and early 2024 (see Figure 1), with some protests even turning violent. In contrast to previous farmer protests, the events of 2023–2024 spread across the continent, suggesting a contagion effect (Figure 1) in which protests in neighbouring countries appear to be a key motivational trigger, reinforced by extensive media attention and prompt political responses.

Heterogeneous reasons for farmer protests

Protest triggers varied across countries and over time, yet several common themes can be observed. Matthews (2024a) summarises these as: i) perceived pressure on farm incomes, ii) tighter environmental regulations, and iii) trade competition. However, the root causes of the farmers’ concerns behind these immediate triggers differ from country to country.

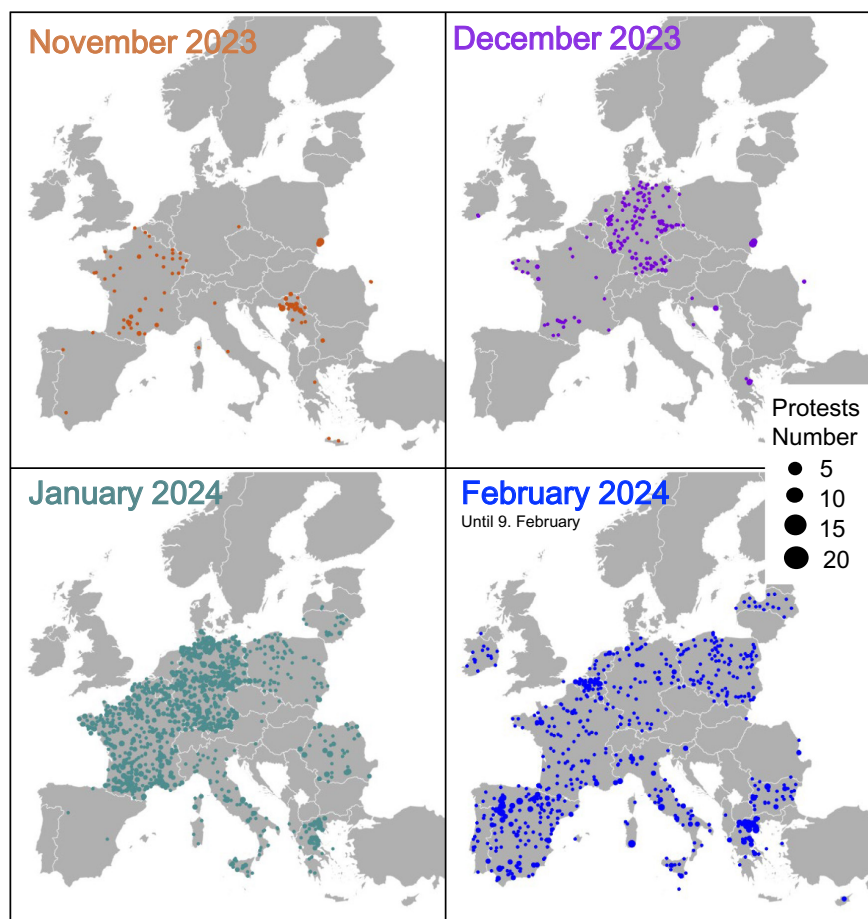
The initial wave of protests was largely triggered by national debates



A comprehensive debate on the future of Europe’s agri-food systems is needed
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on policies such as the proposed termination of fuel subsidies in Germany, and environmental regulations aimed at reducing nitrogen emissions from livestock farming in the Netherlands and Flanders, Belgium (Arte, 2024). In other regions, protests were driven by country-specific issues like elevated production costs due to drought and restrictions on agricultural water use in Spain, France and Greece. Import competition also sparked protests, particularly in Poland and Bulgaria due to Ukrainian grain imports, and in Belgium and France in response to perceived unfair competition from the EU-MERCOSUR trade agreement (Arte, 2024). The protests extended beyond the EU, with Swiss farmers demonstrating against an unstable socio-economic environment, concerns over producer prices, uncertainty about government support, and increasing regulatory demands. In the UK, protests were fueled by opposition to cheap food imports from post-Brexit trade deals.

Figure 1: Farmer protests in the European Union from November 2023 to February 2024



Note: The figure is based on data provided by the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED), <https://acleddata.com/>.

“ Les manifestations d’agriculteurs ont pris une ampleur sans précédent en 2023–2024, se propageant à travers l’Europe et déclenchant des réponses rapides des pouvoirs publics. ”

However, these immediate triggers were underpinned by more fundamental and systemic concerns, including perceived low and volatile profits, high input costs, the market power of retailers and other downstream actors, and stringent environmental and bureaucratic requirements, all within an

ever-evolving political landscape (Matthews, 2024b). Notably, the increasing environmental ambitions of the EU’s Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) and the Farm-to-Fork strategy heightened farmer dissatisfaction. These standards are seen as imposing additional costs on farmers, exacerbated by inflation and particularly sharply rising input prices – such as for energy and fertilisers – since Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. Farmers also face increased risks from climate change and uncertainty over trade agreements. Operating in highly concentrated markets, they often find themselves as price takers, selling their products to a few powerful downstream actors. Consequently, European farmers are exposed to a range of shocks and challenges, with many farmers lacking the adaptive and transformative capacity needed to respond effectively (Meuwissen *et al.*, 2020). These pressures

disproportionately impact small farms, less efficient operations, and those that have invested in infrastructure misaligned with current or future regulatory standards (Matthew, 2024b). Moreover, the CAP, to date, does not foster deeper levels of resilience within agricultural systems (Buitenhuis *et al.*, 2020).

Fast responses by policymakers

Policymakers responded swiftly to the farmer protests amid Europe’s shifting political landscape, both at the national and EU levels. For example, the German government partially retracted plans to eliminate fuel subsidies and completely abandoned the introduction of vehicle taxes for farmers (Neubert, 2024). In addition, restrictions on agricultural imports from Ukraine were tightened (Matthews, 2024a). At the EU level,

the Sustainable Use of Pesticides Regulation was voted down by the European Parliament and eventually withdrawn by the European Commission because ‘no agreement was foreseeable in view of the rejection of the proposal by the European Parliament and the lack of progress in discussions in the Council’ (European Commission, 2024). This withdrawal was also influenced by farmer protests and related political pressures. As Ruig (2024) notes, ‘Commission President Ursula von der Leyen

moved to scrap the proposal altogether in February 2024, appeasing angry farmers protesting in the streets of Brussels’. Furthermore, the European institutions adopted Regulation 1468/2024, which relaxed some of the Good Agricultural and Environmental Conditions that farmers need to comply with to receive CAP direct income support. Other initiatives within the Farm-to-Fork strategy were also derailed, including the framework law on sustainable food systems and the

anticipated revision of animal welfare legislation (Matthews, 2024a; Ruig, 2024). These developments suggest that the farmer protests contributed to a broader shift in the policy landscape, potentially signaling a backlash. As Martin (2024) observes, ‘The [EU’s farm policy] crisis has induced an apparent 180-degree policy shift from “sustainability” to “food security and competitiveness” goals in CAP’s new Strategic Agenda for the next five years’.

“ Die Proteste in der Landwirtschaft haben in den Jahren 2023 und 2024 eine noch nie dagewesene Dynamik entwickelt – sie verbreiteten sich in ganz Europa und lösten sofortige politische Reaktionen aus. ”

The farmer protests have ignited discussions about the future of food production in Europe, while also stalling key policy proposals for more environmentally sustainable agriculture. Even after the protests subsided, some farmers remain dissatisfied, citing an ‘enormous loss of confidence’ in governments (Neubert, 2024). Whether these protests will resume after the 2024 agricultural season is uncertain, but the high-profile nature of the demonstrations and the swift political responses they provoked suggest that such protests are effective means for farmers to assert their influence and push back against policy changes.

The way forward

To pave the way forward, a comprehensive public debate is urgently needed on the future of agricultural and food systems in Europe. This debate should address



‘This is a job on the line—how much longer? When farmers die, the land dies too’ was one of the slogans of farmer protests taking place in Germany © <https://pixabay.com/photos/peasant-protest-farmer-demonstration-8495849/>.

what kind of food system European citizens want to support and who should bear the costs of the negative environmental, health and social externalities associated with current practices. Such a dialogue could be integrated into the strategic dialogue on the future of agriculture in Europe recently initiated by the European Commission. More substantive policy strategies are required to align the food system with planetary boundaries while fairly distributing costs and overcoming short-term hurdles. For instance, transitioning to more sustainable production practices might lead to short-term reductions in production and profits, but

safeguarding soils, climate and biodiversity is crucial for the long-term productivity and economic viability of the agricultural sector (Finger *et al.*, 2024). Although the Green Deal emphasised key objectives for a food system transition, such as enhancing resilience and ensuring just distribution of costs and benefits, these goals have largely remained abstract, lacking concrete policy follow-up. A major political challenge will be to move beyond simplistic dichotomies and develop a vision for a food system that fosters synergies between farmer interests and environmental objectives.

“ Farmer protests gained unprecedented momentum in 2023–2024, spreading across Europe and triggering swift political responses. ”

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Summary


Farmer Protests in Europe 2023–2024

 In 2023–2024, farmer protests swept across Europe, with tractors blocking roads and supermarkets, drawing significant media attention. Unlike previous protests, these events spread continent-wide, suggesting a contagion effect. This paper documents the surge in farmer protests, explores their triggers and underlying causes, and emphasizes the need for a just transition to sustainable food systems. The protests were sparked by proposed policy changes, tighter environmental regulations, perceived pressures on farm incomes and increased trade competition. However, the root causes varied by country. Swift policy responses at both national and EU levels included retracting controversial measures like the Sustainable Use of Pesticides Regulation, but these actions also hindered key initiatives for transitioning to more sustainable agri-food systems. Moving forward, a comprehensive public debate on the future of Europe's agri-food systems is crucial, focusing on balancing environmental sustainability with the economic viability of agriculture. A major political challenge will be moving beyond simplistic dichotomies to develop a vision for a food system that fosters synergies between farmer interests as well as environmental and social objectives.

Manifestations d'agriculteurs en Europe 2023–2024

 En 2023–2024, les manifestations d'agriculteurs ont balayé toute l'Europe, avec des tracteurs bloquant les routes et les supermarchés, attirant une attention médiatique importante. Contrairement aux manifestations précédentes, ces événements se sont répandus à l'échelle du continent, suggérant un effet de contagion. Cet article documente la montée de ces protestations, explore leurs déclencheurs et leurs causes sous-jacentes, et souligne la nécessité d'une transition juste vers des systèmes alimentaires durables. Les protestations ont été déclenchées par des changements de politique proposés, des réglementations environnementales plus strictes, des pressions perçues sur les revenus agricoles et une concurrence commerciale accrue. Toutefois, les causes profondes varient selon les pays. Les réponses rapides des pouvoirs publics aux niveaux national et européen ont consisté notamment à retirer des mesures controversées telles que le règlement sur l'utilisation durable des pesticides, mais ces actions ont également entravé des initiatives clés de transition vers des systèmes agroalimentaires plus durables. À l'avenir, un débat public approfondi sur l'avenir des systèmes agroalimentaires européens est crucial, en se concentrant sur l'équilibre entre la durabilité environnementale et la viabilité économique de l'agriculture. Un défi majeur pour les pouvoirs publics consistera à dépasser les dichotomies simplistes pour développer une vision d'un système alimentaire qui favorise les synergies entre les intérêts des agriculteurs ainsi que les objectifs environnementaux et sociaux.

Die Bauernproteste in Europa in den Jahren 2023–2024

 In den Jahren 2023 und 2024 kam es in ganz Europa zu Protesten in der Landwirtschaft, bei denen Traktoren Straßen und Supermärkte blockierten. Die mediale Aufmerksamkeit war groß. Im Gegensatz zu früheren Protesten breiteten sich diese Ereignisse über ganz Europa aus, was auf einen ‚Ansteckungseffekt‘ hindeutet. Wir zeigen in diesem Beitrag die Zunahme der Bauernproteste, untersuchen ihre Ursachen - und betonen die Notwendigkeit eines gerechten Übergangs zu nachhaltigen Lebensmittelsystemen. Die Proteste wurden durch geplante Subventionskürzungen, strengere Umweltvorschriften, den wahrgenommenen Druck auf das landwirtschaftliche Einkommen und den zunehmenden Wettbewerb im Handel ausgelöst. Die Ursachen waren jedoch von Land zu Land unterschiedlich. Zu den unmittelbaren politischen Reaktionen sowohl auf nationaler als auch auf EU-Ebene gehörte die Rücknahme umstrittener Maßnahmen wie der Verordnung über die nachhaltige Verwendung von Pestiziden. Allerdings wurden hierdurch auch wichtige Entwicklungen für den Übergang zu nachhaltigeren Agrar- und Ernährungssystemen verhindert. Für die Zukunft ist daher eine umfassende öffentliche Debatte von entscheidender Bedeutung, bei der es darum geht, ein Gleichgewicht zwischen ökologischer Nachhaltigkeit und wirtschaftlicher Tragfähigkeit der Landwirtschaft herzustellen. Eine große politische Herausforderung wird darin bestehen, von vereinfachenden Gegensätzen wegzukommen und eine Vision für ein Ernährungssystem zu entwickeln, das Synergien zwischen den Interessen der Landwirtschaft und den ökologischen und sozialen Zielen fördert.

