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**Reframing Nuclear Energy in the
European Union and Spain**
Political Agenda, Public Opinion, and the
Feasibility of Reopening the Debate

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"A crisis becomes a disaster only when we respond to it with preformed judgments, that is, with prejudices."
Hannah Arendt, *The Crisis in Education*, 1954.

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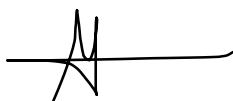
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Abstract:

This thesis examines how and why nuclear energy changed its position in the political agenda of the European Union after Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and why this shift did not unfold in the same way in Spain. It starts from the premise that, in a highly regulated and politicized sector such as energy, the feasibility of policy change depends not only on technical criteria, but also on discursive frames, public opinion, and political legitimacy. On this basis, the study combines agenda-setting, framing, and window of opportunity theories with a public affairs perspective.

Methodologically, the research follows a comparative design focused on the European Union and Spain, combining longitudinal and cross-sectional logic. The analysis is organized around three time cuts, 2019, post-2022, and 2025, and uses both qualitative and quantitative methods. On the one hand, it examines institutional documents, political speeches, and party materials in order to reconstruct the evolution of the political agenda on nuclear energy. On the other, it relies on secondary data, mainly Eurobarometer surveys, to trace changes in public opinion and compare trends between the EU aggregate and Spain.

The study argues that, after 2022, nuclear energy gained legitimacy in European discourse by being linked to security of supply, energy sovereignty, resilience, and industrial competitiveness, whereas in Spain the dominant frame remained centered on phase-out, waste, and a renewables-led transition. This divergence between the European and Spanish trajectories does not imply a full normalization of a pronuclear discourse in Spain, but it does suggest a limited opening of the debate and greater political feasibility for public affairs strategies aimed at reopening the nuclear question.

Key words:

Nuclear energy, European Union, public opinion, political agenda, framing, public affairs.

Resumen:

Esta investigación analiza cómo y por qué la energía nuclear cambia de posición en la agenda política de la Unión Europea tras la invasión rusa de Ucrania, y por qué ese giro no se reproduce del mismo modo en España. El trabajo parte de la idea de que, en un sector altamente regulado y politizado como el energético, la viabilidad de determinadas decisiones no depende solo de criterios técnicos, sino también de los marcos discursivos, la opinión pública y la legitimidad política. Desde esta base, el estudio combina las teorías del agenda-setting, framing y window of opportunity con el enfoque de los asuntos públicos.

Metodológicamente, se adopta un diseño comparado entre la Unión Europea y España, con una lógica longitudinal y transversal. El análisis se organiza en tres cortes temporales, 2019, post-2022 y 2025, y combina métodos cualitativos y cuantitativos. Por un lado, examina documentos institucionales, discursos políticos y materiales programáticos para reconstruir la evolución de la agenda política sobre energía nuclear. Por otro, utiliza datos secundarios, principalmente extraídos de los Eurobarómetros, para analizar la evolución de la opinión pública y comparar tendencias entre el agregado europeo y el caso español.

El trabajo sostiene que, tras 2022, la energía nuclear gana legitimidad en el discurso europeo al asociarse con seguridad de suministro, soberanía energética, resiliencia y competitividad industrial, mientras que en España sigue predominando un marco centrado en el cierre, los residuos y la transición renovable. Esta divergencia entre la trayectoria europea y la española no implica una normalización plena del discurso pronuclear en España, pero sí apunta a una apertura limitada del debate y a una mayor viabilidad política para estrategias de asuntos públicos orientadas a reabrir la cuestión nuclear.

Palabras clave:

Energía nuclear, Unión Europea, opinión pública, agenda política, framing, asuntos públicos.

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Introduction and geopolitical contextualization.

Historically, research has shown a structural European Union reliance on energy imports. Nugent (2017, p. 363) reports rising dependence on external suppliers, with non-member countries covering 53% of EU energy needs, and even higher shares for crude oil and natural gas. Before the war in Ukraine, Russia alone accounted for roughly 40% of the gas supply the EU imported to meet energy demand (Council of the European Union, 2025, November 13). In this context, both the European Commission (2022, May 18) and Spain's Ministry for the Ecological Transition and the Demographic Challenge (MITECO, 2024, September) describe energy supply as a tool of economic and political pressure, since supply disruptions and uncertainty drive prices upward and spill over into many productive sectors.

Earlier supply interruptions through Ukraine in 2006 and 2009 had already raised alarms about the exposure created by dependence on Russian gas (International Energy Agency, 2019, May 27). Academic work on Russian energy strategy helps specify the underlying mechanisms; in this regard, Yergin (2006, p. 71) highlights a push to consolidate state control over "strategic resources" and secure primacy over major pipelines and marketing channels. Related work argues that, through the state monopoly Gazprom, Russian authorities adopted aggressive market behavior in Central and Eastern Europe, leveraging dominant market positions (Eikeland, 2011, as cited in Goldthau & Sitter, 2014, p. 15). The 2022 rupture made these dynamics visible at scale, with pipeline gas supplies from Russia to the Union falling by around 80 billion cubic meters. Combined with low hydroelectric and nuclear output during the same period, the shock translated into close to 160 bcm of missing gas, which Europe replaced through demand adjustments and alternative supplies (International Energy Agency, 2023, October 24, p. 87).

These disruptions pushed the European Union to rethink energy security. A classic definition centers on uninterrupted availability at an affordable price (Cherp & Jewell, 2014, p. 416). More recent EU and Spanish strategic language shifts toward "open strategic autonomy," which aims to preserve gains from global trade and global supply chains while reducing strategic dependencies in sectors linked to security and the green transition (MITECO, 2024, September, p. 13). Within this broader shift, it is important to note that nuclear energy previously sat at the margins of the European political agenda, shaped by risk perceptions and high-cost expectations that led many states to plan progressive shutdowns (Black, 2010, p.

312; Birkland, 2019, p. 392). However, after Russia's invasion of Ukraine, EU-level discourse and policy language assign renewed strategic value to nuclear energy, with the European Commission framing nuclear energy as domestically produced energy and Commission President von der Leyen linking this role to energy sovereignty against the political use of external supplies (European Commission, 2026, January 20).

Hence, the academic rationale for this work starts from a core premise: in a regulated and politicized sector such as energy, legal and policy change reflects technical assessments alongside public meaning-making around risk, cost, security, and legitimacy (Kasperson et al., 1988). For this reason, discourse analysis, public opinion, and official communication deserve central attention.

Prior scholarship bearing on this problem has developed along three largely separate tracks. The first concerns nuclear risk and public perception. Kasperson et al. (1988) established that public attitudes toward nuclear technologies are shaped not only by technical information but by social amplification processes through which risks acquire symbolic and cultural meaning well beyond their statistical magnitude. More recent work by Bohdanowicz et al. (2025), drawing on a six-country survey conducted in late 2023, challenges earlier assumptions about a structurally anti-nuclear public, finding higher and more knowledge-contingent support than the received literature assumed and identifying an erosion of the previously assumed negative relationship between ecological values and nuclear acceptance.

The second track concerns agenda-setting and political framing in energy policy. Research in this tradition, developed by Rogers and Dearing (1988), McCombs and Shaw (1972), and Kingdon (2014), has shown that energy agendas change not through technical revision alone but through the strategic reordering of interpretive frames that assign new political meanings to existing technologies. Applied to the nuclear case, Gamson and Modigliani (1989) demonstrated that shifts in media and political framing can substantially alter the discursive environment within which citizens and leaders assess a controversial technology, independent of changes in underlying technical realities.

The third track concerns windows of opportunity and policy change under crisis conditions. Kingdon (2014), Zahariadis (2007), and Birkland (2019) have shown that external shocks can align problem, policy, and politics streams in ways that lower barriers to non-incremental change, creating episodic but real openings for actors seeking to reposition issues on the

political agenda.

What remains underdeveloped in this body of work is a systematic comparative application of all three frameworks to the post-Ukraine nuclear question, and specifically to the divergence between EU-level institutional re-legitimation and the more restrained evolution of member states with closed phase-out calendars. This thesis addresses that gap by integrating the three research tracks within a mixed-method comparative design and adding a public-affairs perspective to evaluate the strategic implications of the discursive and attitudinal shifts identified. The main research question, then, is: *How and why does nuclear energy's position in the European Union's political agenda change after Russia's invasion of Ukraine? Why does this shift not translate in the same way in Spain, and under what conditions does this divergence create limited political feasibility for reopening the debate in Spain?*

In addition, the specific objectives of this thesis are: (1) map the evolution of EU institutional discourse on nuclear energy under the new energy-security context, (2) compare EU frames with Spanish political and official discourse, with attention to the closure calendar and the rationale used to defend this choice, (3) analyze changes in public opinion across the EU and Spain and links between opinion trends and dominant frames, (4) identify narratives and friction points sustaining divergence, (5) translate findings into an assessment of whether a window of opportunity for nuclear-sector public affairs emerges in Spain, identifying the institutional and communicative conditions that would make renewed debate politically feasible.

To reach these objectives, this thesis is structured in the following way: *Chapters 1 and 2* set the contextual and analytical foundations, *Chapters 3 and 4* present the comparative analysis of the political agenda and public opinion in the EU and Spain across the selected time points, and *Chapter 5* integrates both strands to evaluate divergence, feedback effects, and the resulting window of opportunity for a Spanish public-affairs strategy.

1. Literature review and theoretical framework.

1.1. European legislative and energy context: European Union strategies to reduce dependence on Russian gas after 2022.

1.1.1. *The REPowerEU plan.*

Russia's invasion of Ukraine triggered a major disruption across global energy markets and intensified European concerns over security of supply, after years of high reliance on imported Russian gas, oil, and coal. In response, the European Commission presented REPowerEU in May 2022 as an EU-level roadmap aimed at ending reliance on Russian fossil fuels well before 2030 through demand reduction, alternative supply routes, and a faster shift toward clean energy. The Commission links this approach to an urgent political rationale: limiting EU energy purchases from Russia to avoid financing the war and to reduce strategic vulnerability rooted in dependency (European Commission, 2022, May 18).

REPowerEU organizes policy action around energy savings and efficiency, alongside measures to secure non-Russian supplies and scale up clean-energy deployment. On the demand side, the Commission frames energy savings as the fastest and least costly channel for easing pressure on the system, pairing behavioral changes with strengthened efficiency targets. Supply-side diversification follows through the creation of an EU Energy Platform intended to support voluntary joint purchasing of gas, LNG, and hydrogen, paired with outreach to reliable international partners to replace Russian flows (European Commission, 2022, May 18).

Clean-energy scale-up then serves as the structural response, centered on faster deployment of renewables across power generation, industry, and buildings. REPowerEU, moreover, raises the EU renewable-energy target to 45% by 2030, and advances specific lines of action such as the Hydrogen Accelerator or plans to expand biomethane production (European Commission, 2022, May 18). Nonetheless, while the plan prioritizes decarbonization, the Communication also assigns a transitional role to nuclear energy and domestic gas resources as tools for safeguarding security of supply while the system shifts (European Commission, 2022, May 18).

Lastly, from a governance standpoint, REPowerEU carries the legal form of a European Commission Communication, which positions the text as a political and strategic document defining an EU action roadmap, rather than a binding instrument requiring national transposition in the manner of a directive (European Commission, 2022, May 18). Execution

therefore proceeds through revisions to existing national planning cycles (Nugent, 2017, p. 242).

1.1.2. Recognition of nuclear energy in the green taxonomy and the Net-Zero Industry Act.

The push to cut external dependencies while rebuilding Europe's industrial base takes concrete form in the Net-Zero Industry Act (NZIA), another of the EU's main legislative responses linking decarbonization with strategic autonomy. In this architecture, the NZIA functions as the industrial counterpart to initiatives such as REPowerEU, shifting from crisis management toward long-term capacity building. Its stated purpose is to ensure the Union has secure and sustainable access to the key technologies needed for the green transition (European Parliament & Council of the European Union, 2024, June 13).

Within the NZIA's legal text, nuclear fission technologies and fuel-cycle technologies are explicitly listed as net-zero technologies. This categorization covers established fission systems while also extending to nuclear innovations that had not previously been grouped under this label. The underlying logic is to reinforce energy-system resilience by supporting the full industrial value chain connected to these technologies, rather than focusing narrowly on deployment alone. The regulation also introduces a manufacturing benchmark for 2030, requiring the Union's annual production capacity to reach at least 40% of the deployment needs for the covered technologies (European Parliament & Council of the European Union, 2024, June 13).

At the same time, the NZIA is designed to operate within the EU's division of competences and the principle that each Member State retains control over its energy mix, according to Article 194(2) of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU, 2012). As a result, a Member State is not required to treat as "strategic" those projects tied to technologies it has not accepted as part of its national energy system. This approach seeks to combine an EU-level industrial push with national energy sovereignty. Even so, discretion over the energy mix does not remove the obligation to meet the common targets set by the regulation, which apply across the Union.

This institutional design also matters legally. Unlike REPowerEU, the NZIA was adopted as Regulation (EU) 2024/1735 of the European Parliament and of the Council. Under EU law, a

regulation is a legislative act of general application that is binding in its entirety and directly applicable in every Member State (Nugent, 2017, p. 230). This means the NZIA does not require national transposition in the way directives do. Once it enters into force, its provisions apply automatically and can generate rights and obligations without additional national implementing legislation (European Parliament & Council of the European Union, 2024, June 13).

1.1.3. Differences across Member States: French leadership and the German stance.

REPowerEU and the NZIA together form the Union's strategic and legislative response to the break with Russian energy supplies, framed around open strategic autonomy. At the same time, as shown above, EU action leaves room for each Member State to accept or reject nuclear energy as a strategic technology within national territory, a matter that is not without controversy.

In this regard, France leads the pro-nuclear camp. This position draws support from a long-standing tradition of state intervention in strategic sectors, often described as "dirigisme," and from a strong industrial base where the state keeps close oversight of the main operator, EDF (Saurugger, 2009, p. 113). France stands out in the region because nuclear power produces around 70% of national electricity, which supports domestic demand through steady baseload generation with low marginal costs, while providing a stabilizing role for the wider European market (Chick, 2010, p. 697; International Energy Agency, 2019, May 27, p. 7). In this context, France has become the leading force behind the 14-country "Nuclear Alliance," which supports a target of 150 GW of capacity by 2050 (Ministère de l'Économie, des Finances et de la Souveraineté industrielle et numérique, 2024, March 4; MITECO, 2024, September, p. 381).

Germany represents the opposite pole within the European Union. German policy has consolidated a full exit from nuclear power through a phase-out strategy grounded in long-running political choices and a broad social consensus (International Energy Agency, 2019, p. 45). This stance reflects sustained political and societal opposition shaped by concerns over catastrophic accidents and the long-term management of radioactive waste, factors that have produced unusually high public skepticism toward the nuclear sector and its operators (Grant, 2010, p. 678; European Commission, Directorate-General for Communication, 2008, p. 11; OECD Nuclear Energy Agency, 2010, p. 27).

Compared with other partners, German public opinion shows resistance that persists even under the assumption of a definitive waste solution. Decarbonization strategy therefore relies on large-scale renewable deployment, anchored in climate-neutrality targets for 2045 (International Energy Agency, 2023, October 24, p. 307). Yet the retreat from nuclear generation and coal has increased short-term exposure to natural-gas price swings (European Commission, 2022, May 18). This exposure has placed pressure on Germany's industrial base, especially the chemical and automotive sectors, pushing faster efforts toward energy autonomy through efficiency gains, supply diversification, and investment in flexibility infrastructure such as hydrogen and storage (Lehmann, 2009, p. 48; European Commission, 2022, May 18).

1.1.4. Spain in the face of Europe's nuclear turn.

Spain has taken a distinctive path amid the EU's renewed interest in nuclear power. The country operates seven reactors, yet their future is set by a phased shutdown schedule running from 2027 to 2035 (Instituto para la Transición Justa, 2025, p. 12). This timeline stems from a unanimous agreement between the central government and the plant-owning companies. It starts with the planned closure of Almaraz (Cáceres) in 2027, and it implies that four of the seven reactors will stop operating before 2030 (Instituto para la Transición Justa, 2025, p. 2).

Spain's system operator treats this trajectory as compatible with security of supply, given the projected scale-up of solar, wind, and storage. The central government frames this position within a broader strategy of open strategic autonomy that prioritizes domestic resources and aims to reduce external energy dependence, projected to decline from 73% to 50% by 2030. Policy design rests on a strong starting point: in 2023, renewable generation exceeded 50% of total electricity output for the first time, and the official roadmap targets 81% by the end of the decade (MITECO, 2024, September, p. 19).

This thesis stems, thus, from the observation of a gap between Spain's domestic narrative and the evolution of EU-level discourse, where nuclear energy has been strategically re-legitimized in the wake of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. While, as discussed above, 14 Member States have organized a "Nuclear Alliance," Spain continues to hold to its closure timetable (MITECO, 2024, p. 381).

1.2. Theoretical framework I: public affairs and influence in political decision-making.

The gap between the EU-level re-legitimization of nuclear energy and Spain's domestic narrative, which ties security of supply and price stability to rapid decarbonization and renewable deployment, turns the nuclear debate into a political and reputational issue, beyond a technical discussion. Any continuity, revision, or adjustment of Spain's nuclear phase-out calendar depends on public decisions and on social acceptance. The debate unfolds in a nonmarket arena shaped by institutions, regulators, political parties, industry, the media, and citizens. Public affairs therefore becomes central for understanding how decisions form and how legitimacy is built.

1.2.1. Definition of public affairs and evolution in corporate practice. Relevance in regulated sectors such as energy.

In corporate practice, public affairs refers to the strategic management of an organization's relationships with the nonmarket environment, covering political, social, and legal dimensions in pursuit of competitive advantage (Getz, 1997). A related point appears in David Álvaro García's work, where lobbying does not require visible influence in every case. A coherent strategy, a clear method, and strong tactical preparation often matter more for reaching defined objectives (2021, p. 35). Under this approach, the firm acts as a political actor and coordinates with others to pursue goals beyond what market transactions alone achieve. Historically, the function moved from reactive "government relations" toward proactive and more sophisticated Corporate Political Activity, or CPA (Coen & Richardson, 2019; Getz, 1997, p. 56).

Public affairs holds particular relevance in the nuclear case because energy markets operate under dense regulation, where legal frameworks shape prices, competition, and safety standards (Kraft & Furlong, 2007, p. 33; OECD, 2021, p. 154). Nuclear energy intensifies this dependence on public authority. Nuclear programs require multi-decade planning, involve risks prone to strong social amplification, and raise unresolved political and technical questions around radioactive waste (Kasperson et al., 1988, p. 179; Kraft & Furlong, 2007, p. 115). Public decision-making therefore becomes a direct condition for economic and operational viability. Without state backing and predictable regulation (European Commission, 2022, February 2), private financing for nuclear infrastructure often becomes out

of reach (OECD, 2021, p. 156).

Understanding public affairs also requires separating the field from lobbying and corporate communication, even when boundaries overlap. Lobbying refers to an organized and sustained effort to inform and persuade legislative or executive authorities in order to shape specific regulatory files, often through an exchange where technical information supports institutional access (Kingdon, 2014, p. 45; Kraft & Furlong, 2007, p. 55). Public affairs functions as a broader umbrella. The field includes long-term coalition building and the management of institutional reputation among stakeholders, alongside public advocacy aimed at shaping how issues are perceived outside government (Coen & Richardson, 2019, p. 4; Mahoney, 2007, p. 37). In parallel, traditional corporate communication tends to focus on brand image toward consumers, while public-affairs communication increasingly focuses on issue framing so private preferences align with wider collective interests (Álvaro García, 2021; Bennett & Iyengar, 2008, p. 714).

Stone (2012, p. 246) presents a “policy paradox” in which politics often works by portraying a particular interest as a general interest, since this framing supports alliance-building and collective mobilization. David Álvaro (2021) argues such alignment does not inherently imply illegality or unethical conduct when the goal centers on convergence between citizen preferences and political decision-making within representative democracy, while reputational risks rise when audiences perceive a gap between public claims and organizational behavior. Success metrics in public affairs therefore extend beyond the passage of a rule and include maintaining social license to operate and legitimacy under rising public scrutiny (Mahoney, 2007, p. 37; OECD, 2021, p. 19). In monitored democracies (Innerarity, 2015, p. 210), reputational damage in the public sphere often shuts down institutional access and weakens influence pathways (OECD, 2021, p. 42).

1.2.2. Points of influence in political decision-making. The importance of public opinion and media relations as a means of achieving political objectives.

Influence points in public affairs shift over time and appear across several arenas. These arenas include institutions, independent regulators, and political parties, as well as citizens and public opinion. Public opinion is often treated as an integrating sociopolitical force made up of collective attitudes, judgments, and preferences. Through deliberation, those

preferences show up in “raw” or “refined” forms (Fishkin, 2009, p. 14) and set boundaries on what elected leaders see as feasible when addressing issues presented as serving the public interest (Birkland, 2019, p. 167; Kraft & Furlong, 2007, p. 52; Nugent, 2017, p. 294).

Research also distinguishes between a visible cluster from a hidden cluster. The visible cluster includes politicians and media actors who shape the political agenda, while the hidden cluster includes bureaucrats and technical advisors who draft regulatory details (Kingdon, 2014, p. 68). Effective influence therefore requires work across both levels. Organizations need to supply expert knowledge to technical officials through technical reports and impact scenarios (Bouwen, 2002, pp. 369, 380). At the same time, organizations need to provide narrative legitimacy for political leaders and for wider public audiences. Coalition building across territories and industrial segments becomes central in this setting, since broad alliances signal a critical mass of social and sectoral support that decision-makers struggle to ignore (Zahariadis, 2007, pp. 72-73). This approach also helps present business demands as aligned with regional development and social cohesion.

Political communication supports institutional legitimacy, yet political communication does not replace technical groundwork. In sectors with high perceived risk, communication should focus on correcting myths and improving public understanding, for example, on the role of technology in climate neutrality in the context addressed by this thesis (Gamson & Modigliani, 1989, p. 9; World Nuclear Association, 2025, July 24). Public opinion does not need to produce a clear majority in favor of a policy option in order to matter politically. In highly contested sectors, its relevance often lies in defining the limits of feasibility, the reputational risks attached to certain positions, and the extent to which political actors can reopen debate without incurring prohibitive costs. For this reason, public opinion shapes the room for maneuver available to political leaders by raising or lowering the political costs of certain positions (Donsbach et al., 2014; Innerarity, 2015, p. 158).

Applied to the European and Spanish (especially the latter) nuclear case, this dual-cluster logic organizes the empirical analysis of *Chapter 3*. The analysis of the political agenda maps which actors (party leaders, ministers, industry representatives, regional governments, technical regulators) operate in the visible or hidden cluster at each of the three selected time points, and how shifts in their relative weight and discursive influence shape the political feasibility of reopening the nuclear debate in Spain.

1.3. Theoretical framework II: agenda-setting and framing theories applied to the nuclear case.

All of the above leads to a final component of this theoretical framework: understanding influence in public affairs requires close attention to how agendas form and shift. Agenda-setting refers to the process through which issues become relevant within three interconnected spheres: the media agenda, the public agenda, and the political agenda (Rogers & Dearing, 1988, p. 556). The media agenda reflects the issues prioritized by news outlets, the public agenda refers to the problems citizens perceive as most important, and the political agenda consists of the issues public officials and policymakers treat as deserving sustained attention (Kingdon, 2014; Kraft & Furlong, 2007; Rogers & Dearing, 1988). In this sense, the media does not necessarily tell citizens what to think, but it does play a major role in telling them what to think about (Innerarity, 2020, p. 364; Weimann, 2014, p. 165).

These agendas do not operate separately. Rather, they interact through a reciprocal process of agenda-building, in which issues move across institutional, media, and public arenas (Rogers & Dearing, 1988, p. 556). Media visibility is especially important because it mediates between political developments and citizen perceptions, often through intermediaries and opinion leaders, as suggested by the two-step flow model (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955, as cited in Rogers & Dearing, 1988, p. 559). Over time, this contributes to the construction of a “pseudo-environment” through which citizens orient themselves in complex political contexts (McCombs & Shaw, 1972, p. 185). Within this process, institutions try to activate public support for their priorities (Kingdon, 2014, p. 230; Kollman, 1998, p. 23), while organized interests seek to raise their demands on the institutional agenda through media exposure (Walgrave & Van Aelst, 2006, p. 91). When an issue becomes salient for citizens, political leaders are more likely to interpret it as urgent, especially when inaction may carry electoral costs (Schlager, 2007, p. 306; Walgrave & Van Aelst, 2006, p. 101).

Yet salience alone is not enough. The way an issue is interpreted also matters, which brings framing into the analysis. Framing refers to the strategic selection and emphasis of certain aspects of reality in order to promote a particular interpretation of an issue (Weaver, 2007, p. 143). More specifically, frames help define the problem, identify causes, make moral evaluations, and suggest remedies (Fooks et al., 2012, p. 290). Political language is therefore never neutral. Actors use symbols, categories, and metaphors to make specific interests appear socially meaningful and politically legitimate (Stone, 2012, p. 182). Framing thus works

as an interpretive mechanism through which audiences assign meaning to complex issues and events (Fung & Scheufele, 2014, p. 138).

In political practice, institutional discourse, media coverage, and public opinion are linked through a dynamic exchange of information, legitimacy, and strategic signaling (Kollman, 1998, p. 60). This is especially relevant in controversial and high-risk sectors such as nuclear energy, where public attitudes are shaped not only by issue salience but also by the frames and informational cues through which citizens interpret the technology.

1.4. Theoretical framework III: window of opportunity.

Moving a step forward, a “window of opportunity” refers to a brief, scarce moment in which advocates gain a favorable opening to move preferred solutions forward or to elevate specific problems onto the decision agenda (Kingdon, 2014, pp. 165, 203; Birkland, 2019, p. 234). In the Multiple Streams Framework, this concept captures the point in time when policy change becomes more likely because previously separate processes align (Kingdon, 2014, p. 165; Zahariadis, 2007, pp. 65, 73). These windows are episodic and tend to close quickly, either because early action reduces the sense of urgency or because the circumstances that drew attention lose salience in public debate (Kingdon, 2014, pp. 166-169, 204).

A window opens when three largely independent streams converge within the policy system: problems, policies, and the politics stream (Kingdon, 2014; Zahariadis, 2007, pp. 70-74). Shifts in political conditions, such as turnover in leadership or changes in public mood, often create an opening in the politics stream, while a newly urgent problem can pull an issue onto the agenda (Kingdon, 2014, p. 168). Policy entrepreneurs then act as “couplers,” linking solutions that already circulate in the policy community to problems that have become salient under favorable political conditions (Kingdon, 2014, pp. 172-173, 181).

External shocks often accelerate this process by concentrating attention and exposing weaknesses that demand intervention (Birkland, 2019, pp. 224-225). These shocks often take the form of focusing events: sudden, relatively rare, and harmful developments that become visible to policymakers and the public at roughly the same time (Kingdon, 2014, p. 94). Their political effect lies in their capacity to push previously latent problems into the foreground, enabling organized actors to challenge the status quo and argue for non-incremental change

(Birkland & DeYoung, 2012, p. 175). Read through this lens, Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine stands as a paradigmatic focusing event for the energy sector, since it placed security of supply at the center of public and political attention and generated a sharp sense of urgency.

2. Political agenda and public opinion on nuclear energy: research design.

2.1. Research methodology.

2.1.1. Overall approach and cross-method logic.

This thesis adopts a mixed-method comparative case-study design centered on the European Union and Spain, combining qualitative analysis with secondary quantitative data in order to address three connected questions: how and why nuclear energy changes its position in the EU public and political agendas after Russia's invasion of Ukraine, why this shift does not unfold in the same way in Spain, and whether the resulting divergence creates a window of opportunity for nuclear-sector public affairs in the Spanish case.

Rather than relying on a simple before-and-after division, the research is structured through both a longitudinal and a transversal logic. The longitudinal dimension is necessary to capture change as a process unfolding in a specific political and historical context. For this reason, the study does not observe the phenomenon through a purely binary pre- and post-24 February 2022 lens, but through three strategic temporal cuts, 2019, 2022, and 2025 (or 2024, in instances where these are the most recent data available), which make it possible to trace not only whether change occurs, but also its direction, pace, and political meaning over time.

The selection of the European Union and Spain as the two units of comparison is not arbitrary. The EU level is chosen as the institutional reference for re-legitimation: it is the arena in which the most significant legislative and discursive shifts occur after 2022, and it provides the normative framework against which member-state trajectories are assessed. Spain is chosen as an analytically productive outlier within that frame: it is a member state with an active nuclear fleet and a formally committed phase-out calendar, operating under the same geopolitical shock as the rest of the Union yet producing a divergent institutional response. This combination is more informative than a comparison between two member states, because it allows the analysis to hold the supranational normative environment constant while examining why national political conditions prevent equivalent convergence.

One design limitation deserves explicit acknowledgment here. The theoretical framework developed in *Chapter 1* includes media agenda dynamics as one of the three interrelated arenas through which nuclear energy is publicly constructed. However, the empirical analysis that follows does not include a systematic media content analysis. The discursive component

relies mainly on institutional documents, party manifestos, parliamentary records, and official communications. This choice is consistent with the primary objective of the thesis, which is to reconstruct the evolution of the political agenda rather than to measure media agenda dynamics directly, but it means that the circular relationship between institutional discourse, media coverage, and public opinion posited in the framework is inferred from the two endpoints rather than traced through its intermediate link. The absence of media analysis does not invalidate the comparison between the political agenda and public opinion, but it does limit the precision with which causal mechanisms can be attributed.

2.1.2. Working hypotheses.

- *Hypothesis 1.* EU institutional discourse reframes nuclear energy after 2022 toward security, sovereignty, and competitiveness, while Spanish discourse keeps a frame set centered on phase-out, waste, cost, and a renewables-focused transition. The core criterion is a clear shift in dominant frames in the EU case after 24 February 2022, paired with stronger continuity in Spain across the same break.
- *Hypothesis 2.* Public opinion on nuclear energy shifts more strongly at EU aggregate level than in Spain, or shifts in different directions, after 2022. The core criterion is a detectable change in repeated survey measures in the EU aggregate, alongside weaker movement, greater stability, or a different direction of change in Spain.
- *Hypothesis 3.* If discourse divergence and EU-level opinion change hold, a limited and contested window of opportunity may emerge for nuclear-sector public affairs in Spain. Here, “window of opportunity” does not mean a consolidated pronuclear majority, but rather a context in which reopening the debate entails a lower relative political cost and becomes more discursively and socially viable than in the pre-2022 period. The core criterion is the joint presence of (a) a European reframing that increases institutional legitimacy for nuclear energy; (b) a partial reordering of Spanish opinion frames toward security, resilience, affordability, and diversification, even without strong pronuclear convergence; and, (c) visible political conflict in Spain showing that the issue has become more reopenable, even if not hegemonic.

To move from the hypotheses to empirical testing, the thesis follows a sequential analytic logic

that first reconstructs discourse change, then tracks opinion trends, and finally combines both strands to evaluate the political implications for Spain.

2.2. Defining the two central concepts of the study.

After outlining the overall research design, the empirical analysis centers on two core concepts: the political agenda and public opinion on nuclear energy.

First, the political agenda refers to how nuclear energy appears, how nuclear energy is ordered, and how nuclear energy is framed within political and institutional debate. The focus goes beyond simple mentions. The analysis tracks visibility, relative position within the broader energy agenda, and the political meaning attached to the topic. Under this approach, the political agenda relates to meaning-making by institutional actors, political parties, and arenas that mediate public debate. Observation therefore focuses on electoral platforms, institutional documents, political statements, and related discursive materials that reveal how nuclear energy is constructed as a political priority.

On the other hand, public opinion refers to citizens' perceptions, evaluations, and dispositions toward nuclear energy. The focus shifts away from elite definitions and toward how the population perceives, accepts, rejects, or evaluates the issue. Public opinion functions as a concept tied to measurable attitudes that support aggregation and comparison through surveys. While the political agenda supports reconstruction of interpretive frames and discursive hierarchies, public opinion supports measurement of social acceptance and shifts in citizen predispositions.

2.2.1. Operationalizing the concept of the political agenda.

The political agenda is operationalized through four main dimensions: the presence of nuclear energy, the position of nuclear energy within the broader energy agenda, the dominant frame used to present nuclear energy, and the political function attributed to nuclear energy within the wider policy narrative. These dimensions translate an abstract concept into observable features across concrete texts, documents, speeches, and party materials.

The first dimension is presence. The analysis identifies whether nuclear energy appears in the selected materials and the terms under which it appears. Inclusion or omission is analytically

meaningful because both indicate whether the issue is treated as politically relevant, marginal, or taken for granted.

The second dimension is position, understood as the relative place occupied by nuclear energy within the broader energy agenda. The analysis evaluates whether nuclear energy holds a central, secondary, residual, or conflict-driven position in relation to other priorities such as renewables, security of supply, strategic autonomy, affordability, industrial competitiveness, or waste management.

The third dimension is the dominant frame, meaning the interpretive lens through which nuclear energy is legitimized, problematized, or contested. This dimension tracks whether nuclear energy is primarily linked to energy security, sovereignty, industrial competitiveness, innovation, and system stability, or whether it remains associated with waste, risk, economic cost, closure, or incompatibility with a renewables-led transition.

The fourth dimension is political function. This refers to the role nuclear energy is made to play within each discursive context: for example, as a strategic asset, a transitional technology, a legacy infrastructure to be phased out, a governance problem centered on waste and decommissioning, or a partisan marker within broader political conflict. This dimension is especially important for distinguishing between cases where nuclear energy gains discursive centrality as part of a forward-looking strategy and cases where it remains salient mainly because its closure, cost, or material legacy must be managed.

2.2.2. Operationalizing the concept of public opinion.

Public opinion follows a structured and comparative operationalization logic, since the objective is to analyze how citizens interpret energy policy and how nuclear energy is positioned within those interpretations through repeated quantitative indicators. In this thesis, public opinion is not treated only as direct support for or rejection of nuclear energy, but more broadly as the configuration of priorities, evaluations, and meaning structures through which citizens assess energy policy in different political contexts.

Accordingly, the central analytical dimension is not limited to overall support or opposition to nuclear energy. Instead, the analysis focuses on the place nuclear energy occupies within the broader public understanding of energy policy. This includes the extent to which citizens

associate energy policy with climate transition, affordability, innovation, security of supply, resilience, diversification, or strategic autonomy, as well as the relative position assigned to nuclear energy within that wider hierarchy of concerns and solutions.

This dimension is captured through several observable indicators. The first group of indicators refers to the meaning attributed to energy policy, such as whether citizens primarily associate it with renewables, climate neutrality, affordability, efficiency, innovation, prevention of shortages, or the need to ensure that nuclear energy is safe. The second group refers to the priorities citizens identify for the medium and long term, including investment in clean technologies, cost reduction, diversification of energy sources, energy saving, electrification, or a greater deployment of nuclear energy. The third group refers to the broader political context in which energy is evaluated, especially when sector-specific indicators are unavailable, by considering the relative salience of issues such as inflation, housing, security, or energy supply within the general hierarchy of public concerns.

This block relies mainly on repeated Eurobarometer indicators. Where wording remains comparable, changes are interpreted longitudinally; where it does not, the evidence is read in contextual terms. The aim is not to infer a simple binary position for or against nuclear energy, but to assess whether the broader climate of opinion becomes more or less compatible with reopening the debate.

3. Evolution of the political agenda on nuclear energy in Europe and Spain.

3.1. Nuclear energy in the European agenda.

3.1.1. Starting point in the EU in 2019.

In 2019, nuclear energy occupied a secondary position within the European agenda. The institutional starting point was not a debate over its expansion, but the construction of a broad framework of climate transition, economic modernization, and energy transformation in which priority was given to renewables, efficiency, and the reduction of external dependencies. The *New Strategic Agenda 2019-2024* of the European Council set the objective of a climate-neutral, green, fair, and social Europe, and called for a European energy market capable of providing sustainable, secure, and affordable energy, always with “full respect for the right of Member States to decide on their energy mix” (European Council, 2019, June 20, p. 5).

The same pattern appears in the European Green Deal. The Commission states that energy production and use account for more than 75% of EU greenhouse gas emissions and identifies the central response as the decarbonization of the energy system through efficiency, market integration, electrification, and above all a power sector based “largely” on renewable sources, together with the rapid phase-out of coal and the decarbonization of gas (European Commission, 2019, December 11, p. 6). Nuclear energy therefore was not framed as the emblematic technology of the new phase. The core narrative was renewable rather than nuclear, and climate leadership was articulated around clean transition, not around a political recovery of nuclear energy (European Commission, 2019, December 11).

The *Fourth Report on the State of the Energy Union* confirms this low centrality. Before the geopolitical turn of 2022, the European energy logic was still organized around secure, sustainable, competitive, and affordable energy, with regulatory concerns and renewable progress far more visible than any expansive nuclear impulse. Within that framework, atomic energy appeared mainly in connection with nuclear safety, technical oversight, and the management of existing infrastructure, rather than as part of a new narrative of sovereignty or industrial competitiveness. The dominant frame was therefore one of maintenance and control rather than strategic repositioning (European Commission, 2019, April 9).

The partisan dimension reinforces this reading. In the manifesto of the European People’s

Party, nuclear energy is absent as a distinct programmatic axis. The EPP called for a “true Energy Union” in which electricity and gas could cross borders without obstacles, with the aim of reducing costs, supporting the cost-effective expansion of renewables, and strengthening European energy security (European People’s Party, 2019, April 9, p. 5). This omission is meaningful because it shows that in the main European center-right space, energy competitiveness in 2019 was associated with market integration, innovation, and renewables rather than with an explicit political defense of nuclear energy (European People’s Party, 2019, April 9). A similar silence is found in the Party of European Socialists, whose manifesto framed ecological transformation around industrial renewal, renewable leadership, and climate neutrality by 2050, without making nuclear energy a central discursive element (Party of European Socialists, 2019).

By contrast, the European Green Party openly rejected nuclear energy, defending a transition based on phasing out coal, improving efficiency, moving to 100% renewables, and eliminating both nuclear energy and its subsidies (European Green Party, 2019, p. 2). Before 2022, then, the green pole of the European agenda structured the energy debate in terms of renewables versus fossil fuels and nuclear, not renewables together with nuclear versus fossil fuels (European Green Party, 2019).

The taxonomy provides an additional indicator of this starting point. Regulation (EU) 2020/852, which gave legal shape to the sustainable finance framework emerging from the 2019 debate, did not establish nuclear energy as an uncontested green technology. Instead, it created a general framework based on substantial contribution to environmental objectives and on the principle set out in Article 17 of “do no significant harm.” Because of this, the nuclear question was tied from the outset to a debate about risk, waste, and potential environmental harm, which lowered its symbolic status compared with renewable technologies whose climate legitimacy was much more immediate in the European public debate (European Parliament & Council of the European Union, 2020, June 18).

Overall, the 2019 starting point shows a nuclear sector that was present, but peripheral, technically regulated, and politically fragmented. European institutions tolerated it within the pluralism of national energy mixes, but without elevating it to flagship status within the new climate cycle. The major European parties, except the Greens, tended more to omit it than to defend it. And when it did become an object of debate, it often did so through frames of

safety, waste, or subsidies rather than through the frames of sovereignty, strategic autonomy, or industrial competitiveness that would later become dominant.

3.1.2. Reframing the European agenda after 2022.

From 2022 onward, nuclear energy ceased to occupy a marginal position in the European agenda and became part of a broader framework centered on security, resilience, and the reduction of dependencies. The discursive turning point appears clearly in the Versailles Declaration, where the European Council presents the war in Ukraine as a historic change that compels the Union to assume greater responsibility for its own security and to reduce its external energy dependence “as soon as possible” (European Council, 2022, March 10-11, p. 5). In this context, energy policy was no longer framed only in terms of climate transition, but was directly linked to sovereignty, response capacity, and strategic autonomy, with nuclear energy benefiting from this shift.

This shift is especially relevant in terms of presence and centrality. Whereas in 2019 nuclear energy had remained subordinate to the general language of clean transition, in 2022 it entered an emergency agenda marked by the need to strengthen the resilience of the European system in the face of geopolitical shocks. It stopped appearing primarily as a technical or divisive issue and began to be presented as a useful tool within a broader strategy of protection against external vulnerabilities (European Council, 2022, March 10-11).

REPowerEU consolidated this reframing much more explicitly. The Commission set the goal of ending dependence on Russian fossil fuels well before 2030 and structured that strategy around energy savings, diversification of supply, and the acceleration of clean energy. Within this new framework, the text recognizes that some coal capacity may remain in use longer than originally planned and that nuclear energy, for example in the production of non-fossil hydrogen, together with domestic gas resources, also has a role in guaranteeing supply during the transition (European Commission, 2022, May 18, pp. 3, 9). This formulation is important because it incorporates nuclear energy into the core of the European response to the crisis, and no longer as a simple inherited infrastructure but as a functional asset for maintaining security of supply while the energy system is reorganized (European Commission, 2022, May 18).

REPowerEU also introduces the frame of strategic diversification in the nuclear field. The Commission notes that, for some Member States, dependency concerns do not affect only gas but also nuclear fuel, especially in the case of reactors designed with Soviet technology (European Commission, 2022, May 18, p. 6). It therefore proposes strengthening European capacity, or that of reliable partners, in conversion, enrichment, and fuel fabrication. Nuclear energy here is no longer presented only as a source of power generation, but as part of a logic of supply chains, industrial autonomy, and reduced strategic exposure (European Commission, 2022, May 18).

The sector's regulatory re-legitimation became visible in Delegated Regulation (EU) 2022/1214. This text does not remove the controversy, but it does alter the institutional framing of nuclear energy within the European sustainability regime. The Commission explicitly argues that nuclear energy, by providing a stable supply base, facilitates the deployment of intermittent renewable sources and does not obstruct their development (European Commission, 2022, July 15, p. 2). This point is central because it shifts the debate away from the risk-waste binary and toward one of systemic complementarity, raising its legitimacy within the European regulatory agenda for investment (European Commission, 2022, July 15).

This marks a clear break with the 2019 baseline. At that stage, the main question was whether nuclear energy could fit into a normative architecture guided by the principle of not causing significant harm. In 2022, by contrast, the Commission incorporated it as a transitional activity under specific conditions. The critical environmental frame did not disappear, but it no longer monopolized institutional interpretation. In its place, a logic of balance among decarbonization, security of supply, and the stable functioning of the electricity system became more prominent (European Commission, 2022, July 15). From the perspective of the political agenda, this implies a clear rise in the hierarchical position of nuclear energy.

The conflictive dimension of this process became especially visible in the European Parliament vote of July 2022. Parliament's institutional communication underlined that MEPs did not reach the absolute majority needed to block the inclusion of gas and nuclear in the complementary delegated act, so the objection was rejected (European Parliament, 2022, July 6). This episode shows that the reframing was neither linear nor consensual, but politically contested. At the same time, it also confirms that nuclear energy had reached a level of

centrality sufficient to become the object of a major European regulatory controversy over which activities should be considered sustainable.

The *Seventh Report on the State of the Energy Union* reinforces this reading and shows that by the end of 2022 the new language had already become embedded in the Commission's institutional discourse. The report presents 2022 as a period of volatility, energy insecurity, and pressure on the European system, and states that the Union and the Member States are reshaping and accelerating their energy and climate strategies in response to new geopolitical realities (European Commission, 2022, October 18, p. 1). Although the document does not make nuclear energy the exclusive axis of the response, it does integrate it into a discursive environment dominated by security, affordability, resilience, and strategic adaptation (European Commission, 2022, October 18, p. 8). Overall, the post-2022 reframing shows a clear transformation in the dominant frames through which nuclear energy appears in the European political agenda, without replacing, however, renewables in the European narrative.

3.1.3. Political-institutional configuration of the European agenda in 2025.

By 2025, the nuclear turn in the European agenda not only persists, but takes on a more stable and institutionalized form, more clearly tied to the Union's industrial policy. If in 2022 the reframing had inserted nuclear energy into a language of security of supply, resilience, and reduced dependencies, in this later phase that language is already embedded in regulatory instruments, industrial platforms, and medium-term strategic documents. Nuclear energy no longer appears only as a useful resource in a moment of crisis, but as part of the productive, technological, and financial architecture through which the Union seeks to sustain competitiveness and energy autonomy (European Parliament & Council of the European Union, 2024, June 13; European Commission, 2024, September 11; European Commission, 2025, November 6).

The main legal expression of this deepening is Regulation (EU) 2024/1735, the Net-Zero Industry Act. In this text, nuclear fission technologies and nuclear fuel cycle technologies are explicitly included in the catalogue of net-zero technologies (European Parliament & Council of the European Union, 2024, June 13, p. 28). This is central for the variable of presence and centrality, because it marks the move from largely discursive legitimation to full legislative integration within the European industrial ecosystem for net-zero technologies. The

regulation not only recognizes nuclear energy as admissible, but inserts it into a European manufacturing strategy designed to reduce strategic dependencies, with a benchmark of 40% of annual deployment needs by 2030 and with the possibility for projects to receive the status of net-zero strategic projects (European Parliament & Council of the European Union, 2024, June 13, p. 5). That classification grants them priority treatment, faster permitting procedures, and in certain cases the status of overriding public interest, partially aligning nuclear energy with other key technologies in the new European industrial framework (European Parliament & Council of the European Union, 2024, June 13).

This shift toward competitiveness and technological sovereignty is also visible in the *Ninth Report on the State of the Energy Union*. The Commission presents in 2024 a Union that has managed to withstand critical risks to security of supply, regain a degree of control over markets, and accelerate the climate transition, while linking this evolution directly to the need to strengthen European industrial competitiveness. Within that framework, the report underlines the importance of the Net-Zero Industry Act in responding to the competitive challenges faced by European net-zero technology manufacturers (European Commission, 2024, September 11, p. 11). Although the document preserves the quantitative prominence of renewables, the fact that it places nuclear energy within a discursive environment shaped by security, prices, electrification, and industrial capacity shows that the post-2022 reframing has not weakened, but has become part of the ordinary vocabulary of European energy policy (European Commission, 2024, September 11).

This consolidation becomes even clearer in 2025. The *Tenth Report on the State of the Energy Union* insists on the need to build a “secure and resilient” Energy Union and states that the Union must evolve toward an “electro-continent” based on domestically produced clean energy (European Commission, 2025, November 6, p. 1). This language deepens the frame of strategic autonomy and connects it to a logic of electrification, infrastructure, cost reduction, and economic prosperity (European Commission, 2025, November 6).

The source that best captures this deepening is the *2025 Nuclear Illustrative Programme* (PINC 2025). There, the Commission states that domestic, affordable, and clean energy supports European decarbonization, competitiveness, and resilience objectives, and adds that for some Member States, nuclear energy is an important component of their decarbonization, industrial competitiveness, and security of supply strategies (European Commission, 2025, June 12). The

document no longer treats nuclear energy as a mere transitional technology, but as infrastructure with systemic value. It provides low-carbon electricity suitable for baseload, facilitates system integration, and contributes to the deployment of other clean technologies. The PINC itself projects that by 2040 more than 90% of the Union's electricity will come from decarbonized sources, "primarily from renewables, complemented by nuclear energy" (European Commission, 2025, June 12, p. 1).

The 2025 PINC also deepens the frame of material sovereignty. The Commission warns that security of supply, from ore to nuclear fuel, must remain a strategic objective and highlights European vulnerability in the segments of conversion, enrichment, and fuel fabrication, especially after the disruption caused by Russia's aggression against Ukraine. Added to this is the roadmap presented in May 2025 to phase out Russian imports of oil, gas, and nuclear energy while preserving security of supply (European Commission, 2025, May 6; European Commission, 2025, June 12).

Another clear indicator of the new political-institutional configuration is the growing centrality of small modular reactors. In 2024, the Commission launched the European Industrial Alliance on SMRs with the aim of accelerating the deployment of the first units in Europe in the early 2030s, while emphasizing industrial competitiveness, European cooperation, and the need for a robust supply chain. In 2025, the Alliance's institutional page maintains the same focus and defines its objective as facilitating and accelerating the development, demonstration, and deployment of SMRs through working groups aimed at improving deployment conditions, supporting specific projects, and revitalizing the European nuclear supply chain (European Commission, 2024, February 9; European Commission, 2025). From the analytical standpoint, this implies that the nuclear agenda has expanded from the defense of existing reactors to a narrative of innovation, industry, and future projection.

At the same time, the pro-nuclear political bloc appears in 2025 more coordinated and more demanding. The meetings of the Nuclear Alliance in March and June 2025, promoted by Sweden, call for technological neutrality to become a guiding principle of European energy policy and demand that nuclear energy receive conditions equivalent to those of renewables. In March, the Alliance argued that without sufficient low-carbon baseload, there is no realistic path to providing affordable, reliable, and abundant energy while achieving climate neutrality (Government Offices of Sweden, 2025, March 17). In June, the same bloc demanded that the

PINC and the future investment strategy fully reflect national nuclear plans and open a detailed dialogue with Member States (Government Offices of Sweden, 2025, June 17). This confirms that by 2025 nuclear energy is not only integrated into Commission documents, but also backed by an organized coalition of states pressing to turn that legitimation into financing, planning, and concrete instruments.

3.1.4. Assessment of the European case.

The trajectory analyzed (*see Table 1*) shows a clear shift in the European agenda on nuclear energy between 2019 and 2025. The main conclusion is not that nuclear energy replaces renewables as the axis of the transition, but that it ceases to occupy a peripheral position associated mainly with regulation, technical safety, and inherited infrastructure, and acquires a much more visible role within the Union's political and institutional response. The most important change therefore consists of its relative position, the frames through which it is legitimized, and the political function it begins to perform within the European energy narrative.

Table 1. Evolution of the European nuclear energy agenda, 2019-2025.

Period	Presence	Position	Dominant frame	Political function
2019	Peripheral, mainly regulatory and technical	Secondary within the climate and renewables agenda	Risk, waste, safety, national energy mix pluralism, renewables-led transition	Regulated infrastructure, not a strategic asset
2022	More visible and central after the war in Ukraine	Integrated into the EU energy and geopolitical response	Security of supply, resilience, strategic autonomy, system stability, complementarity with renewables	Functional asset to reduce vulnerability in crisis
2025	High and institutionalized	More stable and higher on the EU agenda	Competitiveness, strategic autonomy, industrial innovation, nuclear value chain, security of supply	Structural component of energy and industrial policy

Source: Compiled by the author (*see annex*).

The causal mechanism underlying this shift can be specified through the Multiple Streams Framework. Russia's invasion of Ukraine activated the problem stream by placing energy

vulnerability at the center of political attention. The policy stream was already primed: a nuclear industry with existing infrastructure, a coalition of member states led by France, and legislative instruments under development provided solutions that could be rapidly coupled to the newly urgent problem. The politics stream shifted because the geopolitical shock generated cross-partisan urgency and because French leadership supplied the political entrepreneurship needed to move the issue from the margins to the core of EU institutional discourse. The convergence of these three streams explains why the same external shock that elevated energy security across Europe produced non-incremental discursive and legislative change at EU level rather than simply reinforcing pre-existing trajectories.

3.2. Nuclear energy in the Spanish agenda.

3.2.1. Starting point in Spain in 2019.

In the Spanish case, the 2019 starting point presents a more defined and less ambiguous configuration than the one observed at the European level. Nuclear energy did not occupy a central position as a future-oriented technology, but as a technology in retreat within a political and programmatic framework already oriented toward its gradual closure. The draft of the *National Integrated Energy and Climate Plan (PNIEC) 2021-2030* placed the Spanish energy transition around the accelerated expansion of renewables, efficiency, electrification, and economic decarbonization, while nuclear energy appeared linked to a calendar of capacity reduction and to a logic of orderly management of its exit from the energy mix (MITECO, 2019, February, p. 175). In that sense, its presence in the agenda was not marginal, but clearly defensive. The issue was present because it had to be administered, not because it was projected as a strategic lever of the new energy model (MITECO, 2019, February; MITECO, 2020, January 20).

In terms of presence and centrality, the most important feature of this phase is that nuclear energy was incorporated into official planning only as transitional capacity. The 2020 PNIEC envisaged a reduction in installed nuclear capacity from the 7.4 GW existing at the beginning of the period to approximately 3 GW by 2030 (MITECO, 2019, February, p. 171), within a scenario in which renewable generation was expected to reach 74% of electricity production and the Spanish energy system was to move toward climate neutrality (MITECO, 2019, February, p. 10). Unlike the European case in 2019, where a certain institutional ambivalence

prevailed, Spain already had a much clearer political direction. Nuclear energy remained part of the system, but subordinated to the construction of a renewable system rather than to the preservation of a long-term nuclear base.

The dominant frame in this Spanish baseline is one of orderly and gradual closure compatible with system security. The Government's written response to the Congress of Deputies in December 2020 is especially useful because it states that frame explicitly. It affirms that the PNIEC establishes the contribution of nuclear energy to the energy mix and contemplates "an orderly closure of Spanish nuclear power plants within the time horizon 2027-2035," while also adding that no new plants are foreseen (Gobierno de España, 2020, December 2).

From the perspective of security of supply, nuclear energy still performed an instrumental role in 2019, but a strictly bounded one. The PNIEC documents did not frame it as a guarantee of strategic autonomy against geopolitical vulnerabilities, but as temporary support for system functioning while the planned renewable deployment took place. In Spain's 2019 case, security referred above all to operational continuity, demand coverage, and the technical coordination of the transition, not to reducing external dependencies through a political reevaluation of nuclear technology (MITECO, 2019, February; MITECO, 2020, January 20).

The position of nuclear energy was also secondary in terms of competitiveness and economic efficiency. The PNIEC built the Spanish energy transition around the idea that renewables, especially solar PV and wind, offered the best cost and deployment prospects for new installed capacity. Nuclear energy was not associated with innovation, technological leadership, or future competitive advantage, but with inherited infrastructure whose continuity was to be managed over a limited period. The Spanish energy agenda in 2019 thus did not articulate a narrative of industrial modernization linked to nuclear energy, but a green modernization narrative centered on renewables, grids, efficiency, and electrification (MITECO, 2019, February; MITECO, 2020, January 20).

The partisan dimension already reinforced that baseline. The PSOE explicitly embraced the commitments of the draft PNIEC and the decarbonization horizon associated with an increasingly renewable system and with a timetable for plant closures (Partido Socialista Obrero Español, 2019, p. 43), while Unidas Podemos prioritized the idea that renewable energy, being "cheaper," should set electricity prices and questioned the over-remuneration or "windfall profits" of certain plants (Unidas Podemos, 2019, p. 16). VOX, by contrast, was

already introducing a different frame when it called for an Energy Plan oriented toward Spanish “energy self-sufficiency” based on cheap, sustainable, efficient, and clean energy (VOX, 2019, p. 10), anticipating a language of sovereignty that would later become more openly pro-nuclear. This baseline was later consolidated in Law 7/2021, which reinforced a decarbonization model centered on renewables, efficiency, and electrification without re-legitimizing nuclear energy as a strategic technology (Boletín Oficial del Estado, 2021, May 20). Overall, the Spanish starting point in 2019 shows an agenda far more closed than the European one in relation to nuclear energy, which did not appear as a technology to be re-legitimized, but as a technology whose exit had to be managed without compromising system stability or the broader direction of the energy transition.

3.2.2. The Spanish agenda after 2022.

After the geopolitical shock of 2022, the Spanish political agenda on nuclear energy did not undergo a reframing comparable to the one observed in the European Union. Nuclear energy remained in the agenda, but not as a revalued technology; instead, it continued to be treated as infrastructure whose end should be managed in an orderly manner within a transition based on renewables, storage, and closure planning. This continuity is already clear in the Government’s written response to the Congress of Deputies in March 2023, where it states explicitly that it does not foresee “modifying or suppressing the programmed closure timetable” for nuclear plants and that the relevant schedule remains the one contemplated in the 2019 Protocol and the PNIEC, with closure planned between 2027 and 2035 (Gobierno de España, 2023, March 14).

The draft update of the PNIEC 2023-2030 confirms this continuity. MITECO presents the update as a revision of the existing plan rather than as a redefinition of the role of nuclear energy, and maintains as its core goals the strengthening of renewables, emissions reductions, improved efficiency, and 81% renewable electricity generation, together with a reduction in external energy dependence to as low as 51% (MITECO, 2023, June, p. 6). The draft also continues to contemplate a phased withdrawal of the nuclear fleet and presents that exit as compatible with system robustness (MITECO, 2023, June, p. 32). Security of supply in Spain is therefore framed through renewable deployment and storage rather than through a repositioning of nuclear energy as a sovereignty asset.

This point is central to the comparison with the European Union. In Spain, the language of security does appear after 2022, but it is attached to the strength of the projected new electricity mix rather than to the need to preserve or expand nuclear technology. The logic of the discourse is therefore almost the reverse of the European one. In Spain, system stability does not require extending the life of the nuclear fleet, but demonstrating that its phased withdrawal is technically absorbable thanks to the growth of wind, solar, and flexibility solutions (MITECO, 2023, June).

Where the centrality of the nuclear issue did clearly increase in the Spanish post-2022 agenda was in the field of radioactive waste and the sector's material legacy. The favorable report issued by the Nuclear Safety Council in December 2022 on the *Seventh General Radioactive Waste (PGRR) Plan* is highly revealing in this regard. The CSN frames the PGRR through a technical-regulatory logic and highlights the planned Decentralized Temporary Storage facilities at nuclear plants to manage spent fuel and high-level waste until their transfer to a Deep Geological Repository scheduled to become operational in 2073 (Consejo de Seguridad Nuclear, 2022, December 21). Nuclear energy thus appears associated not with electricity production or strategic competitiveness, but with governance, licensing, radiological protection, and long-term liability management.

The same shift toward a waste-centered frame appears even more strongly in the full text of the 7th General Radioactive Waste Plan. The document defines radioactive waste management as a "matter of national interest" and stresses that decisions must guarantee "maximum safety" (ENRESA, 2023, December 27, p. 5). The center of the discourse is no longer electricity production as a strategic advantage, but the need to manage long-term consequences in a safe and socially acceptable manner (ENRESA, 2023, December 27, p. 58). Government approval of the 7th PGRR at the end of 2023 reinforced this reading. MITECO's official note stresses that the Plan is "consistent" with the PNIEC 2021-2030 and with the 2019 orderly closure Protocol. At the same time, it underlines that the Plan foresees future costs of 20.22 billion euros, to be financed according to the "polluter pays" principle through the Fund managed by ENRESA (Empresa Nacional de Residuos Radiactivos) (MITECO, 2023, December 27), therefore framing nuclear energy as an issue of closure, waste, and liability financing.

The Resolution published in the BOE in January 2024 legally consolidates the same frame. The Council of Ministers' agreement provides that the dismantling of the plants will begin after

their final closure, with preparatory work, transfer of ownership to ENRESA, and ten-year dismantling works, followed by a later period of surveillance (Boletín Oficial del Estado, 2024, January 8, p. 2348). It also sets the total cost of the activities foreseen in the 7th PGRR through 2100, including the bulk of the financial effort corresponding to the period 2024-2100 (Boletín Oficial del Estado, 2024, January 8, p. 2350).

The strategic environmental declaration of the 7th PGRR adds another layer to this logic, insisting on a high level of environmental protection, territorial and ecological safeguards, and criteria such as no net biodiversity loss in the implementation of the Plan (Boletín Oficial del Estado, 2023, July 27). Even when the Spanish agenda devotes significant attention to the nuclear field, it does so through impact regulation, environmental assessment, and risk correction rather than through the promotion of a new productive or industrial legitimacy for the technology.

The real novelty, then, did not come from government discourse, but from the opposition counter-frame led by VOX, which used the energy crisis to articulate a proposal of “energy sovereignty” free from all “climate imposition” by supranational bodies (VOX, 2022, July 29; VOX, 2022, August 5). Within this framework, the party explicitly linked nuclear energy to a “safe and stable generation base” capable of guaranteeing affordable prices for households and firms in the face of what it described as the “climate fanaticism” of the Green Deal and Agenda 2030 (VOX, 2022, July 29; VOX, 2022, August 5). Its strategy included demands to halt closures and dismantling at existing plants, promote investment for their rehabilitation, call for new plants to guarantee supply, develop a “Spanish modular nuclear reactor,” remove regional “eco-taxes,” repeal the Climate Change Law, and even hold an advisory referendum on energy sovereignty (VOX, 2022, July 29; VOX, 2022, August 5; VOX, 2022, November 18).

At the same time, the parliamentary left, including Unidas Podemos, Esquerra Republicana, EH Bildu, and the BNG, consolidated an anti-nuclear frame of resistance against the European strategic turn. In the Debate on the State of the Nation, these parties denounced the European Commission’s decision to classify nuclear energy and gas as “green” as an act of “greenwashing” that sent a contradictory message to investors and diverted public resources needed for renewable energy (Congreso de los Diputados, 2022, July 29). Through initiatives such as Proposed Resolution No. 87, they urged the executive to reject the European energy taxonomy, arguing that nuclear energy is not sustainable because of the high volume of waste

it generates, the non-recyclable nature of uranium, and the radiological risks it poses to citizens (Congreso de los Diputados, 2022, July 29). This sector also linked the defense of nuclear closure to the need to democratize the energy system through a public energy company and continued to present nuclear energy as a technology of the past whose economic unviability prevented it from being a real solution to the climate crisis (Congreso de los Diputados, 2022, July 14; Congreso de los Diputados, 2022, July 29).

Government continuity was also reflected at the partisan level. The PSOE's 2023 electoral manifesto defended a deep shift toward a more efficient and renewable system and linked it to a just transition (Partido Socialista Obrero Español, 2023, p. 69), while Sumar explicitly called for a "safe and socially just nuclear phase-out," maintaining the timetable and strengthening the responsibility of plant owners (Sumar, 2023, p. 48).

Table 2. Political actors and discursive frames on nuclear energy in Spain after 2022.

Political actor	General position	Dominant frame	Key proposals or arguments	Political function of the discourse
Government / MITECO	Maintain closure calendar	Orderly closure, renewables, system security, waste, costs	No change to closure, supply remains secure, waste must be managed, polluter pays	Prevent strategic reopening of the debate
VOX	Strongly pro-nuclear	Sovereignty, baseload, low prices, anti-climate imposition	Stop closures, reopen or build plants, develop Spanish SMR, cut taxes, referendum	Make nuclear a symbol of sovereignty and opposition
PP (in 2025)	Increasingly pro-nuclear	Security, autonomy, competitiveness, anti-closure calendar	Extend plant life, reverse calendar, attack closure policy	Build a conservative alternative to the government
Parliamentary left, Unidas Podemos, ERC, EH Bildu, BNG, Sumar	Anti-nuclear	Greenwashing, waste, risks, unviability, just closure	Reject taxonomy, back renewables, public energy company, keep closure calendar	Defend closure and resist the European turn

Source: Compiled by the author (*see annex*).

3.2.3. Political-institutional configuration of the Spanish agenda in 2025.

By 2025, the Spanish agenda on nuclear energy shows no rupture with 2022, but rather a consolidation of the previous frame of closure, renewable transition, and orderly management of the nuclear legacy. The main variation lies not in the objectives, which remain stable, but in the tone and intensity of the political framing. The replacement of Teresa Ribera by Sara Aagesen does not open a reframing comparable to the European one, because the new head of MITECO presents her mandate as a continuation of the transformation already under way and stresses from the outset the centrality of science, climate adaptation, and Spain's renewable leadership (Presidencia del Gobierno, 2024, November 25).

The position of nuclear energy within the Spanish energy agenda of 2025 therefore remains secondary and subordinated to the general framework of the updated PNIEC. The 2023-2030 Update of the National Integrated Energy and Climate Plan continues to maintain emissions reductions, electrification, renewable deployment, and lower external energy dependence as its central axes and explicitly reaffirms an orderly and phased timetable for the cessation of operation of the nuclear fleet, compatible with the full guarantee of electricity supply (Boletín Oficial del Estado, 2024, September 24; MITECO, 2024, September; MITECO, 2024, September 24). Real Decreto 986/2024, the public note approving the PNIEC, and the Strategic Environmental Declaration all reinforce the same frame of regulatory continuity rather than the opening of a new nuclear debate (Boletín Oficial del Estado, 2024, September 24; MITECO, 2024, June; MITECO, 2024, September 24).

The dominant frame therefore remains one of orderly closure and renewable transition, but in 2025 the political component of that frame becomes more intense. Sara Aagesen's intervention in February 2025 is especially revealing because she not only reiterates that the closure timetable was agreed by the companies themselves and set out in the 2019 Protocol, but also adds that none of the plant owners has formally requested its modification (MITECO, 2025, February 13). In doing so, the Government shifts the debate away from any strategic discussion over the desirability of closure and toward a logic of compliance with commitments already assumed. At the same time, Aagesen links the strength of the Spanish system to industrial demand for grid access and to the economic attractiveness of the Spanish energy model, which suggests that national competitiveness continues to be institutionally associated with renewables, electrification, and industrial investment rather than with a revision of the

role of nuclear energy (MITECO, 2025, February 13).

What does change in 2025 is the intensity of parliamentary polarization. In the February plenary debate on the scheduled closure, the PP described the closure as “energy suicide,” denied that there were economic, environmental, or strategic autonomy reasons to maintain the timetable, and announced a sustained strategy to reverse it, while VOX defended the recognition of nuclear energy as an indispensable source in the energy mix, the cancellation of the closure timetable, lower taxation, and the possibility of new reactors in the name of energy sovereignty. At the opposite pole, the parties to the left of the PSOE maintained firm rejection and presented nuclear energy as an expensive, socially unsafe, and politically outdated technology (Congreso de los Diputados, 2025, February 11-12).

The issue also reached a higher degree of political-parliamentary crystallization within the opposition in 2025. The Bill to guarantee the contribution of nuclear energy to the decarbonization of the energy system called for extending reactor operation on technical and economic grounds, facilitating economic sustainability, and recognizing its role in the transition, security of supply, and lower prices and emissions (Congreso de los Diputados, 2025, April 11, p. 7). The subsequent consideration of the bill and the following agreement show that, even though the Government did not alter its frame, nuclear closure had become the object of a much more structured legislative offensive by the opposition than in 2022 (Congreso de los Diputados, 2025, June 23; Congreso de los Diputados, 2025, June 27).

The major novelty of 2025 appears with the interruption of the electricity supply on April 28, which heightened the public salience of the energy debate. Yet this episode did not function as a window of opportunity for a pro-nuclear reframing within government discourse. On the contrary, it produced an intensification of the closure frame: in his statement of April 29, the Prime Minister argued that nuclear generation had disconnected in the same way as other technologies during the outage and that greater nuclear dependence would have slowed, not accelerated, recovery; and in his parliamentary intervention of May 7, Sánchez went further, stating that nuclear power had “proven not to be an effective solution” in system-wide crises given its lower operational flexibility, and explicitly rejecting any causal link between the blackout and the need to extend nuclear energy (Presidencia del Gobierno, 2025, April 29; Presidencia del Gobierno, 2025, May 7). Analytically, the April 28 episode does not open a nuclear reframing but reinforces the government's framing of nuclear energy as less flexible

and less useful than alternative technologies in managing system-wide crises.

In terms of costs and waste, the 2025 agenda keeps unchanged the frame consolidated since 2023, but formulates it more forcefully in political terms. In February, Aagesen insists that the new waste plan imposes very high management costs that must be paid by the plant-owning companies according to the “polluter pays” principle, and explicitly argues that lowering nuclear taxation would amount to transferring that cost to citizens (MITECO, 2025, February 13). In this way, the Government not only preserves the framing of nuclear energy as a technology associated with waste and economic liabilities, but also uses it as an argument against demands to revise the closure timetable. The Government’s written response to Congress in September 2025 closes the period by confirming the coherence between the 2019 closure Protocol, the PNIEC updated by Real Decreto 986/2024, and Spanish energy policy (Gobierno de España, 2025, September 5). It justifies the timetable through responsible waste management, the gradual entry of new renewable and storage capacity, and the possibility of anticipating the territorial impacts of closure (Gobierno de España, 2025, September 5).

Overall, the political-institutional configuration of the Spanish agenda in 2025 shows only limited variation with respect to 2022. There is no rupture in objectives and no reframing comparable to the European one, and the main novelty of the year is the intensification of government discourse after the April blackout around renewable energies.

3.2.4. Assessment of the Spanish case.

The trajectory of the Spanish case (*see Table 3*) shows a much stronger pattern of continuity than the one observed at the European level. Nuclear energy does not disappear from the agenda, but neither is it institutionally revalued as a strategic technology after 2022. The main conclusion is that its presence remains embedded in a relatively stable political framework dominated by orderly closure, gradual replacement by renewables, and the management of the sector’s material legacy. The most visible change affects less the orientation of government discourse than the intensity of the partisan conflict built around it.

Table 3. Evolution of the Spanish nuclear energy agenda, 2019-2025.

Period	Presence	Position	Dominant frame	Political function
2019	Relevant but defensive	Secondary, subordinated to the renewables transition	Orderly closure, gradual phase-out, system security, regulatory certainty, green modernization	Legacy technology whose exit must be managed
2022-2023	Present, but not revalorized	Still subordinated to renewables and the closure calendar	Closure, waste, costs, liabilities, regulatory security, environmental assessment, plus opposition frame of sovereignty and baseload	For government, infrastructure in retreat, for opposition, partisan conflict issue
2025	Persistent and more polarized	Secondary for government, salient in political conflict	Closure, renewables, waste, costs, lower flexibility, versus opposition frame of sovereignty, price, security, and decarbonization	For government, reaffirm closure, for PP and VOX, reopen the debate

Source: Compiled by the author (*see annex*).

A significant discursive development at the executive level emerged at the very end of the period under study. On 25 March 2026, Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez made a public statement that introduced a conditional opening to the nuclear debate that had not previously emanated from the head of government: he stated that if extending plant lifetimes implied no additional cost for citizens, and if security of supply and public safety were guaranteed, the executive would be prepared to engage in dialogue with plant-owning companies on the question of definitive closure (Europa Press, 2026, March 25; Redacción El Periódico de la Energía, 2026, March 26).

The analytical relevance of this intervention does not lie in a change of official policy, which Sánchez did not announce. It lies, rather, in the fact that a conditional acceptance of the possibility of continued operation entered the public debate from the highest level of the executive, rather than from the opposition or the industry alone. Sánchez simultaneously reaffirmed the government's renewable strategy and pointed to current electricity prices as evidence of its effectiveness, which signals that this statement should be read as a limited discursive flexibility rather than as a reframing of the executive's overall energy agenda. Even so, its political significance is considerable: the threshold for publicly reopening the discussion had been formally lowered at the apex of the Spanish government.

3.3. Comparative analysis of the political agenda: EU vs. Spain.

The comparison between the European Union and Spain shows that the decisive point is not the mere presence of nuclear energy in the debate, but the way its political meaning changes after 2022. In both cases, nuclear energy remains part of the energy conversation throughout the period, but it does not do so with the same hierarchy or the same function. This is where the main comparative difference lies (*see Table 4*). At the European level, nuclear energy rises within the agenda and becomes integrated into frames increasingly linked to security, strategic autonomy, and competitiveness. In Spain, by contrast, its institutional centrality remains subordinated to a logic of closure, renewable transition, and legacy management. The divergence therefore lies not in presence versus absence, but in re-legitimation versus restrictive continuity.

Table 4. EU-Spain comparison of the nuclear agenda by period.

Period	Case	Presence	Position	Dominant frame	Political function
2019	EU	Peripheral, mainly regulatory and technical	Secondary within the climate and renewables agenda	Risk, waste, safety, pluralism of national energy mixes, renewables-led transition	Regulated infrastructure, not a common strategic asset
	Spain	Relevant but defensive	Secondary, subordinated to the renewables transition	Orderly closure, gradual phase-out, system security, regulatory certainty, green modernization	Legacy technology whose exit must be managed
2022 / 2022-2023	EU	More visible and central after the war in Ukraine	Integrated into the EU energy and geopolitical response	Security of supply, resilience, strategic autonomy, system stability, complementarity with renewables	Functional asset to reduce vulnerability in crisis
	Spain	Present, but not revalorized	Still subordinated to renewables and the closure calendar	Closure, waste, costs, liabilities, regulatory security, environmental assessment, plus opposition frame of sovereignty and baseload	For government, infrastructure in retreat, for opposition, partisan conflict issue
2025	EU	High and institutionalized	More stable and higher on the EU agenda	Competitiveness, strategic autonomy, industrial innovation, nuclear value chain, security of supply	Structural component of energy and industrial policy
	Spain	Persistent and more polarized	Secondary for government, salient in political conflict	Closure, renewables, waste, costs, lower flexibility, versus opposition frame of sovereignty, price, security, and decarbonization	For government, reaffirm closure, for opposition, reopen the debate

Source: Compiled by the author (*see annex*).

**Note: As noted above, by March 2026 a limited conditional opening emerged at the executive level (see section 3.2.4).*

The political function performed by nuclear energy also diverges clearly in each case. In the

Union, nuclear energy moves progressively from regulated infrastructure to a functional asset and later to a more structural component of a strategy of energy security and industrial policy. In Spain, by contrast, it continues to function mainly as an inherited technology whose end must be managed, while at the same time becoming an increasingly visible marker of partisan conflict. This difference is especially important for the general logic of the thesis, because it shows that the divergence between the EU and Spain is not reducible to a different speed of change, but reflects a different nature of change: Europeanization of a more pro-nuclear frame in one case, and institutional resistance with growing political contestation in the other. Therefore, *Hypothesis 1*, that EU institutional discourse reframes nuclear energy after 2022 toward security, sovereignty, and competitiveness, while Spanish discourse retains a set of frames centered on phase-out, waste, cost, and a renewables-focused transition, is confirmed in its general terms. However, verifying the hypothesis requires an important nuance: Spanish continuity does not mean that the country remains static, but rather that the change that does occur is concentrated more in political contestation than in a genuine transformation of the dominant institutional frame.

The divergence between the two cases is therefore not reducible to a difference in speed of adaptation to the same external shock. It reflects a difference in the political conditions that mediate between the shock and institutional response. In Spain, three factors combine to explain why the EU's focusing event did not produce equivalent reframing: first, the governing coalition's dependence on parties with strong anti-nuclear commitments limited the political cost of maintaining the closure calendar; second, the 2019 consensual agreement between the government and the plant-owning companies had already converted the phase-out into a legally and financially structured commitment, raising the exit cost of any reversal; and third, the relative weakness of the pro-nuclear bloc within the mainstream right until 2023 left the issue without an effective political entrepreneur capable of coupling the security frame to a concrete legislative alternative. These conditions do not make Spanish continuity inevitable, but they do make it structurally durable in a way that the mere persistence of old frames alone would not explain.

4. Evolution of public opinion on nuclear energy.

4.1. Evolution of public opinion in the European Union.

4.1.1. Starting point in the EU 2019.

In 2019, European public opinion interpreted EU energy policy primarily through the lens of the green transition. The most common association was the shift from fossil fuels to renewable energy in order to tackle climate change, at 41%, followed by reducing energy consumption, at 28%, securing more competitive prices for consumers, at 27%, and investing in innovative technologies, at 24% (European Commission, Directorate-General for Communication, 2019). At this starting point, energy was therefore linked above all to decarbonization, efficiency, and cost, rather than to a dominant logic of strategic vulnerability or geopolitical security.

This was accompanied by broad consensus on the role the Union itself should play. A total of 92% believed the EU should guarantee access to energy for all citizens, 90% thought it should ensure access to clean energy, 89% said it should secure affordable energy, and 91% supported stronger cooperation among Member States to guarantee energy that was secure, clean, and financially accessible (European Commission, Directorate-General for Communication, 2019). This suggests that, before the turning point of 2022, the legitimacy of European action in energy policy was already very high. The debate was not structured around whether the EU should act, but around which goals should be prioritized within that action.

Within this framework, nuclear energy occupied a secondary, though not marginal, position. Only 18% directly associated it with the general meaning of European energy policy, placing it behind climate-related goals, energy saving, and price. In addition, 15% linked EU energy policy to minimizing the risk of blackouts and energy shortages, which shows that material system resilience was already present even before 2022, though clearly in a secondary position relative to climate and economic priorities. When the question shifted toward system security, however, support rose substantially: 85% considered it necessary to ensure that nuclear energy was safe and secure in the EU in order to guarantee access to secure energy (European Commission, Directorate-General for Communication, 2019). The gap between these two figures is analytically significant.

The structure of medium-term priorities reinforces this interpretation. For the following ten

years, responses focused on investing in and developing clean energy technologies, at 47%, keeping energy costs as low as possible, at 37%, intensifying international efforts against climate change, at 33%, and reducing total energy consumption, at 30%. By contrast, reducing EU energy imports reached only 13% (European Commission, Directorate-General for Communication, 2019). In other words, the 2019 data show a public opinion climate oriented toward transition, innovation, and affordability, but not yet reordered by the urgency of strategic autonomy. Nuclear energy was present, but clearly subordinate to a broader framework dominated by climate, efficiency, and cost.

4.1.2. Changes in the EU after 2022.

The break produced by 2022 did not simply replace the climate frame with a purely security-based one. Instead, it led to a more complex recomposition in which security, economics, and energy transition became increasingly intertwined. The 2023 Standard Eurobarometer did not yet ask about the general meaning of European energy policy, but rather about levels of agreement with specific energy policy directions in the context of the war in Ukraine. Support was very high across all items: 85% agreed that the EU should invest heavily in renewable energy, 82% supported greater energy efficiency to reduce dependence on external producers, another 82% agreed that the EU should reduce its dependence on Russian energy sources as soon as possible, 81% said reducing oil and gas imports while investing in renewables was important for security, and 80% supported joint energy purchasing to obtain better prices (European Commission, Directorate-General for Communication, 2023).

These results matter for two reasons. First, they show that the geopolitical shock after 2022 shifted public attention toward security of supply, external dependence, and coordinated action. Second, they indicate that this new sensitivity did not weaken support for the transition, but instead reinforced it through a different logic. Renewables and efficiency no longer appeared only as climate instruments, but also as tools of security, resilience, and dependency reduction. The reorientation, then, was not at odds with the previous green frame, but rather reformulated it in geopolitical terms.

This shift becomes even clearer in Special Eurobarometer 555 of 2024, which once again measures what EU energy policy means to citizens. Here the leading response is no longer climate action, but ensuring affordable energy prices for consumers, at 40%, thirteen points

higher than in 2019. This is followed by investment in innovative energy technologies, at 33%, and reducing energy consumption, at 30%, while the option of advancing European climate neutrality falls to 25%. At the same time, mentions of preventing blackouts and shortages rise to 22%, and references to ensuring that nuclear energy is safe reach 21% (European Commission, Directorate-General for Communication, 2024). The report itself notes that comparisons with 2019 should be treated with caution, since both the territorial base, from EU28 including the United Kingdom to EU27, and some response formulations have changed (European Commission, Directorate-General for Communication, 2024). Even so, the direction of the shift is clear: energy policy is defined less in exclusively climate terms and more through cost, resilience, infrastructure, and system security.

In this new context, nuclear energy improves its relative position, but it does not become the dominant axis. In the question about what European energy policy means, the share referring to ensuring nuclear safety rises from 18% in 2019 to 21% in 2024. In addition, when respondents are asked which measures should be prioritized to achieve climate neutrality by 2050, 32% mention greater deployment of nuclear energy, including small local reactors. Even so, this option remains well behind diversification of energy sources, at 62%, energy saving, at 54%, and electrification of uses through renewable or low-carbon electricity, at 40% (European Commission, Directorate-General for Communication, 2024). The strongest reading, then, is not that European public opinion has moved sharply toward a pro-nuclear agenda, but that nuclear energy has become more normalized within a broader set of acceptable solutions in a context of strategic uncertainty.

Viewed longitudinally, the post-2022 change lies in the fact that public opinion no longer evaluates energy only as a matter of climate transition and increasingly interprets it as an issue of autonomy, security, and economic stability as well. This reordering favors a relative legitimization of nuclear energy, but within a wider framework still dominated by diversification, efficiency, and affordability. The shift is real, but qualified, and it fits the hypothesis that the geopolitical shock did not fully replace earlier priorities, but altered the order and function of the frames through which citizens assess European energy policy.

4.1.3. Situation in the EU in 2025.

For the 2025 time cut, the key methodological clarification is that none of the sources used

includes a specific energy Eurobarometer conducted that year that would make it possible to replicate the sectoral logic of 2019 or 2024. Standard Eurobarometer 103 does not ask what EU energy policy means or what its energy priorities should be, but rather what the main problems facing the Union and the Member States are. For that reason, 2025 must be treated as a general public opinion context, useful for situating energy within the broader political climate, but not as a directly equivalent new measurement of energy attitudes. In addition, the report itself warns that, in the national question, several items were removed compared with previous versions, including “energy supply,” so comparisons must be made cautiously (European Commission, Directorate-General for Communication, 2025).

Once this is made clear, the hierarchy of concerns at EU level in 2025 is led by Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, at 27%, followed by the international situation, at 24%, and security and defense, at 20%. After that come the economic situation, at 17%, and rising prices, inflation, or the cost of living, at 16%, while energy supply falls to tenth place, at 9% (European Commission, Directorate-General for Communication, 2025).

The interpretation of the 2025 cut must therefore rely on combining this general climate of opinion with the latest available sectoral snapshot, which remains Special Eurobarometer 555 from 2024. Read together, the two sources point to the same conclusion. Energy policy continues to matter for European citizens, but it is no longer presented as a singular supply crisis. Instead, it has been absorbed into a broader framework of affordability, security, and strategic autonomy. Within that context, nuclear energy maintains the relative legitimacy gained after 2022, but there is no evidence of a distinct majority strong enough to speak of a consolidated pro-nuclear agenda. Rather, it remains part of a broader repertoire of acceptable solutions whose center still lies in diversification, energy saving, innovation, and system resilience.

Table 5. European Union: longitudinal evolution of public opinion on energy policy, 2019-2025.

Time cut	Type of indicator	Dominant meaning or concern	Position of nuclear energy	Analytical reading
2019	<i>Energy-policy meanings and priorities</i>	Climate, efficiency, affordability, innovation	Secondary but visible, 18%, plus 85% support for nuclear safety	Present, but subordinated
2023	<i>Energy-policy orientations after Ukraine</i>	Security of supply, dependence, coordination	Indirectly repositioned within a security agenda	Security rises without displacing renewables
2024	<i>Energy-policy meanings and 2050 priorities</i>	Affordability, innovation, resilience, shortage prevention	21%, up from 18%, 32% support more deployment by 2050	Greater legitimacy, but not dominance
2025	<i>General hierarchy of concerns</i>	War, security, economy, cost of living	No equivalent direct measure	Energy absorbed into a broader strategic context

Source: Compiled by the author based on Eurobarometer data (*see annex*).

4.2. Evolution of public opinion in Spain.

4.2.1. Starting point in Spain in 2019.

In 2019, Spanish public opinion placed European energy policy within a framework dominated by the green transition, but with a stronger emphasis than the European average on price and technological innovation. The most frequent association, as in the EU aggregate, was the shift from fossil fuels to renewable energy to combat climate change, at 45% in Spain compared with 41% in the EU. Unlike the EU average, however, Spain assigned greater weight to competitive energy prices for consumers, at 36% compared with 27%, and to contributing to economic growth and employment through innovative technologies, at 34% compared with 24% (European Commission, Directorate-General for Communication, 2019). This suggests that, even before 2022, the Spanish case interpreted the energy issue through a logic less centered on strategy and more closely linked to the combination of transition, cost, and technological modernization.

This emphasis did not imply weaker legitimacy for European action. On the contrary, support

for an active EU role was even stronger in Spain than in the European aggregate, with all four items on EU energy responsibility exceeding 96%, compared to a range of 89–92% in the EU aggregate (European Commission, Directorate-General for Communication, 2019). The Spanish starting point, then, was not one of distance from European governance, but rather one of strong support for robust EU intervention, provided it was directed toward tangible goals for citizens, especially in terms of price, access, and system modernization.

The position of nuclear energy in this 2019 cut was nevertheless weaker in Spain than in the EU aggregate. Only 14% identified it as part of the general meaning of EU energy policy, compared with 18% in the European average. This lower centrality matters because it shows that, even before the later geopolitical shock, nuclear energy occupied a more secondary place in Spain than in the EU. Even so, when the question shifted from the symbolic or programmatic level to system security, acceptance rose significantly: 89% considered it necessary to ensure that nuclear energy was safe and secure in the EU in order to guarantee access to secure energy (European Commission, Directorate-General for Communication, 2019). Rather than appearing as a politically prioritized option, nuclear energy was already presented as a technology whose continued presence could be acceptable in functional and security terms. This nuance matters because it shows that the Spanish starting point was not one of absolute rejection, but of low political centrality combined with conditional acceptance.

Medium-term priorities confirm this pattern. In Spain, 55% identified investment in and development of clean energy technologies as a priority, eight points above the European average, and 50% placed keeping energy costs as low as possible at the center, thirteen points above the EU average. By contrast, reducing total energy consumption reached 23%, compared with 30% in the EU, and reducing energy imports remained at 11%, compared with 13% in the Union (European Commission, Directorate-General for Communication, 2019). The Spanish 2019 cut therefore shows a public opinion climate less oriented than the European one toward autonomy or security of supply, and more oriented toward a combination of renewable transition, economic accessibility, and innovation.

4.2.2. Changes in Spain after 2022.

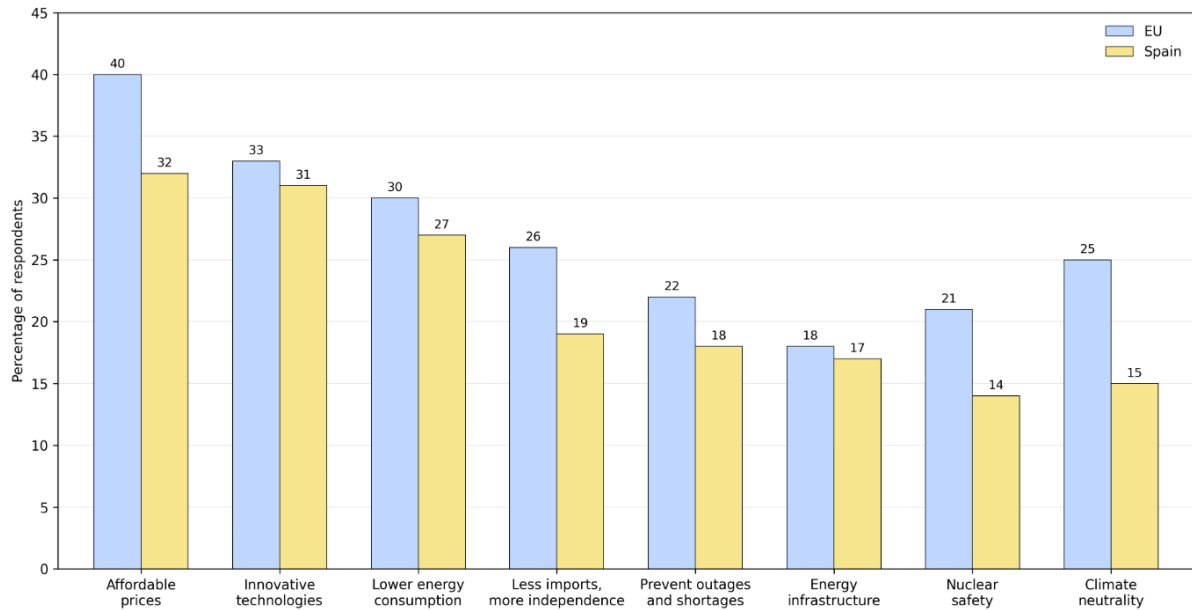
After Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the Spanish case shares with the European one a reconfiguration of the opinion environment, but it does not reproduce the same evolution in

the nuclear dimension. Standard Eurobarometer 99 shows that, in 2023, rising prices, inflation, and the cost of living remained the main national concern in Spain, at 41%, while the economic situation reached 25%, unemployment ranked third at 22%, and climate change stood at 9% (European Commission, Directorate-General for Communication, 2023). This matters because it places the Spanish reception of the energy shock within a predominantly socioeconomic frame. The energy crisis is not processed first as a technological debate or a dispute over the energy mix, but as an extension of pressure on households and the domestic economy.

At the same time, post-2022 Spanish attitudes do clearly incorporate the link between energy, security, and dependency reduction. In 2023, Spain was among the countries where support for the idea that reducing oil and gas imports while investing in renewables is important for security was especially high, at 85%, above the European average of 81% (European Commission, Directorate-General for Communication, 2023). This helps clarify the nature of the Spanish shift. The post-2022 change does not primarily take the form of expanded explicit support for nuclear energy, but it does reorder the ground on which energy policy is judged. Energy is no longer read only in environmental or sectoral terms, but becomes part of a broader frame of security, resilience, and vulnerability reduction, a shift that expands the space of legitimacy for technologies that had previously been more peripheral within the debate.

Special Eurobarometer 555 confirms this direction in 2024 (see *Figure 1*). In Spain, EU energy policy is associated above all with ensuring more affordable prices for consumers, at 32%, and with investing in innovative energy technologies, at 31%. These are followed by reducing energy consumption in Europe, at 27%, and, at some distance, reducing imports and increasing European energy independence, at 19%, preventing blackouts and shortages, at 18%, and improving energy infrastructure, at 17%. The reference to ensuring that nuclear energy is safe reaches only 14%, clearly below the European average of 21%, while climate neutrality stands at 15%, also below the EU figure of 21% (European Commission, Directorate-General for Communication, 2024). Compared with 2019, Spain shifts part of the emphasis toward affordability and maintains the importance of innovation, but it does not strengthen nuclear centrality.

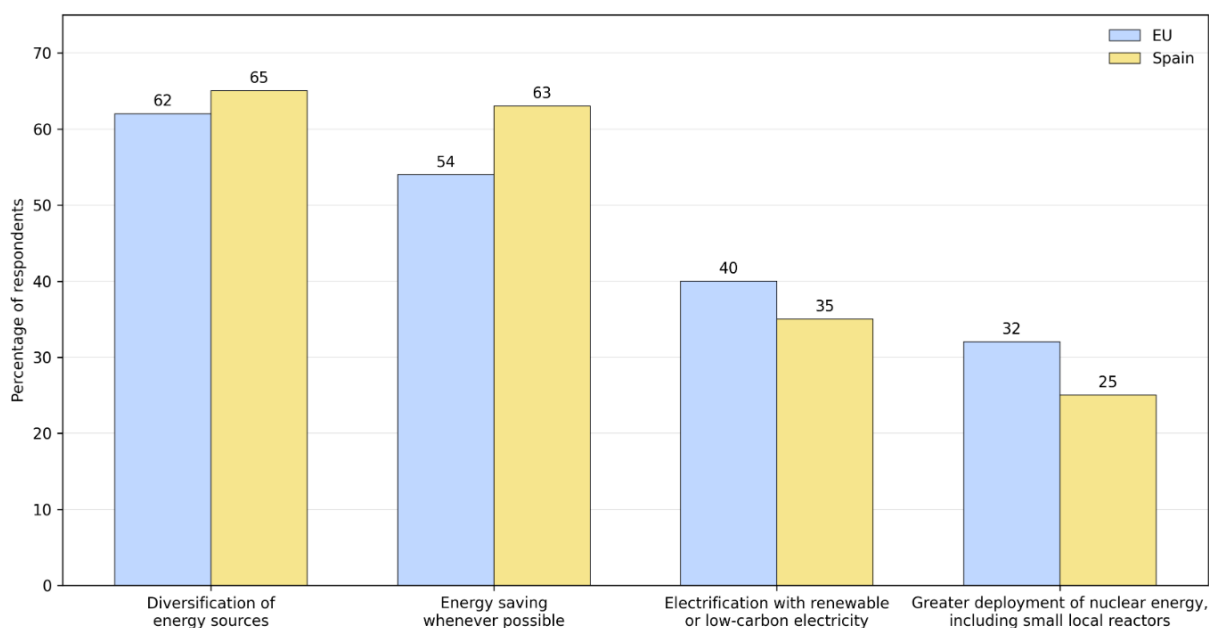
Figure 1. Meaning attributed to EU energy policy in 2024: EU and Spain compared.



Source: Compiled by the author based on Eurobarometer data (*see annex*).

This difference becomes even clearer when looking at the measures that should be prioritized to achieve climate neutrality by 2050 (*see Figure 2*). In Spain, the two clearly dominant options are diversifying energy sources, at 65%, and saving energy whenever possible, at 63%, both above the European average. By contrast, electrifying uses with renewable or low-carbon electricity reaches 35%, five points below the EU average, and deploying more nuclear energy, including small reactors, remains at 25%, seven points below the European aggregate (European Commission, Directorate-General for Communication, 2024). What follows from this is that, after 2022, Spanish public opinion does adopt a vocabulary more closely tied to security and diversification, but it continues to channel it mainly through energy saving, innovation, and renewables rather than through stronger relative legitimization of the nuclear option.

Figure 2. Priority measures for achieving climate neutrality by 2050: EU and Spain compared, 2024.



Source: Compiled by the author based on Eurobarometer data (*see annex*).

In comparative terms, this is the decisive feature of the Spanish case after 2022. Whereas in the EU the geopolitical shock contributes to a partial normalization of nuclear energy within a broader set of solutions, in Spain the same context mainly reinforces the priority of lowering energy prices, accelerating innovation, diversifying sources, and reducing vulnerabilities. This difference, however, does not imply complete immobility. Even if nuclear acceptability does not rise in Spain with the same intensity as in the European aggregate, the shift in frames still reduces the exceptional character of the nuclear debate by inserting it into a wider discussion about security of supply, strategic autonomy, and system stability. In that sense, what emerges is less a fully pro-nuclear convergence than the appearance of somewhat more favorable discursive and social conditions for reopening the debate.

4.2.3. Situation in Spain in 2025.

For the Spanish 2025 cut, the key methodological clarification is that the fieldwork for the Standard Eurobarometer (EB) 103 was carried out between March 26 and April 22, 2025, so it does not capture any later effect from energy-related events that took place after those dates. Any claim about such impact would therefore go beyond the sources used in this section.

What EB103 does allow us to state is that, once again in spring 2025, the structure of concerns in Spain was dominated by the economic situation and housing, both at 26% and both in first position (European Commission, Directorate-General for Communication, 2025). This is analytically relevant because it indicates that, in the Spanish case, the 2025 context does not place energy as a visible autonomous concern at the highest level of the political agenda, but instead absorbs it into a broader framework of economic pressure and material problems.

Read as the immediately preceding cut and still valid for profiling the attitudinal structure, the 2024 evidence shows a Spanish public opinion that continues to prioritize affordability, at 32%, technological innovation, at 31%, diversification of sources, at 65%, and energy saving, at 63%. It also shows a comparatively stronger sensitivity than the European average toward support measures for households in energy poverty, at 59% compared with 53% in the EU (European Commission, Directorate-General for Communication, 2024). The Spanish profile entering 2025 therefore continues to be organized around an axis of economic protection, efficiency, and innovation rather than around any marked revaluation of nuclear energy.

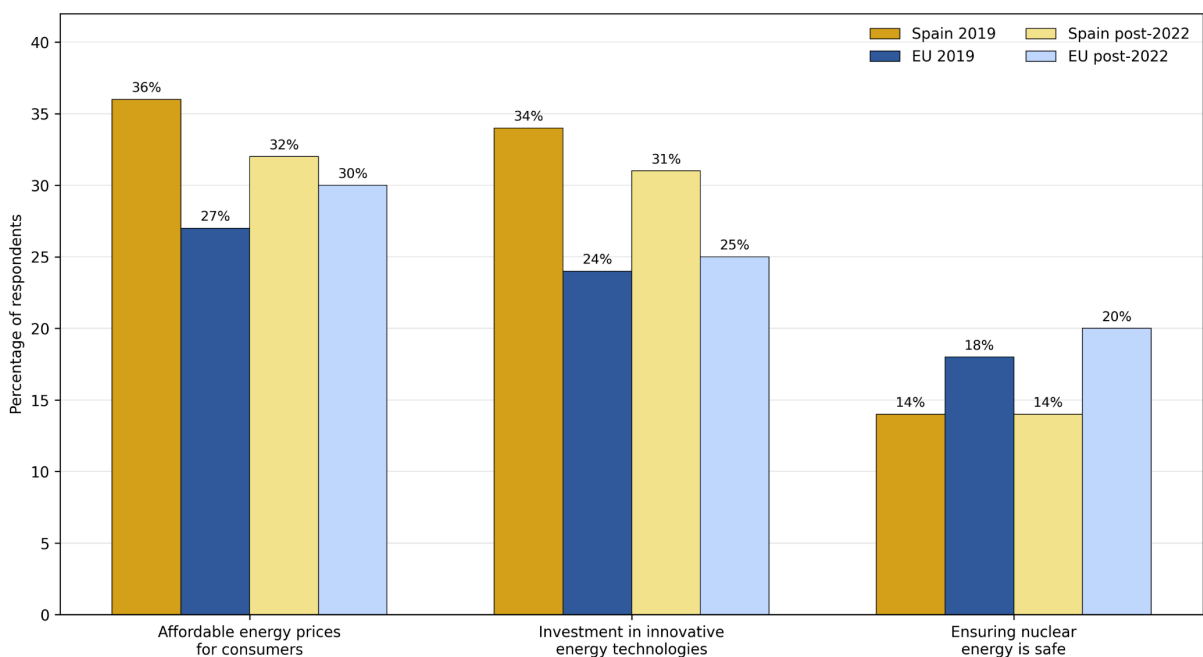
The position of nuclear energy remains, in fact, relatively low. Only 14% identify it as part of the meaning of EU energy policy and 25% mention it as a priority measure for achieving climate neutrality by 2050, both figures below the European average (European Commission, Directorate-General for Communication, 2024). This allows an important conclusion for the comparative argument of the thesis. In 2025, the available sources provide no evidence of Spanish convergence with the European trajectory of relative nuclear legitimation. At the same time, it would also be inaccurate to say that the frame remains identical to that of 2019. What emerges instead is a persistence of priorities structured around saving, diversification, innovation, and social cost, within a context where security of supply and system resilience have gained weight. That shift does not consolidate a pro-nuclear agenda, but it does contribute to making the reopening of the debate more politically viable.

4.3. Comparative analysis of public opinion: EU vs. Spain.

The comparison between the European Union and Spain (*see Figure 3*) shows that, in public opinion too, the decisive element is not the appearance or disappearance of nuclear energy as an issue, but the different intensity and direction with which its relative position changes within the energy imaginary after 2022. In both cases, the geopolitical shock alters the way

citizens interpret energy policy, but not symmetrically. The main comparative pattern is that European public opinion more clearly incorporates a shift toward frames of security, resilience, and strategic autonomy that tend to normalize the nuclear option to a greater extent, whereas in Spain the change is channeled mainly through concerns about cost, economic protection, innovation, and diversification, without translating into an equivalent revaluation of nuclear energy.

Figure 3. Spain and the EU compared: public opinion priorities on energy policy, 2019 vs. post-2022.



Source: Compiled by the author based on Eurobarometer data (*see annex*).

The key comparative difference is therefore visible less in abstract acceptance of nuclear energy than in its relative position vis-à-vis other energy priorities. In the EU, nuclear energy advances somewhat within the hierarchy of legitimate solutions in a context of crisis, uncertainty, and the search for system stability. In Spain, no equivalent rise can be observed. The new context does not eliminate the possibility that nuclear energy may be seen as a functional option, but neither does it move it to the center of citizens' preferences. The comparison thus suggests a divergence of intensity: the European aggregate registers a more perceptible movement toward the normalization of nuclear energy, while Spain shows a more limited evolution in which the general frames for evaluating energy change without altering to the same degree the specific place occupied by the nuclear option within them.

Hypothesis 2, that public opinion on nuclear energy shifts more strongly at the EU aggregate level than in Spain after 2022, or shifts in different directions, is thus confirmed in general terms. The comparative evidence supports the conclusion that public opinion on nuclear energy moves more clearly in the European Union than in Spain after 2022, or at least that both cases evolve in partially different directions.

In this regard, the post-2022 shift in Spain alters the environment in which energy is evaluated and reduces part of the exceptional character with which the nuclear debate could previously be read, by embedding the energy question within a broader framework of security, vulnerability, and resilience. This means that, even if the relative acceptability of nuclear energy does not rise with the force observed in the EU, the social context does become somewhat less rigid than the earlier baseline.

5. Relationship between the political agenda and public opinion: divergence, feedback, and a window of opportunity.

5.1. The circular relationship between agenda and opinion.

This thesis has treated the political agenda and public opinion as closely related but analytically distinct dimensions, suggesting that, in the nuclear case, both dimensions interact through a circular but uneven relationship. Nuclear energy does not gain broad social visibility in a vacuum. Its position in public debate depends on the way institutions, parties, and the media define its meaning and relevance.

As examined, at the EU level, the post-2022 rise of frames linked to security of supply, strategic autonomy, resilience, and competitiveness did not automatically produce a clearly pronuclear majority, yet it did contribute to placing nuclear energy within a less exceptional and more functional vocabulary. In Spain, by contrast, the persistence of the official closure frame and the continued priority given to a renewables-centered transition limited the extent to which changes in the wider energy context translated into equivalent nuclear normalization. In that sense, the relationship between agenda and opinion is circular because salience structures interpretive possibilities, while opinion sets the political boundaries of action, but it is not symmetrical, since neither dimension fully determines the other (Gamson & Modigliani, 1989; Birkland, 2019).

5.2. Divergence between the European and Spanish evolution.

When *Chapters 3* and *4* are read together, the central finding is not simply that the European Union and Spain evolve at different speeds, but that they evolve in different directions and through different logics.

At the European level, the political agenda after 2022 repositions nuclear energy within a broader strategic language tied to energy security, sovereignty, industrial resilience, and competitiveness. Public opinion moves in a partially compatible direction. Even without a consolidated pronuclear majority, nuclear energy acquires greater relative legitimacy within a wider social context shaped by concerns over affordability, dependency, and system robustness (Bohdanowicz et al., 2025). In Spain, official discourse remained anchored in the closure frame while public opinion, though altered by the geopolitical shock, continued to

prioritize affordability, innovation, and diversification over nuclear re-legitimation. The change, therefore, lay less in nuclear acceptance itself than in the broader discursive context in which energy came to be evaluated (Bohdanowicz et al., 2025).

This divergence confirms that the distance between the two arenas widens rather than narrows over the period under study. In 2019, both the EU and Spain still treated nuclear energy from relatively low levels of salience, even if important differences were already present. After 2022, the Union clearly changes direction, whereas Spain largely preserves its baseline institutional logic. By 2025, the gap is fully consolidated. The divergence identified in this thesis is therefore structural, not anecdotal, and it provides the basis for the interpretive and strategic implications that follow.

Consequently, with regard to *Hypothesis 3*, it should be best regarded as confirmed in relative rather than absolute terms, since the results do not show that Spain has entered a broad pronuclear phase, nor that the political debate has already been transformed in a decisive way. What they do show is that the divergence between European discourse and Spanish discourse, combined with the more marked shift in EU-level opinion and the partial reordering of Spanish opinion frames, creates more favorable conditions than before 2022 for reopening the debate over nuclear energy.

For that reason, the window of opportunity identified here should be understood as limited and contested rather than fully open. It does not mean that a stable pronuclear majority exists, nor that institutional change is imminent. It means that the issue has become more reopenable, more publicly defensible, and less politically prohibitive than in the pre-2022 period. The significance of Sánchez's March 2026 declaration in this context is not that it demonstrates a pronuclear turn in Spain, but that it lowers the symbolic and political threshold for reopening the debate: the possibility of a conditional extension is no longer articulated exclusively by opposition parties or sector actors, but by the prime minister himself (Europa Press, 2026, March 25; Redacción El Periódico de la Energía, 2026, March 26).

5.3. Implications for the public-affairs strategy of the nuclear sector in Spain.

The main implication for the nuclear sector in Spain is that the problem is not reducible to a lack of technical information. The central obstacle lies in public and political legitimacy. The

analysis shows that, even after 2022, the Spanish debate remains filtered through institutional frames that continue to associate nuclear energy with closure, legacy costs, and a transition model built around renewables. Under these conditions, effective public affairs should not rely on technical expertise alone, nor on the assumption that improved information by itself will alter the political environment. What is required is a dual strategy that addresses both the hidden cluster of technical and regulatory actors and the visible cluster of political leaders, media actors, and broader public audiences (Kingdon, 2014).

This means that the sector's task is not to present nuclear energy as an ideological alternative to the energy transition, but to reframe it as a politically manageable component of energy security, affordability, system stability, industrial continuity, and territorial cohesion. In practical terms, this implies shifting away from a defensive discourse centered only on rebutting criticism and toward a narrative that links nuclear continuity, or at least the reopening of the debate, to broader public-interest concerns. Such a strategy fits the logic of public affairs already developed in the theoretical framework, where influence depends not only on access to decision-makers but also on the ability to supply socially resonant justifications for institutional action (Gamson & Modigliani, 1989; Zahariadis, 2007).

At the same time, the European shift should be used carefully. The Spanish case does not support a simple importation of the broader EU discourse, nor a direct replication of more openly pronuclear national models such as the French one. The more viable route in Spain is narrower and more incremental. It lies in emphasizing complementarity, risk management, and the lower relative cost of keeping the issue open in a more uncertain geopolitical and economic context. Coalition-building becomes especially important here. Regional actors, industrial consumers, experts, territories linked to nuclear plants and especially the members of the political opposition are well placed to present the question not as a narrow corporate interest, but as part of a wider discussion about industrial resilience, employment, and the stability of the energy transition itself. The goal, in short, is not an immediate hegemonic reversal of the dominant narrative, but a gradual expansion of the public space in which nuclear energy becomes more discussable and less politically penalized (Innerarity, 2015).

6. Conclusions.

This thesis examined how and why nuclear energy changed its position in the European Union's political agenda after Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and why this shift did not unfold in the same way in Spain. It addressed three research questions on EU-level discursive change, the comparative evolution of public opinion, and the conditions under which this divergence might open a window of opportunity for nuclear-sector public affairs in Spain. The study followed a mixed-method comparative design combining qualitative analysis of institutional documents and political discourse with secondary quantitative data from repeated Eurobarometer surveys across three time cuts: 2019, post-2022, and 2025.

The central finding is that Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine functioned as a paradigmatic focusing event that reordered the European energy agenda and produced divergent trajectories in the two cases under study. *Hypothesis 1* is confirmed in general terms. At EU level, institutional and political discourse reframed nuclear energy after 2022 around energy security, strategic autonomy, industrial resilience, and competitiveness. Nuclear energy moved from a peripheral and contested position in 2019, where it appeared mainly through frames of regulation, safety, and energy-mix pluralism, to a legally institutionalized component of the Union's net-zero industrial strategy by 2025, explicitly included in the Net-Zero Industry Act and the 2025 Nuclear Illustrative Programme.

Spain, by contrast, largely maintained continuity. The dominant governmental frame kept nuclear energy within a logic of orderly phase-out, renewable substitution, and radioactive waste management. This continuity was reaffirmed after 2022 and hardened after the April 2025 blackout. A final qualification is still needed: by March 2026, Prime Minister Sánchez publicly accepted the possibility of discussing a conditional continuation of plant operations under strict cost and security criteria. Spain therefore ends the study period with continuity still dominant, but no longer fully impermeable.

Hypothesis 2 is also confirmed. Public opinion moved more clearly in the EU aggregate than in Spain after 2022, or moved in different directions. European data show a real, though qualified, normalization of nuclear energy within the broader repertoire of acceptable energy solutions. By 2024, 32% of EU respondents supported greater nuclear deployment as a priority for achieving climate neutrality by 2050, and nuclear safety rose from 18% in 2019 to 21% as a meaning associated with EU energy policy. The overall climate of opinion shifted toward

affordability, resilience, and strategic autonomy, giving nuclear energy greater relative legitimacy without producing a consolidated pro-nuclear majority. Spain followed a different path. Spanish public opinion incorporated the language of security and dependency reduction, but continued to channel those concerns mainly through energy saving, diversification, technological innovation, and affordability, without a comparable rise in nuclear centrality. The comparison therefore points not only to a difference in speed, but also to a difference in direction and content.

Hypothesis 3 is confirmed in relative terms. The joint presence of EU-level discursive re-legitimation, a partial reordering of European public opinion, and a more contested Spanish domestic debate creates better conditions for reopening the nuclear question in Spain than existed before 2022. This does not mean that a stable pro-nuclear majority exists, or that the closure calendar is about to be reversed. It means that the issue has become less politically prohibitive, more publicly discussable, and less exceptional than it was at the 2019 baseline. Sánchez's March 2026 statement reinforces this conclusion. The window of opportunity remains limited and contested, but it is slightly more open at the close of the study period than the institutional landscape of 2025 alone suggested, since the idea of conditional continuation is no longer voiced only from outside the governing coalition.

These findings are grounded in the thesis's theoretical framework. Agenda-setting and framing theory provided the tools to track not only whether nuclear energy gained salience, but also how its dominant interpretive frame changed. Their main value lies in distinguishing visibility from re-legitimation. Nuclear energy was always present in both the EU and Spanish agendas, but its political function and legitimating rationale changed fundamentally in the European case while remaining largely stable in Spain. The window-of-opportunity framework helped assess the political implications of this divergence. Russia's invasion of Ukraine met the conditions of a focusing event: sudden, widely visible, and able to concentrate political attention in ways that lowered barriers to issue reframing. In the European case, the three streams converged enough to produce non-incremental discursive and legislative change.

In Spain, the problem stream shifted, but political and institutional conditions limited reordering of the dominant frame. From a public-affairs perspective, this means that effective intervention in Spain requires not only technical information, but also a dual-track strategy aimed at both regulatory actors and visible political, media, and public audiences, framing

nuclear energy not as an ideological alternative to the transition, but as a possible complement to system security, affordability, and territorial continuity.

Several limitations should be noted. The study relies on secondary survey data whose wording changes across Eurobarometer waves, which limits strict longitudinal comparability and requires interpretation in terms of trend direction more than exact numerical change. It also lacks a systematic media content analysis, so the relationship between institutional discourse and media agenda dynamics is inferred rather than directly measured. In addition, the study closes in early 2026, leaving developments after Sánchez's March 2026 statement outside its scope.

Taken together, the findings do not suggest that Spain is moving toward a straightforward reversal of its current energy policy. They suggest, rather, that after 2022 the nuclear debate in Spain is less closed than before, and that this creates a meaningful, if narrow, opening for strategic public-affairs intervention. The extent to which that opening translates into durable political change depends on institutional timing, coalition dynamics, public opinion, and sectoral strategy, factors that this thesis maps but does not fully resolve.

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Table 1 (annex). Headline indicators for the 2019 European cut-off.

Block	Indicator	EU
SEB492 QB1. What the EU's energy policy means	Shifting from fossil fuels to renewables to combat climate change	41%
SEB492 QB1. What the EU's energy policy means	Reducing energy consumption in Europe	28%
SEB492 QB1. What the EU's energy policy means	More competitive energy prices for consumers	27%
SEB492 QB1. What the EU's energy policy means	Investing in innovative energy technologies	24%
SEB492 QB1. What the EU's energy policy means	Ensuring nuclear power is safe	18%
SEB492 QB1. What the EU's energy policy means	Minimising the risk of power cuts and power shortages in Europe	15%
SEB492 QB2. EU responsibility	The EU must guarantee access to energy for all citizens	92%
SEB492 QB2. EU responsibility	EU must ensure access to clean energy	90%
SEB492 QB2. EU responsibility	The EU must ensure affordable energy	89%
SEB492 QB2. EU responsibility	Cooperation between Member States should be strengthened	91%
SEB492 QB3. Energy security	To ensure access to safe energy, nuclear energy needs to be safe in the EU	85%
SEB492 QB9. Priorities for the next ten years	Investing in and developing clean energy technologies	47%
SEB492 QB9. Priorities for the next ten years	Ensure energy costs are as low as possible	37%
SEB492 QB9. Priorities for the next ten years	Strengthening international efforts against climate change	33%

Block	Indicator	EU
SEB492 QB9. Priorities for the next ten years	Reducing the EU's total energy consumption	30%
SEB492 QB9. Priorities for the next ten years	Reducing EU energy imports	13%

Source: Author's elaboration based on the Special Eurobarometer (SEB) 492 (European Commission, Directorate-General for Communication, 2019).

Table 2 (annex). Indicators of change after 2022 in the EU.

Block	Indicator	2023	2024
EB99 QE3. Direction of energy policy in the post-Ukraine context	The EU must invest massively in renewable energy	85%	—
EB99 QE3. Direction of energy policy in the post-Ukraine context	Energy efficiency reduces dependence on external producers	82%	—
EB99 QE3. Direction of energy policy in the post-Ukraine context	The EU must reduce its dependence on Russian energy as soon as possible	82%	—
EB99 QE3. Direction of energy policy in the post-Ukraine context	Reducing oil and gas imports and investing in renewables is important for security	81%	—
EB99 QE3. Direction of energy policy in the post-Ukraine context	Joint energy purchasing helps to obtain better prices	80%	—
SEB555 QC1. What the EU's energy policy means	Ensuring more affordable energy prices for consumers	—	40%
SEB555 QC1. What the EU's energy policy means	Investing in innovative energy technologies	—	33%

Block	Indicator	2023	2024
SEB555 QC1. What the EU's energy policy means	Reducing energy consumption in Europe	—	30%
SEB555 QC1. What the EU's energy policy means	Boosting European climate neutrality	—	25%
SEB555 QC1. What the EU's energy policy means	Preventing blackouts and power shortages	—	22%
SEB555 QC1. What the EU's energy policy means	Ensuring nuclear power is safe	—	21%
SEB555 QC4. Measures to achieve climate neutrality by 2050	Diversifying energy sources	—	62%
SEB555 QC4. Measures to achieve climate neutrality by 2050	Save energy wherever possible	—	54%
SEB555 QC4. Measures to achieve climate neutrality by 2050	Electrifying uses with renewable or low-carbon electricity	—	40%
SEB555 QC4. Measures to achieve climate neutrality by 2050	Deploying more nuclear power, including small reactors	—	32%

Source: Author's elaboration based on the Standard Eurobarometer (EB) 99 (European Commission, Directorate-General for Communication, 2023) and the Special Eurobarometer (SEB) 555 (European Commission, Directorate-General for Communication, 2024).

Table 2 bis (annex). Reshaping the meaning of EU energy policy, 2019-2024.

Comparable indicator	2019	2024
SEB492 QB1; SEB555 QC1. Affordable prices for consumers	27%	40%
SEB492 QB1; SEB555 QC1. Technological innovation	24%	33%
SEB492 QB1; SEB555 QC1. Reduced energy consumption	28%	30%
SEB492 QB1; SEB555 QC1. Climate as the main axis	41%	25%
SEB492 QB1; SEB555 QC1. System Security, Outages, and Shortages	15%	22%
SEB492 QB1; SEB555 QC1. Ensuring nuclear power is safe	18%	21%

Source: Author's elaboration based on the Special Eurobarometer (SEB) 492 (European Commission, Directorate-General for Communication, 2019) and the Special Eurobarometer (SEB) 555 (European Commission, Directorate-General for Communication, 2024).

Table 3 (annex). Main EU-level concerns in 2025.

Level	Block	Indicator	EU/EN
<i>European</i>	EB103 QA5. Main challenges facing the EU	Russian invasion of Ukraine	27%
<i>European</i>	EB103 QA5. Main challenges facing the EU	International situation	24%
<i>European</i>	EB103 QA5. Main challenges facing the EU	Security and defense	20%
<i>European</i>	EB103 QA5. Main challenges facing the EU	Economic situation	17%
<i>European</i>	EB103 QA5. Main challenges facing the EU	Price increases, inflation, or cost of living	16%
<i>European</i>	EB103 QA5. Main challenges facing the EU	Energy supply	9%

Source: Author's elaboration based on the Standard Eurobarometer (EB) 103 (European Commission, Directorate-General for Communication, 2025).

Table 4 (annex). Comparison of the European cuts 2019, 2023, 2024 and 2025.

Year	Block	Indicator	EU
2019	SEB492 QB1. What the EU's energy policy means	Shift from fossil to renewable to combat climate change	41%
2019	SEB492 QB1. What the EU's energy policy means	Reducing energy consumption in Europe	28%
2019	SEB492 QB1. What the EU's energy policy means	More competitive energy prices for consumers	27%
2019	SEB492 QB1. What the EU's energy policy means	Ensuring nuclear power is safe	18%
2019	SEB492 QB2. Responsibility attributed to the EU	Guaranteeing access to energy for all citizens	92%
2019	SEB492 QB3. Conditions for secure energy	Ensuring nuclear energy is safe in the EU	85%
2019	SEB492 QB9. Energy priorities for the next ten years	Investing in and developing clean energy technologies	47%
2019	SEB492 QB9. Energy priorities for the next ten years	Reducing EU energy imports	13%
2023	EB99 QE3. Energy Policy Management in a Geopolitical Context	The EU must invest massively in renewable energy	85%
2023	EB99 QE3. Energy Policy Management in a Geopolitical Context	Energy efficiency reduces external dependence	82%
2023	EB99 QE3. Energy Policy Management in a Geopolitical Context	The EU must reduce its dependence on Russian energy as soon as possible	82%

Year	Block	Indicator	EU
2023	EB99 QE3. Energy Policy Management in a Geopolitical Context	Reducing oil and gas imports and investing in renewables is important for security	81%
2023	EB99 QE3. Energy Policy Management in a Geopolitical Context	Joint energy purchasing helps to obtain better prices	80%
2024	SEB555 QC1. Current significance of EU energy policy	Ensuring more affordable energy prices for consumers	40%
2024	SEB555 QC1. Current significance of EU energy policy	Investing in innovative energy technologies	33%
2024	SEB555 QC1. Current significance of EU energy policy	Reducing energy consumption in Europe	30%
2024	SEB555 QC1. Current significance of EU energy policy	Boosting European climate neutrality	25%
2024	SEB555 QC1. Current significance of EU energy policy	Ensuring nuclear power is safe	21%
2024	SEB555 QC4. Priority actions to achieve climate neutrality by 2050	Diversifying energy sources	62%
2024	SEB555 QC4. Priority actions to achieve climate neutrality by 2050	Deploying more nuclear power, including small reactors	32%
2025	EB103 QA5. Main challenges facing the EU	Russian invasion of Ukraine	27%
2025	EB103 QA5. Main challenges facing the EU	International situation	24%
2025	EB103 QA5. Main challenges facing the EU	Security and defense	20%
2025	EB103 QA5. Main challenges facing the EU	Economic situation	17%

Year	Block	Indicator	EU
2025	EB103 QA5. Main challenges facing the EU	Price Increases and Inflation	16%
2025	EB103 QA5. Main challenges facing the EU	Power supply	9%
2025	EB103 QA3. Main challenges facing the country	Price increases, inflation, or cost of living	31%
2025	EB103 QA3. Main challenges facing the country	Economic situation	20%
2025	EB103 QA3. Main challenges facing the country	Security and defense	15%

Source: Author's elaboration based on the Special Eurobarometer (SEB) 492 (European Commission, Directorate-General for Communication, 2019), the Standard Eurobarometer (EB) 99 (European Commission, Directorate-General for Communication, 2023), the Special Eurobarometer (SEB) 555 (European Commission, Directorate-General for Communication, 2024) and the Standard Eurobarometer (EB) 103 (European Commission, Directorate-General for Communication, 2025).

Table 5 (annex). Main indicators of the Spanish cut-off of 2019.

Block	Indicator	Spain	EU
SEB492 QB1. What the EU's energy policy means	Shifting from fossil fuels to renewables to combat climate change	45%	41%
SEB492 QB1. What the EU's energy policy means	More competitive energy prices for consumers	36%	27%
SEB492 QB1. What the EU's energy policy means	Contribute to economic growth and jobs by investing in innovative technologies	34%	24%
SEB492 QB1. What the EU's energy policy means	Reducing energy consumption in the EU	20%	28%
SEB492 QB1. What the EU's energy policy means	Strengthening cooperation between Member States on energy matters	12%	22%
SEB492 QB1. What the EU's energy policy means	Ensuring nuclear power is safe	14%	18%
SEB492 QB2. EU responsibility	Guaranteeing access to energy for all citizens	98%	92%
SEB492 QB2. EU responsibility	Ensuring access to clean energy	97%	90%
SEB492 QB2. EU responsibility	Ensuring affordable energy	98%	89%
SEB492 QB2. EU responsibility	Strengthening cooperation between Member States	96%	91%
SEB492 QB3. Energy security	To ensure access to safe energy, nuclear energy needs to be safe in the EU	89%	85%
SEB492 QB9. Priorities for the next ten years	Investing in and developing clean energy technologies	55%	47%
SEB492 QB9. Priorities for the next ten years	Ensure energy costs are as low as possible	50%	37%
SEB492 QB9. Priorities for the next ten years	Strengthening international efforts	30%	33%

Block	Indicator	Spain	EU
years	against climate change		
SEB492 QB9. Priorities for the next ten years	Reduce overall energy consumption	23%	30%
SEB492 QB9. Priorities for the next ten years	Reducing EU energy imports	11%	13%

Source: Author's elaboration based on the Special Eurobarometer 492 (European Commission, Directorate-General for Communication, 2019).

Table 6 (annex). Indicators of change after 2022 in Spain.

Block	Indicator	Spain	EU
EB99 QA3. Main problems facing the country in 2023	Price increases, inflation, or cost of living	41%	45%
EB99 QA3. Main problems facing the country in 2023	Unemployment	22%	9%
EB99 QA3. Main problems facing the country in 2023	Economic situation	25%	18%
EB99 QA3. Main problems facing the country in 2023	Climate change	9%	16%
EB99 QE3. Post-Ukraine Energy Security Battery	Reducing oil and gas imports and investing in renewables is important for security	85%	81%
SEB555 QC1. What the EU's energy policy means	Investing in innovative energy technologies	31%	25%
SEB555 QC1. What the EU's energy policy means	Ensuring more affordable energy prices for consumers	32%	30%
SEB555 QC1. What the EU's energy policy means	Reducing energy consumption in Europe	27%	27%

Block	Indicator	Spain	EU
SEB555 QC1. What the EU's energy policy means	Reducing European energy imports and increasing European energy independence	19%	26%
SEB555 QC1. What the EU's energy policy means	Preventing blackouts and power shortages	18%	16%
SEB555 QC1. What the EU's energy policy means	Improving energy infrastructure between and across European countries	17%	18%
SEB555 QC1. What the EU's energy policy means	Strengthening cooperation between European countries in energy matters	16%	19%
SEB555 QC1. What the EU's energy policy means	Boosting European climate neutrality	15%	21%
SEB555 QC1. What the EU's energy policy means	Ensuring nuclear power is safe	14%	21%
SEB555 QC4T. Measures to achieve climate neutrality by 2050	Diversifying energy sources	65%	62%
SEB555 QC4T. Measures to achieve climate neutrality by 2050	Save energy wherever possible	63%	54%
SEB555 QC4T. Measures to achieve climate neutrality by 2050	Electrifying uses with renewable or low-carbon electricity	35%	40%
SEB555 QC4T. Measures to achieve climate neutrality by 2050	Deploying more nuclear power, including small reactors	25%	32%

Source: Author's elaboration based on the Standard Eurobarometer (EB) 99 (European Commission, Directorate-General for Communication, 2023), the Special Eurobarometer (SEB) 555 (European Commission, Directorate-General for Communication, 2024)

Table 7 (annex). Indicators of the Spanish cut-off of 2025.

Block	Indicator	Spain	EU
EB103 QA3. Main challenges facing the country	Economic situation	26%	20%
EB103 QA3. Main challenges facing the country	Housing	26%	12%
EB103 QA3. Methodological note	"Energy supply" is eliminated from the national battery in 2025	Yes	Yes
SEB555 QC1. What the EU's energy policy means	Ensuring more affordable energy prices for consumers	32%	40%
SEB555 QC1. What the EU's energy policy means	Investing in innovative energy technologies	31%	33%
SEB555 QC1. What the EU's energy policy means	Ensuring nuclear power is safe	14%	21%
SEB555 QC4T. Measures to achieve climate neutrality by 2050	Diversifying energy sources	65%	62%
SEB555 QC4T. Measures to achieve climate neutrality by 2050	Save energy wherever possible	63%	54%
SEB555 QC4T. Measures to achieve climate neutrality by 2050	Deploying more nuclear power, including small reactors	25%	32%
SEB555 QC5T. Measures to ensure affordable energy	Support measures for households in energy poverty	59%	53%

Source: Author's elaboration based on the Special Eurobarometer (SEB) 555 (European Commission, Directorate-General for Communication, 2024) and the Standard Eurobarometer (EB) 103 (European Commission, Directorate-General for Communication, 2025).

Table 8 (annex). Comparison of the Spanish cuts 2019, 2023, 2024 and 2025.

Year	Block	Indicator	Spain	EU
2019	SEB492 QB1. What the EU's energy policy means	Shift from fossil to renewable to combat climate change	45%	41%
2019	SEB492 QB1. What the EU's energy policy means	More competitive energy prices for consumers	36%	27%
2019	SEB492 QB1. What the EU's energy policy means	Investing in innovative technologies	34%	24%
2019	SEB492 QB1. What the EU's energy policy means	Ensuring nuclear power is safe	14%	21%
2019	SEB492 QB2. Responsibility attributed to the EU	Guaranteeing access to energy for all citizens	98%	92%
2019	SEB492 QB3. Energy security	Ensuring nuclear energy is safe in the EU	89%	85%
2019	SEB492 QB9. Priorities for the next ten years	Investing in and developing clean energy technologies	55%	47%
2019	SEB492 QB9. Priorities for the next ten years	Reducing EU energy imports	11%	13%
2023	EB99 QA3. Main challenges facing the country	Price increases, inflation, or cost of living	41%	45%
2023	EB99 QA3. Main challenges facing the country	Unemployment	22%	9%
2023	EB99 QE3. Direction of energy policy in the post-Ukraine context	Reducing oil and gas imports and investing in renewables is important for security	85%	81%
2024	SEB555 QC1. What the EU's energy policy means	Ensuring more affordable energy prices for consumers	32%	30%
2024	SEB555 QC1. What the EU's	Investing in innovative energy	31%	25%

Year	Block	Indicator	Spain	EU
	energy policy means	technologies		
2024	SEB555 QC1. What the EU's energy policy means	Ensuring nuclear power is safe	14%	20%
2024	SEB555 QC4T. Measures to achieve climate neutrality by 2050	Diversifying energy sources	65%	62%
2024	SEB555 QC4T. Measures to achieve climate neutrality by 2050	Save energy wherever possible	63%	54%
2024	SEB555 QC4T. Measures to achieve climate neutrality by 2050	Deploying more nuclear power, including small reactors	25%	32%
2025	EB103 QA3. Main challenges facing the country	Economic situation	26%	20%
2025	EB103 QA3. Main challenges facing the country	Housing	26%	12%
2025	SEB555 QC5T. Measures to ensure affordable energy	Support measures for households in energy poverty	59%	53%

Source: Author's elaboration based on the Special Eurobarometer (SEB) 492 (European Commission, Directorate-General for Communication, 2019), the Standard Eurobarometer (EB) 99 (European Commission, Directorate-General for Communication, 2023), the Special Eurobarometer (SEB) 555 (European Commission, Directorate-General for Communication, 2024) and the Standard Eurobarometer (EB) 103 (European Commission, Directorate-General for Communication, 2025).