

## VIEWPOINT OPEN ACCESS

# Deeply Political and Populist Decisions on Large Carnivores in Europe in Recent Times

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In recent years, debates around downgrading the protection of large carnivores, such as wolves (*Canis lupus*) or bears (*Ursus arctos*), have become deeply political, especially in areas where these species are recovering in mainland Europe and North America (Ausband and Mech 2023; Di Bernardi et al. 2025). Various viewpoints on lethal control, either by target or non-target removals or through culling by authorities or public hunting schemes, have particularly exacerbated the polarization around large carnivore conservation and are often riddled with biased arguments (e.g., Chapron and López-Bao 2014; Kutal and Dula 2020; Vucetich and Nelson 2014). Livestock depredation is one of the main opposing factors against sharing the landscape with large carnivores. Despite inconclusive results of the effectiveness of current practices of lethal control to prevent livestock depredations (e.g., Eeden et al. 2018; Grente et al. 2024; Kutal et al. 2024), killing large carnivores is still often perceived as an effective strategy to reduce the impact of these species on livestock (Linnell et al. 2017). Lethal control is increasingly proposed as a solution by populist, center-right politicians, as seen recently across Europe (Carter and Guillot 2024).

The last decision by the Standing Committee of the Bern Convention (European Commission 2024) to downlist wolves from a “strictly protected” (Appendix II of the Bern Convention) to a “protected” (Appendix III of the Bern Convention) species, proposed by the European Commission, was entirely political and not based on scientific evidence. Even the Large Carnivore Initiative of Europe, a specialist group of IUCN’s Species Survival

Commission, considered the decision as “pre-mature and faulty” (LCIE 2024). However, the European Commission argued in its press release that the proposal is based on “in-depth analysis on the status of the wolf in the EU” (European Commission 2024) and stressed that “the concentration of wolf packs in some European regions has become a real danger for livestock and potentially also for humans.” The Commission urged local and national authorities to “take action where necessary” (European Commission 2023), quoting the President of the European Commission from the center-right European Peoples Party.

The reasoning used by the European Commission is misleading. First, the “in-depth analysis” (Blanco and Sundseth 2023) did not actually recommend downgrading the protection status of wolves. Second, the previous study commissioned by the European Parliament on the impact of large carnivores on farmers and their livelihood (Linnell and Cretois 2018) did not provide the support for this outcome either. The current decision goes against their own recommendations from the Standing Committee of the Bern Convention on amendments of the Appendixes, which should be based on the best available science (Bern Convention 1997). In fact, a similar downlisting proposal submitted by Switzerland was opposed by the European Commission only 2 years ago (European Union 2022). There is no evidence to support a recent increase in livestock damages or threats to human safety from wolves since 2022 (Kaczensky et al. 2024). Despite the positive trend of wolf and bear populations in Europe over the last decades at the continental scale (Chapron et al. 2014;

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Kaczensky et al. 2024), these species have not yet reached the so-called favorable conservation status in most European Member States (Eionet Portal 2025) as required by the European Habitats Directive, and recently confirmed by the Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU 2024).

Wolf recolonization of European cultural landscapes containing intensive agriculture inevitably leads to more attacks on livestock, but a detailed analysis from Germany (where wolf killing is still restricted) showed that the relationship between the number of wolf territories and damage diminished over time, suggesting that non-lethal methods could reduce the losses (Singer et al. 2023). Furthermore, studies from Europe and across the world provide very limited evidence on the effectiveness of wolf killing as a useful tool to decrease livestock losses (Eeden et al. 2018; Grente et al. 2024; Kompaniyets and Evans 2017; Kutal et al. 2024; Šuba et al. 2023; Treves et al. 2016). When considering the potential danger of wolves to humans, wolf attacks on humans are extremely rare events and there have been no fatalities in Europe associated with wolves in the 21st century (Linnell et al. 2021).

However, it seems that issues of livestock and human safety around wolves have completely dominated the public debate, and quotes on the “concentration of wolf packs” have been widely reported in the media (e.g., Guillot 2024). The use of populist discourses centered on fear and emotion (Leser and Pates 2021) and the threat these species pose to rural livelihoods or human safety reinforce the use of the “political wolf” to win voters in the struggle for political power (Almarcha et al. 2022) regardless of administrative level and political ideology. Those who oppose the recovery of large carnivores or lobby for limiting their populations are positioned as defenders of the interests of particular social groups (López-Bao et al. 2017). Wolves have already been used by populist parties to symbolize the rural–urban divide (Leser and Pates 2021) and wolf attacks on livestock predicted far-right populist votes in Germany (Clemm von Hohenberg and Hager 2022). But the political wolf is not the domain of only far-right ideologies. The European Peoples Party, the largest political group in the European Parliament, also called for increased culling of wolves and bears in its manifest ahead of the last EU elections (EPP 2024). There has been a noticeable shift recently toward lowering the requirements in environmental legislation in the European Union (Durá-Alemañ and López-Bao 2025).

On March 7, 2025, the European Commission proposed to align the protection status of wolves under the EU Habitats Directive with the previous decision adopted by the Standing Committee of the Bern Convention, which was then approved by the European Parliament and the Council of the European Union on June 5, 2025 (Council of the EU 2025). In practice, this means moving all wolf populations from Annex IV (strictly protected) to Annex V (species of community interest whose taking in the wild and exploitation may be subject to management measures). This is the first time that the Annexes of the Habitats Directive have been amended. It remains to be seen whether other species will follow the wolf.

The recent political debate and incentives around large carnivore conservation at the European level, and the last decisions mentioned above, may encourage the adoption of aggressive species management approaches across Member States to cap large

carnivore populations at a certain size, regardless of obligations under EU law. In Sweden, for example, licensed hunting of wolves and bears has been practiced in the last few years, even though these species have been strictly protected under the EU Habitats Directive (Annex IV), and the Swedish government has announced its intention to reduce the required minimum number of wolves in the country from 300 individuals to 170 (Ministry of Climate and Enterprise 2024). Although Member States are responsible for maintaining the favorable conservation status of species, unwarranted changes to favorable reference values could undermine previous conservation successes.

In Slovakia, wolves have already received reduced protection under EU law and were hunted for decades, but national law banned the killing of wolves since 2021 (Kutal et al. 2024). After the elections in September 2023 and the establishment of a new populist government in Slovakia, the Ministry of the Environment changed the national legislation and the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development issued a quota for killing 74 wolves in the last season 2024/2025 (Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development 2024), without a robust assessment of the impact of such action on the wolf population dynamics. While official reasons for the change in the law were to prevent predation on livestock and wolf-dog hybridization, recent studies in Slovakia showed no impact of culling an average of 41 wolves per year on livestock losses in the following seasons and there was no confirmation of hybridization between wolves and domestic dogs (Hulva et al. 2018; Kutal et al. 2024; Salvatori et al. 2020). The latest legislative changes in Slovakia also simplify the process of brown bear shooting during a declared “emergency situation.” As of December 2024, the Slovak authorities have already killed 93 bears in 2024 deemed to have “problematic behavior,” three times more than in the previous 5 years combined (SME 2024). Furthermore, a new plan to kill 350 bears in 55 districts in Slovakia was approved in April 2025 by the Slovak government (Ministry of Environment of the Slovak Republic 2025). Romania, the country hosting the largest bear populations in continental Europe, has taken a similar turn toward lethal management in recent years (Pop et al. 2025).

The European Commission’s debates and proposals to weaken wolf protection without a rigorous evaluation of the expected impacts of the proposed approach provide a foundation for national populist decisions on large carnivore management that are not evidence-based and offer little or no benefits for livestock owners, while previous proposals to improve the quality and transparency of data collection on livestock predation at the EU level (Selva et al. 2023; Singer et al. 2023) have so far been ignored. We are concerned when alleged scientific evidence is presented as a reason for the change of conservation status, but science is misused in the decision-making.

Robust, evidence-based mechanisms for managing large carnivore populations should be implemented at the national level for each EU Member State to limit the possibility that decisions will be politicized and the best available science ignored. Ultimately, each country is solely responsible for conserving biodiversity and finding sustainable ways to coexist with large carnivores. Best practices of mitigating measures for non-lethal wolf management are already available for implementation (Eeden et al. 2018; Eklund et al. 2017). Liberalizing the killing of wolves and bears

will increase not only the flexibility of management actions but also the likelihood of negative outcomes for large carnivore conservation across Europe.

## Author Contributions

M.K. and J.V.L.B. designed the idea. M.K. led the writing of the manuscript. All authors reviewed and commented on the study.

## Conflicts of Interest

M.K. is a member of the IUCN Large Carnivore Initiative for Europe. M.D. is a member of the IUCN Bear Specialist Group, and J.V.L.B. is a member of the IUCN Canid Specialist Group.

## Data Availability Statement

Data sharing not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analyzed during the current study.

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