

IN SEARCH OF CLIMATE-INCLINED SUCCESSORS IN THE EU LEADERSHIP



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During an election period, many things are said. For example, Ursula von der Leyen, incumbent President of the European Commission, and candidate for a second term, in mid-February 2024, claimed -according to Politico (21/2/2024)- that her main goal for the second term is to make the European Union more "competitive", weakening her climate profile. What does this mean, though, for the EU's green policy? Is it going to alter the current Commission's direction that is characterized by the European Green Deal (EGD)?

The EU has established itself as a global leader in combating climate change by, first and foremost, putting forward and implementing bold climate actions, especially in contrast to

other countries or regions around the world. During the current term (2019-2024), the European Commission pushed the climate agenda significantly forward. In December 2019, the EGD was presented as the EU's new growth strategy, aiming to make Europe the first climate-neutral continent by 2050. The EGD offers a comprehensive plan to mainstream green strategies into most European policies. To ensure that the EGD would bear fruit, the European Climate Law was adopted in June 2021, rendering the political declaration of climate neutrality by 2050 a legally binding target. Moreover, the Law set a target for decreasing emissions by 55% by 2030 compared to 1990. The Fit for 55 package was launched to implement the above target by reviewing upwards already existing climate and

energy legislation and measures concerning a broad array of different sectors and introducing new ones.

The above efforts met and had to compete with the severe imbalance that the Covid-19 pandemic created, since early 2020, in everyday life. This unprecedented-for-the-recent-years crisis coincided with the EGD and could have derailed it. However, the EU addressed it by introducing a green recovery scheme and earmarking large amounts of money. It introduced both in its Multiannual Financial Framework for 2021-2027 and the Next Generation EU -its ad hoc package for the pandemic recovery- robust climate spending targets of 30% and 37% respectively. Thus, it actively demonstrated its adherence to its climate ambition. Is this enough for the EU to be a climate leader and pioneer in mitigating its greenhouse gas emissions (GHG)?

According to the United Nations Environmental Program, global emissions should decrease by 7.6% annually from 2020 to 2030 to achieve the 1.5°C target. For the EU, this translates into a 65% reduction by 2030 compared to 1990. Thus, the bar is not set high enough to begin with. Furthermore, existing measures of the EU fall short of the -55% target, as the European Scientific Advisory Board on Climate Change (ESABCC) highlights. Indeed, observing the latest available data from the European Environment Agency, in 2021, the EU had decreased its emissions by 30.4% compared to 1990. This means that emissions need to be reduced by around 20% in less 9 years, while the already-observed reduction of ~30% was achieved in 31 years. This reveals the challenge: the EU must enhance its efforts to achieve its -55% goal and intensify them even more to reach 90-95% reductions by 2040 to achieve the 1.5°C target, as ESABCC again underlines.

At the same time, besides its internal goals, which, despite the shortcomings, are among the most ambitious globally, the EU has to tackle another challenge: it has to preserve intense climate diplomacy to persuade other actors to commit to and implement equally ambitious climate policies. The EU-27 is the 4th emitter globally, accounting for around 7% of global emissions, while the top 3 emitters are single states. Specifically, China, the US, and India account for around 30%, 11%, and 7% of global

emissions, respectively, while other states like Russia, Japan, and Brazil come lower in the top 10 list, with around 5%, 2.4% and 2.2% each. Thus, with the EU's emissions presenting a downward trend, it is in its interest that other actors commit to substantial emissions reductions too. Otherwise, the rest of the world will continue emitting and performing business as usual, while the EU tries to use less and less energy; thus, challenges for the EU's competitiveness will arise. Now, the geopolitical and geoeconomic weight of the EU remains at the top of the world, but with allegedly a declining trend. It may take decades for the EU to become obsolete. Still, one should ask: Do greener policies and targets align with a strong international presence and robust internal affluence and prosperity?

This complex equation becomes even more complicated considering the war in Ukraine since early 2022 and the war in Gaza since mid-2023. In the case of greener goals, externalities create needs that fight against climate targets. An example of this situation is the subsidies on fossil fuels that the European Commission has raised during the last few years as energy security becomes thinner. Moreover, externalities also impact internal fronts in a world where almost everything is interconnected. For instance, the green reform of the Common Agricultural Policy, which started a few months before the European elections 2024, has resulted in excessive opposition, leading policymakers to retract.

Currently, the EU has achieved to a certain extent the decoupling of its economic growth and competitiveness from intense resource consumption and high GHG emissions. The EGD is all about perfecting this decoupling. The new European leadership (2024-2029) will be burdened with the task of implementing it even more strictly. This situation will become even more byzantine due to the foreseeable rise of populists, as well as members of the European Parliament who do not have climate change as a priority. Within this framework, the new President of the European Commission will have to make brave choices toward the well-embedded belief that the EU is and must continue to be a climate leader. Otherwise, decades of effort will remain a dead letter. ■