

# YOUTH AWAITS ENVIRONMENTAL PROPOSALS: WHAT RESPONSES FROM EUROPEAN PARTIES ON THE EVE OF ELECTIONS?

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During the hottest summer in recent human history, in July 2023, a young Italian woman in her twenties, Giorgia, got to the microphone to ask a question to the Italian minister for the Environment, Gilberto Pichetto Fratin at the end of a public event. “I am worried for my future, my home region, Sicily, is plagued by wildfire, and I am suffering from eco-anxiety,” Giorgia’s voice cracked, and she started crying.

The video went viral because when minister Pichetto Fratin, who has no reputation for being sympathetic with environmental activists, tried to answer, he was so moved that he started crying too.

However, on the eve of the June 2024 European elections, the climate crisis has disappeared from the list of top priorities of European parties.

In her bid for a second mandate as EU Commission president, Ursula von der Leyen has softened her message on climate after her party - the European Popular Party - called for a “regulatory pause” in that field.

Climate has become a major generational cleavage: a 2023 survey asked 10.786 young Europeans what the top priority in the EU

policy action should be. The most popular answer - with 67 percent support - resulted fighting the climate crisis.

However, as the elections approached, EU institutions and national governments proved surprisingly open to conceding everything that farmers and agroindustry lobbyists asked for. The so-called farmers’ movement has, at least temporarily, overshadowed the green rhetoric that used to be so present in any Commission document or event.

According to the most recent economic literature, there is no empirical evidence of the widely commented “green backlash”: green transition policies do not negatively impact the support for the government implementing those policies. Populist and nativist movements profit more from increased concerns about migration.

But due to the increasingly hostile geopolitical context, priorities in the European debate have shifted from climate to defense and security. This is no good news for young Europeans, for two reasons.

First, as terrible and tragic as they are, wars usually end in a few years, and the passing of

time makes the ceasefire easier because all the parties involved in the fight run short of ammunition, resources, and troops.

On the contrary, the climate crisis does not follow the same path: as times go by, mitigation and adaptation policies become more expensive and less effective.

Rising temperature is a more dangerous enemy than Russian President Vladimir Putin, especially for younger generations.

Secondly, defense-oriented industrial policy has a relevant side effect for young people: older generations can stop any criticism by saying that national governments and the EU institutions must invest today to build a safer future for tomorrow, in the interest of today and future children.

Since military research and development, as defense procurement, takes time, policymakers' message is that they are allocating public resources to security to prevent future wars, rather than to impact current conflicts in Ukraine and in the Middle East.

However, the shift from climate to defense in the public discourse has moved the policymakers' horizon back to normal: the future is an excuse to have a higher deficit and rising public debt today, with higher public investments in the defense sector and, if needed, temporary support to mitigate the social impact of the geopolitical crisis.

On the other hand, the climate crisis requires a different approach, with immediate higher taxes on high-emission industries and goods, international cooperation, a redistribution of resources, and technology transfers from the EU (and the US) to the Global South. Also, brown industries and fossil fuels are supposed to become more expensive.

According to another survey at the European level, administered by the European Investment Bank in 2023, 66 percent of all Europeans are in favor of stricter government measures to impose a change in personal behavior. The share is higher - 72% - for people under thirty.

However, the EIB is one of the many top EU institutions that is shifting its priorities from climate to security: the EIB's new president Nadia Calvino is under pressure by national governments to soften the limitations that have so far prevented the EIB from supporting military or dual-use technology projects.

At the peak of the pandemic crises, in 2020,

the EU and the national governments approved the so-called "Next Generation EU" to build a more resilient European Union in the interest of a generation that was seriously damaged by the social disruptions that came as a side effect of anti-contagion policies.

Grants and loans total 712 billion euros, with Italy as the main beneficiary country, since it was the most negatively impacted by the pandemic, according to the European Commission's criteria.

Less than four years later, the first assessment is far from enthusiastic: Italy is struggling to respect milestones and targets, and a significant chunk of the funds has been allocated to very traditional infrastructure projects with no specific impact on future generations, the European Public Prosecutor's Office uncovered frauds and scams related to "NextGenEU" projects and funds for hundreds of million euros, in different countries.

Therefore, there is no surprise that skepticism is on a rise on the idea of replicating the NextGen approach to fund with common European debt other initiatives at the EU level.

The next generation named after the EU plan bears no responsibility in the disappointing outcome of the 712-billion-euro investment, but young people will be the most likely casualties of the disaffection for long-term planning that will be a lasting legacy of the NextGeneration Plan.

For all these reasons, young Europeans in their twenties have no reason to be optimistic on the policy outcome of the June 2024 European elections.

However, all major events that shaped the 2019-2024 term were totally unpredictable: a global pandemic outbreak, a major energy crisis, a war on the Eastern European border of the EU.

Therefore, there is no reason to assume that we can predict what will come in the next five years, and policy priorities that today look like set in stone might change once again. ■