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Climate and Energy Transitions in Times of Environmental Backlash? The European Union 'Green Deal' From Adoption to Implementation

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Introduction

The inception of the European Union's (EU's) 'Green Deal' – a flagship project of European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen launched to much acclaim in December 2019 – contrasts with its adoption in the final years of the Commission's term in office in 2023–2024.

In 2019, unprecedented climate protests and mobilisations across Europe and the world – from the 'Fridays for Future' school strikes to climate marches and to more radical actions by groups like the Extinction Rebellion (XR) – pushed climate change and the energy transition to the top of the EU's political agenda. In this context, the 2019 European elections saw unprecedented successes for Green Parties across the continent, boosting the Greens/European Free Alliance (EFA) parliamentary group to a record 72 members (Pearson and Rüdig, 2020). With the main centre-left and centre-right groups together failing to command a majority in Parliament, the Greens were able to pressure Ursula von der Leyen to commit to ambitious policies. The EU 'Green Deal' stemmed directly from this context marked by 'enabling politicisation' of the climate issue (Dupont et al., 2024). The EU climate law (Regulation EU 2021/1119, 2021), formally adopted in July 2021, committed the block to reaching net-zero emissions by 2050 and reducing net emissions by 55% by 2030, whilst a large legislative package explicitly called 'Fit for 55' was proposed by the Commission that same month to achieve the headline targets. Although the Green Deal has been developed in times of crisis, the Commission and EU have held steady in their commitments (Eckert, 2021; Von Homeyer et al., 2022). Yet, the finalisation of the legislative proposals aimed at turning lofty goals into action in 2023–2024 – before the Commission's end of term and EU Parliament elections – has taken place in a starkly different context. Energy and cost of living crises, initially triggered by post-COVID-19 supply chain disruptions and dramatically heightened by the war in Ukraine leading to energy supply disruptions and commodity price hikes across Europe, have increasingly fuelled concerns about the costs of climate and energy transitions (Goldthau and Youngs, 2023; Kuzemko et al., 2022). Although energy prices have fallen since the end of 2023, cost of living and energy security issues have remained salient.

Politically, this context has been instrumentalised by populist and radical right parties to mobilise against the climate and energy transitions (Yazar and Haarstad, 2023), whilst the centre has also become increasingly cautious, especially the centre right. At the

European level, this is most evident for the European People's Party (EPP), which has increasingly contested Green Deal legislation, most notably the Nature Restoration Law (Regulation EU 2024/1991, 2024) (Tosun, 2023). This shift is in part a response to protests and contestations of energy and climate legislation across the continent, notably the highly covered farmer's protests starting in late 2023 and continuing throughout the spring of 2024 (Politico, 2024; Reuters, 2023). The June 2024 European Parliament elections reflect this new context, with a rise of far-right groups, whilst the Greens were the main losers along with the liberals (Hix et al., 2024).

Against this background of 'constraining politicisation' of climate policy (Dupont et al., 2024), this article asks whether 2023–2024 represents a turning point for EU commitments to the climate and energy transitions. As a new European Commission and Parliament set in, it is a good time to assess progress and challenges for the EU 'Green Deal'. Has it been faltering? What are the prospects for its implementation and for renewing the EU's green ambitions?

I argue that, overall, the agenda for climate action and energy system decarbonisation has proved remarkably resilient. EU institutions and member states have remained committed to delivering the climate and energy dimensions of the Green Deal agenda by the end of the von der Leyen Commission's term and have mostly delivered. Yet, cost concerns, protests and their political use by right-wing populists also raise questions for implementation, possibly dampening ambitions going forward.

This article first reviews the progress of the Green Deal legislation and whether the EU has delivered on its ambitions, focusing in particular on energy and climate change. It then assesses the seemingly waning momentum for climate action and the recent 'green backlash'. Finally, it reflects on the prospects for Green Deal implementation and renewal, drawing insights from past crises and their effects on EU environmental and climate policies. It concludes that, whilst the energy and climate transition agenda is likely to prove resilient, its framing and focus may be changing in the context of domestic politicisation of the climate and energy transition and global geopolitical competition.

I. Finalising the Green Deal and 'Fit for 55': Mission (Almost) Accomplished?

In its initial communication launching the 'Green Deal', the European Commission (2019) presented a wide-ranging strategy to 'make Europe the first climate-neutral continent by 2050', protect biodiversity, create a circular economy, curb pollution and mobilise finance for the green transition, all whilst boosting the competitiveness of European industry and ensuring a just transition for the affected regions and workers. The implementation of this strategy has led to the proposal and subsequent adoption of a wide range of policy packages and individual laws across different sectors, from climate and energy to agriculture, transport and the environment. Since its launch as a core priority of the 'geopolitical Commission' and over the course of its evolution, the contours of the Green Deal as a political object have remained ill-defined. This is in part because it is a cross-cutting strategy reflecting the multisectoral, complex and evolving nature of the climate crisis, which requires climate policy integration across all areas (Dupont et al., 2024). This is also politically deliberate: to reframe and aggregate new and related initiatives as part of an all-encompassing, purposeful and popular narrative.

The EU steamed ahead throughout 2023 and the first half of 2024 to finish off the negotiation and adoption of remaining Green Deal files ahead of the June 2024 EU elections, marking the end of the term of both the ninth legislature of the European Parliament and the first von der Leyen Commission. Uncertainty arose when the Commission Vice President and Green Deal chief, Frans Timmermans, known as a heavyweight skilled negotiator and vocal proponent of the Green Deal, left his post to compete in Dutch elections and lead a left-green alliance (Euractiv, 2023a). He was replaced by Commission Vice President Maroš Šefčovič and the new controversial Dutch appointee Wopke Hoekstra, criticised for his past employment at Shell and lacklustre record on climate (Taylor, 2023a). Yet, this did not derail work on finalising the Green Deal, which was successful overall with a majority of files adopted and a few blocked or withdrawn due to delays or intractable divisions.[1]

Looking specifically at the 'Fit for 55' package, which implements the headline emission reduction targets and energy transition objectives, it was originally composed of 13 legislative proposals, later extended to 19.[2] As of July 2024, all proposals but one had been adopted by the co-legislators. Some of the legislation updates and strengthens pre-existing legislation, whilst new policies are also introduced. A significant step was the reform of the flagship EU Emission Trading System (EU ETS), adopted in April 2023, along with a raft of associated laws. It accelerates the reduction of emission allowances for energy-intensive industries and the power sector; progressively phases out free allowances; progressively includes shipping within the ETS; strengthens the rules for aviation emissions by phasing out free allowances for domestic flights and implementing the Carbon Offsetting and Reduction Scheme for International Aviation (CORSIA) for extra-European flights; and revises the market stability reserve that aims to maintain stable and effective carbon prices. The reform aims to achieve an emission reduction of 62% in covered sectors by 2030, compared to 2005, a reduction slightly higher than initially proposed by the Commission. In addition, a new and distinct ETS is introduced for buildings, road transport and additional sectors – all considered hard to decarbonise – that apply to fuel distributors from 2027. A new Social Climate Fund, mostly supplied by revenues from the new ETS, aims to help vulnerable households, small companies and transport users cope with associated costs. This is a recognition of the concrete impacts and justice implications of this new scheme and an attempt at diffusing contestation to avoid a replay of protracted opposition, such as the 'Yellow Vest' protests that rocked France in 2018–2020 following an increase in fuel taxes. An innovative and internationally controversial piece of legislation is the Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM), which imposes a carbon tax on imports of products in carbon-intensive industries. CBAM is to be progressively phased in from 2026 in line with the phasing out of free allowances within the ETS, aiming to put EU and third-country industries on a level playing field and avoid carbon leakage – the outsourcing of industrial emissions to jurisdictions with lower emission standards and costs.

In sectors not covered by the ETS (road and domestic maritime transport, buildings, agriculture, waste and small industries), emission reductions are defined by the Effort

[1]See the status of the Green Deal files according to the European Parliament's 'Legislative Train Schedule', which tracks the files' progress. See https://www.europarl.europa.eu/legislative-train/theme-a-european-green-deal.
[2]See the Legislative Train Schedule for 'Fit for 55': https://www.europarl.europa.eu/legislative-train/package-fit-for-55.

Sharing Regulation. The revision, adopted in March 2023, increases the 2030 EU-wide target from 29% to 40%, compared with 2005, and distributes the effort with binding national targets. Along with this, the revised Land Use, Land-Use Change and Forestry (LULUCF) regulation of March 2023 includes an increased EU-level target of at least 310 million tonnes of CO_2 equivalent net removals of greenhouse gases for 2030, with associated and binding national targets. A new regulation on tracking and reducing methane emissions in the energy sector, adopted in November 2023, aims to implement the Global Methane Pledge signed along with over 100 countries at the UN Climate COP26. It requires the oil, gas and coal industries to measure, report and verify methane emissions and to put in place mitigation measures for leak detection and repair, as well as for closed wells and mines.

For transport, a hard-to-decarbonise sector, a number of new laws were passed in addition to ETS provisions. The regulation on CO_2 emission standards for cars and vans, updated and finally adopted in March 2023, introduces progressive emissions reduction targets, including a 100% emission reduction target for 2035, which effectively amounts to a complete phase-out of combustion car and van sales. In parallel, and to facilitate the growth of electric vehicles, the regulation on alternative fuel infrastructure finalised that same month mandates the installation of recharging stations for cars and vans every 60 km, as well as hydrogen refuelling stations for cars and lorries in all urban nodes from 2030 onwards. For shipping, a July 2023 agreement on the FuelEU maritime initiative mandates a reduction of greenhouse gas intensity for the energy used on-board ships by up to 80% by 2050, whilst promoting the use of renewable and low-carbon fuels. Concerning aviation, the ReFuelEU Aviation initiative adopted in October 2023 aims to promote sustainable aviation fuels (SAF) (e.g., advanced biofuels, renewable and low-carbon hydrogen and recycled fuels meeting sustainability and emissions-saving criteria). It sets obligations for fuel suppliers to ensure that aviation fuels contain minimum shares of SAF (from 2025) and synthetic fuels (from 2030), increasing progressively until 2050.

The energy sector also saw key proposals updated. The revision of the flagship renewable energy directive, finally adopted in October 2023, sets a binding target of 42.5% renewable energy in EU final energy consumption by 2030 (up from a paltry 32.5%), with an extra 2.5% indicative top-up to reach the 45% supported by the most ambitious member states and European Parliament. The directive does not set binding national renewable energy targets but introduces a mix of binding and non-binding renewable sub-targets in transport, industry, buildings and district heating and cooling, whilst also mandating faster permitting procedures for renewable energy projects. Increased ambitions are in part the results of the REPowerEU plan of 18 May 2022, adopted in the context of the war in Ukraine and aiming at reducing EU dependence on Russian gas (Von Homeyer et al., 2022; Wendler, 2023). It introduced targeted emergency amendments to increase overall ambitions to 45%. As pointed out by Buzogány et al. (2023), the revised renewable energy directive also introduces a high level of flexibility for member states regarding the various sub-targets as a condition of its adoption.

Ambitions have also been upgraded for energy efficiency. The revised energy efficiency directive, agreed upon in July 2023, sets a target to reduce final EU energy consumption by 11.7% in 2030 compared to 2020 projections. This is less than the 13% proposed under the REPowerEU plan and, in typical fashion, a middle ground between the more ambitious Parliament and the more cautious Council (Kurmayer, 2023). The

directive also includes indicative national contributions for member states, a gradual increase of the annual energy savings target and a specific annual energy consumption reduction for the public sector (including the yearly renovation of a set share of public buildings). The energy efficiency directive is complemented by a revision of the energy performance of buildings directive, completed in 2024, which aims for all new buildings to be zero emission by 2030 and for existing buildings to be retrofitted to have zero emissions by 2050, with mandates for solar energy in buildings and rising minimum energy performance standards and renovation targets. Finally, a regulation and a directive adopted in December 2023 aim to facilitate the shift from natural gas to renewable and low-carbon gases by setting common rules for hydrogen infrastructures and markets.

Of the 19 proposals associated with the 'Fit for 55' package, only one remains pending. The proposed revision of the Council directive on the taxation of energy products and electricity aims to switch from energy taxation based on volume to taxation based on energy content. Fossil fuels would be taxed at the highest rate and electricity at the lowest. Energy taxation is a sovereign, sensitive matter and the exclusive competence of the member states under the Lisbon Treaty, decided by the Council subject to unanimity, which has proved a perennial challenge. The 2003 directive sets minimum levels of taxation on energy products, fuels and electricity but places energy sources on an equal footing irrespective of their carbon content. Despite agreement that an update is much overdue, a previous attempt started in 2011 failed in the face of member states' opposition, leading the Commission to withdraw the proposal in 2015. Once again, despite the last-ditch efforts from the Belgian Presidency in the winter of 2024, no agreement could be reached, and its adoption has been postponed to the next legislature (Messad, 2024).

II. Pending Issues and Implementation Challenges

Overall, then, despite the challenges associated with post-COVID-19 recovery and the war in Ukraine, from energy supply disruptions to high energy prices, the momentum for climate action and energy system decarbonisation has not evaporated, showing remarkable resilience. EU institutions and member states have remained committed to delivering the climate and energy dimensions of the Green Deal agenda during the term of the von der Leyen Commission and have mostly delivered.

Indeed, as many have pointed out, the crises have been reframed into 'windows of opportunity' for furthering the Green Deal agenda (Eckert, 2021; Von Homeyer et al., 2022). The COVID-19 NextGenEU recovery programme of €750 billion and the associated Recovery and Resilience Facility make new funding available in the form of loans and grants. With member states required to spend at least 37% of their National Recovery and Resilience Plans (NRRPs) in support of the green transition, this additional funding has tended to accelerate ongoing policies and projects rather than new initiatives (Bocquillon et al., 2023). Similarly, the EU's response to the war in Ukraine, in particular the REPowerEU plan to reduce dependence on Russia, has mostly accelerated pre-existing Green Deal dynamics rather than initiated a change of course (Wendler, 2023). It has led to a Commission's legislative proposal for an upgrade of the Green Deal's renewable and energy efficiency targets for 2030 to foster homegrown renewables and reduce imports; additional investments of €210 billion until 2027 to be

defined in new REPowerEU chapters added to NRRPs [with the possibility of financing liquefied natural gas (LNG) infrastructure]; and various soft mechanisms to help diversify supplies (e.g., external engagement strategy, establishment of a new voluntary EU Energy Platform to co-ordinate energy purchases and hydrogen strategy). None of this has upended and, in fact, reinforced the Green Deal's agenda. The jury is still out, however, as to the overall effect of the energy crisis in view of national efforts to shore up short-term fossil fuel supplies with new contracts and infrastructure (Goldthau and Youngs, 2023; Kuzemko et al., 2022).

As most energy and climate legislation has been adopted, at least in this first phase of an ever-evolving agenda, attention turns towards implementation, which is crucial to effectiveness and legitimacy. Looking at the period covering the Eurozone crisis for insight, when the salience of and appetite for ambitious environment and climate policies receded, several studies tracked environmental policy dismantling and found real but limited instances in the face of institutional resilience (Gravey and Jordan, 2016). They also point out that there is a risk of policy dismantling 'through the back door' in implementation, notably via delegated and implementing acts (Burns and Tobin, 2020).

As is evident from the cursory overview above, adopted legislation is ridden with flexibility mechanisms, such as indicative targets, exemptions and optionality, which may be justified in view of national diversity and indeed necessary to reach agreements, but can also make effective implementation challenging. This is clearly the case with the revised renewable energy directive, with its various sub-targets and differentiated options (see Buzogány et al., 2023). Various policies also have phase-in periods and start to kick in progressively, with stringency increasing over time, often beyond 2030 (Von Homeyer et al., 2022). For instance, targets for reducing and phasing out combustion cars will increase, reaching 100% in 2035. This is also the case for CBAM, which has only reporting obligations during a phase-in period, with its tax component entering into force in 2026 in parallel with the phasing out of free ETS allowances. The new ETS enters into force from 2027 onwards. These phase-in and phase-out periods create multiple points where legislation starts 'to bite' for stakeholders. Some of the legislation, like the ban on new combustion engine sales in 2035 or the new building standards, directly impacts European citizens. There is, therefore, potential for politicisation and contestation of the implementation process, which policy-makers may be particularly concerned about.

Certain pieces of legislation in the 'Fit for 55' package also have extra-territorial effects, most notably CBAM. It has been actively discussed, criticised and challenged in international forums. For instance, India has threatened a legal challenge under World Trade Organization (WTO) rules against a trade barrier considered especially disadvantageous to developing countries (Euractiv, 2023b). The EU's unilateral approach may trigger international tensions, making implementation challenging (Smith et al., 2024).

In a context of geopolitical competition over who controls the energy transition, the Green Deal has increasingly taken a new turn towards green industrial policy. In response to the United States's Inflation Reduction Act (IRA), and as part of its Green Deal Industrial Plan, the Commission proposed in May 2023, and the co-legislators adopted in March 2024, a new Net Zero Industry Act (NZIA) establishing a non-binding target of 40% strategic 'net-zero' technologies to be produced within the EU, as well as a European Critical Raw Material Act that sets benchmarks for domestic production of key minerals, all whilst aiming to speed up projects. The goal is to secure and reduce dependence on

key raw materials and technologies, from the production and import of critical minerals essential for green technologies to battery and electric vehicle production. This industrial and geopolitical framing is likely to become more prominent in the Green Deal to achieve both economic growth and reduced dependence, but it may also fuel international frictions.

III. Waning Climate Momentum and Green Backlash?

The economic crisis of the early 2010s showed that, beyond implementation challenges, economic imperatives and environmental objectives could conflict with each other and dampen EU ambitions (Burns et al., 2020; Skovgaard, 2014). Citizens, stakeholders and governments may become less willing to bear the costs of climate action or more cautious about what they can commit to. Crises also offer an opportunity for those against ambitious action to challenge, mobilise and gain legitimacy.

Although the climate and energy dimensions of the Green Deal proved relatively resilient with the finalisation of most proposals, the years 2023–2024 also saw the emergence of a wave of opposition and protests against green policies, including parts of the Green Deal. These protests were widely covered in European and national media, often presented as a 'green backlash' or 'greenlash' (e.g., Politico, 2024; Reuters, 2023; Tash, 2024). Discontent focused on the costs of green policies in a period of cost-of-living crisis and economic downturn, with businesses denouncing the 'regulatory burden' imposed on them. Protests took place across Europe, the West and East and the North and South. Most prominent and widely covered were the farmers' protests that spread across the EU, from Belgium to Germany, France to Spain and Poland to Romania. Often blocking roads, their demands were diverse but tended to focus on costly regulation, notably as part of the greening of the Common Agricultural Policy and biodiversity protection. These protests led to the Commission scrapping a proposal to halve pesticide use in the EU (Tash, 2024). In the Netherlands, plans to cut nitrogen pollution fuelled discontent and the surprise rise of a new farmers' protest party. The backlash was not only limited to farming and conservation, however, with discontent emerging on other issues directly related to energy and climate, such as the phasing out of oil and gas boilers, which nearly broke the German coalition, or the particularly inflammatory phasing out of combustion cars.[3]

The backlash has been driven by the right and far right (Yazar and Haarstad, 2023). Radical right populists tend to be inimical to climate ambitions, largely on ideological grounds (Lockwood, 2018), even though there is mixed evidence as to their ability to influence EU policy when in power (Huber et al., 2021). Climate policy has become a 'wedge issue' (Dickson and Hobolt, 2024) for these parties, which have politicised it to split and polarise the electorate and shore up support from their climate sceptic base. At the EU level, the far-right grouping of the European Conservatives and Reformists and Identity and Democracy, as well as the centre-right EPP, which is part of the majority coalition, have challenged the purpose and content of pending legislation. The EPP's principal target was the controversial Nature Restoration Law, which sets a target of restoring at least 20% of the EU's land and sea areas by 2030. Building on farmer protests, it failed

[3]For a detailed, country-by-country overview of contentious green issues, see Politico (2024).

to block it but was able to considerably weaken the text (Taylor, 2023b). Governments, in turn, responded to domestic pressure or a perceived change of mood. French President Macron's call for a 'European regulatory pause' in the adoption of new green legislation to protect industries (Messad, 2023), supported by other leaders such as Belgian Prime Minister de Croo, came as a shock. The final phase of the negotiations on several files, from car emissions to the energy performance of buildings, saw rising member-state opposition. Poland even initiated legal proceedings against the EU ban on combustion cars in 2035 (Politico, 2023).

This picture needs to be nuanced. First, not all parts of the Green Deal have been equally affected. Opposition has tended to concentrate on agriculture reforms and the conservation of nature. Second, the perceived importance of, and support for climate action remain high across member states, at levels broadly similar to 2019, even though climate may have gone down the pecking order of priorities (Eurobarometer, 2023). Despite disruptions and high energy prices due to the war in Ukraine, a majority of respondents to the 2023 special Eurobarometer survey on climate change considered that the transition to a green economy should be sped up. Similarly, Abou-Chadi et al. (2024), based on a representative survey across three countries, argue that the backlash narrative is overblown and largely confined to the far right, with widespread support for climate action and climate policies, provided costs are mitigated through green industrial policies and offsetting measures.

Still, the June 2024 European elections indicate challenges ahead for the Green Deal. The main winners were the far-right parties (European Conservatives and Reformists 78, Patriots for Europe 84 and Europe of Sovereign Nations 25) and the centre right (EPP 188), with the main losers being the Greens (Greens/EFA 53) and the liberals (Renew Europe 77). Compared to 2019, when a key signal was a shift towards pro-environment parties and policies, 2024 heralds a shift towards parties with critical positions towards an ambitious environmental agenda, even if the results were arguably not driven by environmental issues. As Hix et al. (2024) and others have pointed out, the new majority will not unravel already adopted legislation, but it could settle for less ambitious climate policies going forward, given the EPP's increasingly critical stance and the fact that the relatively ambitious bloc of the Socialists & Democrats, the liberals and the Greens no longer commands a majority of seats. In her speech to the European Parliament ahead of the vote on her reappointment, which was eventually successful based on a grand coalition against the far right, Ursula von der Leyen reaffirmed her commitment to the bloc's climate objectives, including a yet-to-be-agreed 90% reduction target for 2040, and to further the Green Deal agenda. However, the language suggested a framing focused more on competitiveness and green industrial policy with the promise of a 'Clean Industrial Deal', whilst nature and the environment were only mentioned in general terms (Cagney, 2024).

Conclusion

The EU Green Deal illustrates, from its inception to its adoption, the promises and perils – or inherent tensions – of the politicisation of climate change (Dupont et al., 2024; Paterson et al., 2022). In 2019, climate movements pushed climate change – an already well-established and institutionalised policy area – on top of the EU's political agenda.

In this context, the Commission proposed a novel, cross-cutting and relatively ambitious Green Deal, receiving wide support across member states and the political spectrum. In this case, politicisation proved enabling. In contrast, the completion of the Green Deal ahead of EU elections has been marked by a different context, with a section of the impacted stakeholders as well as the radical right and centre right politicising the Green Deal agenda to undermine it – a form of 'constraining politicisation' (Dupont et al., 2024).

The Green Deal has proved relatively resilient to the COVID pandemic and the energy crisis, and implementing legislation has been mostly adopted in 2023 and the first half of 2024 – at least its energy and climate component. Therefore, it would be hard to undo and unlikely to unravel. Climate and energy policies are well established, benefit from high legitimacy and are deeply institutionalised; in contrast, the biodiversity and farming components of the Green Deal have been subject to deeper challenges. Yet, implementation could prove a challenge for climate and energy, with dismantling through the back door via executive acts; policies that are due to be reviewed and could be weakened; and perhaps most importantly, a lack of ambition and stagnation moving forward. There is, therefore, considerable uncertainty, just as a new cycle of negotiations is opening over the 2040 targets.

The Green Deal remains fundamentally a moving political object with blurry boundaries, rather than a 'done deal'. More likely than its faltering, one can expect a change in its framing and focus – on competitiveness and green industrialisation in particular – in the context of domestic politicisation of the climate and energy transition and global geopolitical competition.

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