

EUROPEAN CLIMATE ACTION IN A RENEWED POLITICAL LANDSCAPE

WHERE TO LOOK FOR LEADERSHIP AFTER THE EUROPEAN ELECTIONS OF MAY 2019

ELISA GIANNELLI

This paper aims to assess the potential consequences of the political nominations which will follow the European elections in May 2019 for the European climate agenda. At a time when Eurosceptic and populist voices are largely reported to threaten the Union's stability and strength, what could the next European leaders mean for climate action?

Under the current legislative term the European institutions and the member states have successfully agreed on a set of new climate and energy targets and legislation, while securing the Paris Agreement. The next legislative cycle will have the crucial task to implement the new legislation, successfully lead the diplomatic engagement to take forward the Paris Agreement and mainstream climate into cross-sectoral policies.

The political transition triggered by the European elections follows a precisely choreographed path. European leaders define a broad political mandate for the Commission, which decides which legislative proposals and non-legislative actions to put forward. The Parliament exerts political influence over the Commission and is a fully-fledged co-legislator with the member states in the European Council.

Looking back at the last five years, the European Commission delivered on its priorities, but the proposals **were not designed** to spur a radical transformation. The Parliament has often broadened the scope of the proposals and accelerate the speed and scale of the transition. The European Council has also recently experienced the rise of engaged leaders pushing for increased climate action.

Looking forward, European leaders have already **signalled their commitment** to climate action for the next legislative term. **The Commission should receive a strong climate mandate but might not be able to take actions and adopt ambitious legislation if national populist positions are reflected in the college. As far as the Parliament is concerned, its strong climate track record is likely to continue despite its next composition.**



E3G

The European Council

Although the right of initiative lies solely with the Commission, the EU Council provides the European Commission with a mandate for the next term through a strategic agenda. The priorities and direction defined by EU Heads of Governments or States depends on their own leadership on climate action.

France, Sweden, Portugal, the Netherlands, Spain and Luxembourg are currently among those promoting more action on climate. Others, like **Germany and Italy** have slowed down progress. Belgium, **despite a strong citizens' movement**, is not able to adopt a **consistently ambitious position**.

The debate on the Future of Europe has recently been brought closer to the strategic agenda for the next European Commission. European leaders met in Sibiu, Romania, on 9th May 2019 to relaunch the EU at 27. Nine European countries **called for climate action** to be a cornerstone of the next European Commission's agenda and the EU to become climate-neutral by 2050.¹ This contribution shows the importance given by some leaders to continued climate action.

During the Summit, leaders have also agreed an **outline for the strategic vision**. Climate action is among the areas identified for continued cooperation, but leaders **have been criticized** for the lack of response to the citizens' movements across Europe.

The strategic agenda will be discussed during the next EU leaders' meeting on 20th-21st June, together with the objective of climate neutrality for the EU. **The constant public pressure and the emerging political leadership by some member states converge towards a strong climate mandate for the next European Commission**. Whether this will allow for transformative actions is very much a function of the outcome of the debate around climate neutrality.

The European Commission

The European Commission defends the EU's general interests and is the only institution empowered with making legislative proposals. Its capacity to shape climate and energy policies depends on the mandate received by Heads of States, the political program of the President of the European Commission, the entrepreneurship of the Commissioners in charge of policies relevant for the energy transition and the capacity of the college to unite behind climate action.

Regarding the political platform of the President of the European Commission, the current term is a useful precedent. Significant progress has been made in EU climate policies under the current Commission. President Juncker's idea of a European Energy Union, campaigned as one of his priorities in 2014, has been **fully implemented** throughout the five years by Commissioner Cañete and Vice-President Šefčovič.

¹ France, Luxembourg, Denmark, Belgium, Latvia, the Netherlands, Sweden, Spain and Portugal.



E3G

During the current electoral campaign, all the lead candidates are including climate among their top priorities:

- Lead candidates from European People's Party (**EPP**), Socialists (**S&D**), European Left (**GUE**), **Greens**, and the Liberals (**ALDE**) are supporting climate policies. S&D, GUE, ALDE and the Greens are supportive of the European goal of climate neutrality by 2050 (or earlier). In addition, all these groups include other climate-related measures in their **Groups' manifestos**.
- The candidate for the Conservatives and Reformists (**ECR**) does not support the long-term climate target (or any other), but he calls on the EU to lead by example, investing in research and innovation and making better use of EU resources.
- Europe of Nations and Freedom (ENF) and Europe of Freedom and Direct Democracy (EFDD) groups do not have a manifesto nor a lead candidate. However, it looks unlikely to get a strong support on climate change from them. With the exception of the Five Stars Movement, parties belonging to these groups are usually the most **hostile towards climate policies**.

Considering the outline of the strategic agenda, the likely power distribution in Parliament and the domestic and international pressure for continued climate action, climate change will remain high in the next Commission's agenda. The ambition of which will depend upon the composition of the college and the importance given to reaching climate neutrality.

In a parallel track, member states hold an enormous influence on the Commission. Member States nominate a candidate per country and try to influence the President of the Commission to secure a portfolio close to their national strategic interest. Once nominated and approved by the European Parliament, Commissioners must work in the Union's (and not their national) interests. The independence of each Commissioner is something to watch out for, especially if he/she is close to a Eurosceptic, climate-sceptic or populist government.

The risk of an "antagonist" Commissioner is real but might not be of direct consequence for the climate agenda. Those countries likely to nominate a rogue Commissioner probably have alternate priorities and so may not focus on the energy or climate-related files: for instance, Italy – where the extreme-right League is part of a coalition government with the Five Stars – has already expressed its preference for the **economic portfolio**. On the other hand, other EU countries are coming out as climate leaders and are making it a priority which could indicate their own preference for such a portfolio. The next Commission will anyway strive to avoid failure on such an important topic with the public pressure so high at the moment.



E3G

The European Parliament

The new political equilibrium in the next European Parliament is often portrayed as the most disruptive risk during this political transition. The election of a Eurosceptic or climate-sceptic majority in the European Parliament would fundamentally undermine its role as a co-legislator and climate leader. It has however, not been forecast in **any polling so far**.

The main factors to watch regarding the European Parliament are how important climate action is for incoming MEPs, the political equilibrium of the plenary, the recomposition of the political groups after the elections, voters' turnout and the existence of a stable alliance of political parties to form a majority.

In the current mandate, the European Parliament has very often proven to be the **most ambitious co-legislator** when it comes to climate-related policies, ensuring several positive outcomes in relevant files. The so-called "Grand Coalition" has ensured a smooth run of most legislative procedures, with the support of a broad pro-European, centre-right and left coalition. This did not prevent them to disagree on specific files though. The Greens are usually over-performing thanks to good cooperation with the S&D, ALDE, GUE and the Five Stars Movement. Finally, the extreme-right voices or the rest of the EFDD did not have any major policy impact at EU-level, but they rather use their mandate to increase their national stature.

In all the elections' polls thus far, Eurosceptic and extreme-right parties have an increased presence in the European Parliament. In the scenarios below (inspired from those of **EuropeElects**), we look at the potential impact on climate policy.

1. S&D + GUE + Greens + ALDE*: The "Left-bock with ALDE"

This scenario includes all the **most progressive voices** for ambitious climate and energy policies. En Marche is likely to become an important and influential national delegation within the party. Macron's party has been strongly supportive of ambitious climate policies, calling to mainstream **40% of the next EU budget** to climate-related investments and to reach **climate neutrality by 2050**.

This clear stance could either boost the support of the existing ALDE members to climate policies, or it could push them to leave the group and join a more conservative one.

2. S&D + EPP + ALDE*: the "Juncker bloc"

Probably the closest scenario to the **current status quo**, this coalition would be generally supportive of progressive climate policies. Besides the "new ALDE" approach defined above, the level of ambition for this coalition would probably depend on the evolution in the internal EPP dynamics.

What could make the difference is whether Fidesz will eventually decide to leave the EPP and join an extreme-right alliance. In this case, this would certainly be a threat for



the pro/anti-EU equilibrium, but it would also allow the EPP group to move towards a more moderate centre-right position on certain issues, notably the rule of law. The EPP reticence to ambitious climate policies is indeed often due to internal discordances between the supportive members (from Denmark, Ireland, Finland) and the blockers (Poland, Hungary, Romania).

3. EPP + ECR (+ ENF): the “Right bloc”

This scenario would be the most **likely to dampen ambition** for the environmental agenda based on their track record.

Nevertheless, this scenario seems unlikely, considering the recent statement from the EPP President who has **excluded any alliance** with the extreme right. The ECR and ENF are still expected to increase their power in the next plenary, but without the EPP support, they are likely to remain marginal.

Many other coalitions are of course possible, and it will also depend on the other influencing factors mentioned above. However, it seems clear that the extreme/populist side of the chamber will not be able to stop climate action; they could influence it, provided it is their aim and they are aligned. In any case, the international and national pressures for increasing climate actions will continue to exist.

About E3G

E3G is an independent climate change think tank accelerating the transition to a climate safe world. E3G builds cross-sectoral coalitions to achieve carefully defined outcomes, chosen for their capacity to leverage change. E3G works closely with like-minded partners in government, politics, business, civil society, science, the media, public interest foundations and elsewhere. In 2018, for the third year running, E3G was ranked the fifth most globally influential environmental think tank.

More information is available at www.e3g.org

Copyright

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 2.0 License.

© E3G 2019