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**F**ew issues cause more debate and polarisation in the European Union (EU) than climate and environmental policy. And it will be contentious during the campaign leading up to the European elections in June 2024, too.

First, it must be said climate change is already here, and its impacts are becoming increasingly apparent. By way of example, in the summer of 2023 alone heatwaves claimed the lives of 60,000 people in the EU (Ballester, 2023). There is, therefore, a growing awareness of climate risks and of the lack of preparedness for what lies ahead. In its first detailed climate risk assessment, the European Environment Agency (EEA) issues an explicit warning about the pace of increasing extreme weather phenomena that could soon have “catastrophic” consequences for Europe (2024). What’s more, other major environmental challenges apart from climate change are also impacting the continent, including biodiversity loss and chemical pollution (Richardson et al., 2023).

Second, while there is a relative consensus in the European political field on the scale of the climate and environmental challenge, there is no such consensus, however, on the depth of the reforms required to tackle it. Some sectors on the left question whether the green transition is truly just, disputing whether the European Commission’s current instruments and proposals, like the Just Transition Mechanism, really suffice to ensure that “no one is left behind” (Culot and Wiese, 2023). At the other end of the political spectrum, in each member state there are political forces (on the radical right and centre-right) who argue that “climate ideology” has gone too far and that the economic costs are unacceptable. In this regard, the greatest challenge has come from the European People’s Party (EPP). The political family of European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen has recently called for a “moratorium” on European climate legislation, probably in a bid to prevent a leakage of votes to the radical right.

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Third, on an international level the relative optimism that followed the signing of the Paris Agreement of 2015 has given way to an era marked by uncertainty and lack of leadership. Nearly a decade on from Paris, global emissions are still rising and all but a few countries are honouring their commitments. In addition, oil producing countries and oil extraction companies have a growing influence over the design of climate policies, as we could see at the recent COP28, held in Dubai. And then there is the possibility of a change of direction on environmental matters in the United States, given the very real prospect of a second Trump administration. In such a scenario, the EU, with all its indecision and contradictions, would become practically the last bastion -among key countries and blocks- of climate policy on a global scale.

That is why the climate and environmental issue is crucial in the context of the European elections. At stake in these elections is where to place the emphasis of climate policies – on security, competitiveness, sustainability or cohesion – to ensure an "open strategic autonomy" that encapsulates the EU's position in an increasingly uncertain world (Kroll, 2024).

### **Taking stock of climate affairs in the ninth legislative term: from consensus to polarisation**

After five years characterised by a certain consensus, climate change is emerging as one of the most politicised issues on the current agenda. In 2019, the fight against climate change was at the heart of the European political agenda. Shortly after her election as president of the commission, Ursula von der Leyen launched what would be her flagship policy: the European Green Deal.

This plan set the ambitious target of making the EU the first climate neutral economy by 2050 via far-reaching reform of key sectors such as energy, mobility and industry. More specifically, the European Climate Law launched in 2020 sets the target of achieving carbon neutrality by 2050 and establishes a framework for raising climate goals in the short and medium term. The policy, moreover, was bolstered as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, since a large part of the Next Generation EU funds were granted with the aim of decarbonising the European economies in mind.

But over the last two years of the term, the consensus forged by the main European political parties has gradually crumbled, for several reasons. For one thing, the conflict in Ukraine has upended the European energy market. Russia's war of aggression has laid bare the delicate state of affairs underpinning Europe's energy transition, largely resting on the supply of Russian natural gas, which the bloc considered a "transition fuel". As a result, the war has triggered an energy price shock not seen since the 1970s, raising the cost of a broad basket of goods and services, particularly electricity and food (OECD, 2022). For another thing, the transition from pledges to reach climate neutrality in 2050 to taking real measures has, unsurprisingly, sparked a reaction from the sectors that bear the brunt of green policies.

Pushback against these policies proliferated throughout 2023, a phenomenon that media outlets in the UK dubbed “greenlash” (Tocci, 2023). Popular support for these commitments appears to be shrinking. While nearly nine out of ten Europeans back the EU’s core goal of reducing carbon emissions to zero by 2050, that support has diminished compared to 2019 in 19 of the 27 EU countries. Finland, Estonia and the Czech Republic have reported falls in support of up to 15 percentage points (European Commission, 2023).

This reaction has been apparent at public policy level, too. The green agenda has suffered several setbacks, both nationally and on a European level. A prime example are the farmers’ protests that swept the continent in early 2024, particularly in countries with a significant agricultural base, such as France, Spain, Germany and the Netherlands. Although this sector will likely bear the brunt of climate impacts, as seen recently with the drought blighting southern Europe, many of the groups protesting are taking aim at European climate and environmental policies. Precisely on account of the demonstrations, a recent example of this “greenlash” is the scrapping of a 30% reduction target in agricultural emissions by 2040, as well as the withdrawal of a proposal to lower the use of pesticides.

## Outlook for the new political cycle: a tenth term shifting to the right

Given the prospect of a change in the environmental agenda in the European Parliament, the outgoing EU institutions are hurriedly trying to tie up the loose ends of pending climate and environmental initiatives. Indeed, if the forecasts prove correct, the next political cycle will see a more conservative, more Eurosceptic European Parliament that is less inclined to implement ambitious climate and environmental policies.

The polls are indicating a swing to the right in many countries, with radical right populists gaining votes and seats across the EU, at the expense of the parties on the centre-left and greens<sup>1</sup>. There is every indication that during the campaign populist Eurosceptic parties will continue to lead the polls in key member states like France, Hungary, Italy, the Netherlands and Poland. According to the main forecasts, nearly half of the seats will go to MEPs outside the “grand coalition” of the three centrist groups (EPP, Socialists and Liberals). Inside the European Parliament, a right-wing coalition formed by the EPP, European Conservatives and Reformists and MEPs from the radical right Identity and Democracy party could win a majority for the first time.

This swing to the right will likely have significant implications for green policies on a European scale. In fact, in the current parliament a centre-left coalition of S&D (Socialists), Renew Europe (Liberals), Greens and the Confederal Groups of the Left have often prevailed on matters of environmental policy, but many of the votes were won by very slim margins. A significant swing to the right in the new parliament will quite possibly result in control for a coalition contrary to climate policy, particularly if the EPP chooses to enter into an alliance with the radical right rather than aligning with the Socialists, Greens and Liberals.

The “greenlash” is gaining traction in European politics. Paradoxically, at a time when the impacts of climate change are growing ever more severe, the Green Deal intended to confront the problem is increasingly under question by the public and various European political groups.

1. Regarding polls, the following sources were consulted for this paper: [EU Election Projection 2024](#), [Politico EU Elections](#), [Euronews Poll Average](#).

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## A turbulent climate future in political and environmental terms

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It is essential not to lose sight of the magnitude of the climate challenge. Cutting emissions means reducing dependence on fossil fuels, the veritable mainstay of our economies, which requires profound economic and social change (Smil, 2019). Yet in communicating this challenge to the public, it is often omitted that this energy transition - based on renewables and which never questions levels of consumption - has major social and environmental consequences inside and outside the EU. This, among other reasons, is because renewable energy harvesting systems require a great deal of land and producing them is often water-intensive and highly polluting, particularly the process of acquiring the necessary raw materials (Zografos and Robbins, 2020). Another critical matter is that in no way will they alone be able to cover the current levels of energy consumption of the countries of the Global North (Smil, 2019). A true transition that means to be effective and just should therefore begin by significantly reducing energy and materials consumption, an issue that no relevant actor on the European political spectrum has really wished to broach so far.

Similarly, inside the EU this transition has undeniable negative impacts on already aggrieved groups, as highlighted by the virulent backlash among sectors shouldering a disproportionate burden of the reforms, from the yellow vests movement in 2018 to the farmers at present. Consequently, in order to avoid alienating disadvantaged groups and stoking the backlash, the next commission and parliament should develop instruments that channel the benefits of the green transition into the whole of society and share out the costs more equitably.

Yet, despite the tragic reality that without green policies the whole of society stands to lose, there is every indication that the European political winds will blow in a different direction, pushing the continent and the planet further away from the goal of achieving the swiftest, fairest and most inclusive transition possible.

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