

## **Europe's Choices Can Save or Fail the Climate**

**Article by François Gemenne**

December 4, 2023

A growing proportion of emissions will come from outside Europe. So while the EU is currently focused on decarbonising itself, its resources should also be wielded globally. And from an urgent need for adaptation to a backlash against the European Green Deal, its own house is not fully in order. François Gemenne on how the EU and its Green parties can shift strategy externally and internally.

***Green European Journal: How will the impacts of the climate crisis change Europe in the next decades?***

**François Gemenne:** That depends most of all on the decisions being taken right now in Cairo, Jakarta, Lagos, Mexico City, and Delhi. At least for the second half of this century, Europe's climate future will depend not on what Europe does but on the development path taken by the countries of the Global South. The problem is that Europe today is too focused on itself and not enough on the decisions being taken in Cairo and Jakarta. European countries, of course, have absolutely no right or legitimacy to tell these countries how they should develop. We cannot tell any country to keep their fossil fuels in the ground. But we need to work much more closely with them than we do currently. Europe's priority needs to be stimulating investments in their energy transitions and increasing access to low-carbon technologies globally. If we don't, they'll tap into fossil resources to fuel their development.

*There is no point in Europe becoming a decarbonised island in a sea of carbon.*

**So Europe needs to be thinking about a global green transition rather than becoming the "world's first climate-neutral continent", as the EU Commission has boasted?**

Europe thinks that it will lead by example on climate change and all the other countries of the world will follow. But it doesn't work like that, especially in the current geopolitical context where the European model is not seen favourably. Many countries – I'm thinking of some African governments, for example – see renewable energies as a way for Europe to maintain dominance over countries of the Global South. Very often Europe and other industrialised countries think that they should do their share, and that their share is limited to the proportion of greenhouse gas emissions that they represent. This approach will never work. By 2030, Europe will represent around 12 per cent of emissions. By 2050 it will be less than five per cent. There is no point in Europe becoming a decarbonised island in a sea of carbon. But if Europe doesn't pay attention, this is what will happen.

**Enabling climate action globally is therefore not about altruism but is very much in Europe's interest. What levers does Europe have at its disposal?**

For developing countries to be able to pursue a different development path, we need to offer some

alternatives. At the moment, investments in low-carbon energy in the Global South remain dramatically low. Europe should commit to working with countries around the world to grow these investments. Europe has plenty of money, investors, major banks, and technology: it has the levers at its disposal. The problem is that Europe is focused on developing climate technologies for itself. It is the same with nuclear energy and artificial intelligence. It is not enough to improve European energy systems. It is crucial to make these technologies available across the world.

### **To what extent are countries and global leaders rallying around climate issues?**

The simple existence of the COP (the annual UN global conference on climate) and the Paris Agreement is testament to the fact that countries around the world have rallied around what they perceive as a global issue that needs to be addressed collectively. All countries agreed to do something and made a formal commitment to do so, even if what has followed has proved insufficient. What isn't clear is how the divisions of geopolitics right now will play into the climate negotiations. At the time of the Paris Agreement in 2015, the global community was much less divided than it is today. I doubt the Paris Agreement could be successfully negotiated today. You can complain that COPs are too heavy and too costly or that they emit too much carbon and are held in Dubai surrounded by lobbyists. But that gathering remains a small miracle.

### **If Europe wants to develop its climate diplomacy, should it be investing more political energy in COPs or should it focus on different smaller initiatives?**

Bilateral or smaller multilateral initiatives are not contrary to the existence of COPs. Alliances between countries, but also companies and civil society organisations, are the most efficient ways for COPs to move forward. COPs should be judged not just by the consensus reached by governments but also by the other initiatives that are enabled to flourish. Here, Europe can be an example. If the European Union had waited around for unanimity before introducing the euro, we'd still be paying with Belgian francs. Instead, what paved the way for the euro was a smaller coalition of countries moving forward, with others joining progressively. We need to let the pioneers speed ahead rather than wait for the laggards.

*Europe will not be spared climate impacts, and it is increasingly clear that it is wildly unprepared.*

### **Going back to climate impacts, how will they transform Europe?**

There will be an increased frequency and intensity of extreme weather events such as flash floods, droughts, and heatwaves, and a truly major shift in the climate overall. Brussels will enjoy the climate of Lyon today, while Lyon will have the climate of Tunis or Rabat. Stockholm will have a climate comparable to the climate of Brussels today. What we will see is a shift northward, which will have an impact on agriculture as well. These shifts will require responses across the board, from rethinking the EU's Common Agricultural Policy to new measures to protect working conditions and maintain productivity, as well as protection from new risks to infrastructure.

### **What does Europe need to do to adapt to the changing climate?**

For a long time, Europe thought that it was immune to the impacts of climate change. That it was in a way invulnerable, that adaptation was for countries of the Global South, and that the task of Europe was to mitigate greenhouse gas emissions. Now we know otherwise.

Europe will not be spared climate impacts, and it is increasingly clear that it is wildly unprepared: floods in Belgium and Germany in 2021; fires and drought in France in 2022; fires and floods in Greece this year. We have seen how extreme weather events soon get out of control, and how capacities such as basic equipment and training are lacking.

Adapting the European continent is also not only about climate extremes. We will need to invest in infrastructure against sea level rises, work with farmers to transform agricultural processes, and help industries transition and secure their supply chains. On adaptation, Europe also needs to realise that there are many lessons to learn from the Global South, which has been thinking about some of these problems for much longer.

### **Four years into the European Green Deal, how would you evaluate it overall?**

There have been drawbacks, but, overall, it's been ambitious and rather successful. The Green Deal is an opportunity to craft a new model for the European economy. Today, however, the Green Deal is facing a populist backlash, which European institutions should be taking much more seriously. Many people, especially in Central and Eastern Europe, perceive the Green Deal as a constraint rather than an opportunity.

If the EU is keen on transforming the Green Deal into the impetus for a new economic model, it needs to communicate more effectively so people see something other than red tape and regulations. Of course, some of the shortcomings of the Green Deal are the result of political compromises and negotiations. But a huge effort needs to be made in terms of publicity. If not, the danger is that the real backlash against environmental politics will put the Green Deal at risk and then the whole building comes tumbling down.

### **The Greens have been struggling with this pushback against environmental politics. Why are they particularly vulnerable?**

Green parties were formed around consensus, around a diagnosis: the environmental situation was bad, and something had to be done. But when it comes to what needs to be done and especially to the linkage of environmental policy with social and economic policy, there is a lack of consensus in Green parties. There is a paradox that you would expect Green parties to do better when the situation looks worse. But the reality is the exact opposite, because many of their preferred solutions are seen as top-down and insufficiently linked with economic and social measures.

*You need to make climate action visible to people, with major investments in public transport and in renewables.*

There is also the fact that where the Greens have been in government, they haven't achieved much. In Belgium, the Greens have the transport, energy, and environment ministries. As a Belgian citizen, I have not seen much of a transformation aside from some interesting initiatives at the local level. In Germany, Robert Habeck set up a giant ministry that brought together the economy ministry and the climate ministry. What we have seen are new coal mines and other policies that the electorate has struggled to understand. We've ended up with climate activists campaigning against a government where Greens play a major role.

**If the green transition is at risk because it is perceived as an imposition, how can it be made more desirable?**

For now, to convince people of the need for climate action, we have focused a lot on what would happen if action is not taken. We have focused on disastrous visions of what Europe would look like. The problem is, people know very well that there is a long gap between the emissions at a given time in a given place and the impacts at a given time in a given place. People know that impacts in Europe depend on past emissions and on emissions in China and the US as much as on anything that Europe can do today. So it is wrong to try and prompt people into action by emphasising what can go wrong.

I think that the way to prompt action is to show people why it is in their best interest. For that, you need to make climate action visible to people, with major investments in public transport and in renewables infrastructure to make energy bills cheaper.

**Do we need to take inspiration from US President Biden's Inflation Reduction Act?**

What is interesting about Biden's plan is that it is successful precisely because it is not labelled as the Climate Action Plan but the Inflation Reduction Act. Many people perceive climate action as something they don't want, but everyone is concerned about inflation. When people see that the Inflation Reduction Act brings new jobs to the American economy and builds new infrastructure, then Biden can say, "Look, see how climate action is in your best interest." Tragically, Europe had to wait for the war in Ukraine to realise the importance of a European vision for energy policy.

**Climate action will cost a lot of public money, and there are already plenty of demands on government spending. How should we finance the green transition?**

We should do more to mobilise private money. Europeans have a lot of savings in banks. In France, the total amount of household savings is between 4000 and 6000 billion euros. It's huge – the equivalent of around five per cent of global GDP just in French savings. If the EU Commission were to provide some bonds or major opportunities for investment, I'm pretty sure that Europeans would be willing to contribute and put their money to good use.

**Environmental movements have long rallied against megaprojects and the environmental damage that comes with large infrastructure projects. Do we now need an environmentalism that builds?**

In French, we say that you cannot have "le beurre et l'argent du beurre". It's the equivalent of the English saying: "You can't have your cake and eat it." We need to accept that climate action will require massive infrastructure projects, and that there will sometimes need to be a balance between climate policies and biodiversity policies. For the Greens this means not just saying that we need to ground planes or phase out cars. Green thinking needs to stop focusing on the world they don't want and show what the world we do want looks like.

**What do you think about climate policies that target the disproportionate carbon consumption of wealthy people, such as banning private jets or restrictions on SUV drivers?**

These policies make a lot of activists feel good about themselves because they reinforce the idea that you are fighting the good fight. The effect for most people is to reinforce the idea that climate action means limitations and restrictions. When people hear that climate activists want to ban jets, cars, even golf, they think, "What's next? Am I next? Is meat next?" All these slogans create anxiety and mean lost

votes and less support in public debates. They are not about convincing people about the benefits of the transition.

*We need to think more about reaching out to people from different social classes.*

I don't think we should ban private jets for business people. We should make high-speed trains more attractive. The Greens love night trains. But I travel a lot for work, and I'm not going to take night trains and neither are most business people. I have kids at home and I already work a lot, so I'm not going to spend a night away if there is an easier option. Paris to Berlin by night train is not for businesspeople, it's for young people. Paris to Berlin in six hours by high-speed train with high-speed internet – that will appeal to business people.

We need to cater to different groups when we think about train policies, and we need to do the same with all policies. Sometimes it seems like the Greens are too eager to please their core electorate. We need to think more about reaching out to people from different social classes.

If you think that by bashing the rich, you are going to attract the working class, it's not true. Most people want to do well. They want to be rich. By attacking the rich, you appeal most to the upper middle class – the people who already have enough money and know that they are probably never going to make much more than that anyhow.

### **How did the war in Ukraine and the energy crisis change the climate question in Europe?**

The war in Ukraine provided a way to reconcile those concerned with the end of the world with those concerned about the end of the month. Suddenly, that dilemma between climate action and affordability no longer existed. The dilemma was not solved. It was just eliminated.

In many respects, it is easiest to convince people of the core benefits of climate action when you are looking at it through a different lens. With more renewable energy capacity, Europe would have never been in the crisis situation we were in the year after the war in Ukraine escalated. Many people who are not sociologically close to the Greens or who simply aren't that concerned about the environment realise that as well. The same logic could be the starting point internationally too. Europe needs to develop its green diplomacy, and I think that there is so much potential there.

### **What should be at the centre of the European Green Deal after 2024?**

First, public investments. So far, the Green Deal has been mostly about regulation. It is only with investments in public services, transport, and infrastructure that people will realise that climate action is in their best interest. We need to make sure that climate action offers something more than restrictions, taxes, and cuts.

Second, Europe needs to make the Green Deal visible to people. People across Europe need to know what the Green Deal is doing for them. They need to know that the new train station is paid for by the Green Deal.

Public investments, properly communicated across Europe, can convince people that the Green Deal is something for them.



François Gemenne is a political scientist, specialised in international migration, climate policy, and environmental affairs. He lectures on these issues in various universities, including Sciences Po Paris, Université Libre de Bruxelles, and the University of Liège (Belgium). Between 2013 and 2015, he coordinated the component of the MOBLOB research project dealing with borders. MOBLOB is an international research project bringing together anthropologists, political scientists, geographers, and sociologists from various institutions, and focusing on modern patterns of migration from an interdisciplinary perspective.

Published December 4, 2023

Article in English

Published in the *Green European Journal*

Downloaded from <https://www.greeneuropeanjournal.eu/europes-choices-can-save-or-fail-the-climate/>

*The Green European Journal offers analysis on current affairs, political ecology and the struggle for an alternative Europe. In print and online, the journal works to create an inclusive, multilingual and independent media space.*

*Sign up to the newsletter to receive our monthly Editor's Picks.*