



# Prospects for Europe's green transition after the 2024 European Parliament elections

Kacper Szulecki

On 18 July 2024, Ursula Von der Leyen has been re-elected for another term as head of the European Commission, with a stronger mandate than in 2019 – the majority in the European Parliament she managed to ramp up was 401 votes. On 17 September, the planned composition of the new Commission was announced, subject to the approval of the European Parliament. What can we expect from the new EU 'government' and what are the most important challenges the VdL2 Commission will face in the area of climate, energy and sustainability governance?

## **VdL1 – climate ambition in turbulent times**

Von der Leyen's first Commission (hereafter VdL1) is arguably the most ambitious to date in terms of environmental policy due to its comprehensive European Green Deal (EGD) strategy. Launched in December 2019 on a wave of climate mobilization, the EGD aims to make Europe climate-neutral by 2050. The pathway to achieving emissions

reductions was laid out in the Fit For 55 package, while the European Climate Law legally binds these targets.

The new climate targets were significantly more stringent than previous commitments and require substantial changes across all sectors of the economy, including energy, transport, agriculture, and industry. They were, however, a reflection of the policy preferences of a pro-climate majority in the 2019-2024 European Parliament. It was under the pressure of MEPs, that the Commission maintained the 90% reduction target by 2040 in February 2024.

While scientists and environmental movements welcomed the higher ambition, some were noting that it is still only aiming to achieve an absolute minimum of what is required from the European Union in the global effort to combat climate change. The Climate Action Tracker rates EU's pledge (its jointly submitted Nationally Determined Contribution under the Paris Agreement) as 'Insufficient' overall.

At the same time, the Commission's course has met significant pushback from more climate-sceptic political forces. Furthermore, Member States in the European Council were keen to safeguard their full sovereignty over energy policies, which in the context of climate change and an imminent energy transition was at odds with the Commission's mandate to harmonize EU legal frameworks and its competence in environmental and climate policy.

The European Green Deal has become a focal point of many protest campaigns, often merely as a placeholder for EU politics in general, or as a symbol of frustration with European democracies. As such, the ambitious approach of the VdL1 Commission and its relentless drive to mainstream climate goals in overall EU policy – also in the face of the 2021-2022 energy crisis and the war in Ukraine – has fuelled criticism, and taming “green” regulation has become an important political postulate for anti-establishment, populist and many conservative political forces.

VdL1 sought to finalize the adoption of the Fit For 55 legislative package and the Climate Law before a new parliamentary term could strengthen climate sceptical forces. Overall, the 2024 elections marked a shift towards more fragmented and diverse representation, with increased support for right-wing populist parties and the rise of new political forces within the European Parliament. Despite gains by right-wing and Eurosceptic parties, the pro-EU groups (EPP, S&D, RE, and Greens/EFA) still hold a combined majority, allowing them to influence the legislative agenda significantly – and the increased support for Von der Leyen in the July 2024 vote is a good illustration.

### Ambivalent support for climate policy among EU citizens

According to a 2023 Eurobarometer survey, 93% of EU citizens see climate change as a serious problem, with 77% considering it a very serious issue. The survey also found that 88% of respondents agree that greenhouse gas emissions should be minimized to achieve a climate-neutral EU economy by 2050, and 87% believe it is important for their national governments to increase the use of renewable energy. Additionally, a 2024 survey by Clean Energy Wire revealed that climate action remains a top priority for many Europeans, even amidst other crises like the COVID-19 pandemic and the energy crisis triggered by Russia's invasion of Ukraine. 84% of respondents agree that tackling climate change

should be a priority to improve public health, and 70% believe that reducing fossil fuel imports can enhance energy security and benefit the EU economically.

This widespread support underscores the strong public mandate for ambitious climate policies across the EU. At the same time, immediate costs of climate protection and decarbonization policies have already proven highly unpopular among many constituencies and the French Yellow Vests protests are only one example of a protest movement that can be sparked by climate policy and then spill over to other domains. The first half of 2024 saw massive protest of farmers which targeted the EGD and forced the Commission to concede on some of its policy proposals.

### What are the prospects for Europe's green transition?

In the incoming Commission, portfolios most relevant for the climate, energy, and sustainability have been earmarked for the following candidates:

- **Teresa Ribera** – Spain's social democratic minister for ecological transition, formerly director of the Paris-based Institute for Sustainable Development and International Relations, nominated for Executive Vice-President for the Clean, Just and Competitive Transition.
- **Dan Jørgensen** – former Danish social democratic minister of energy and climate as the commissioner for Energy and Housing.
- **Wopke Hoekstra** – the Dutch Christian democratic nominee and Commissioner for Climate Action in VdL1 to continue with a portfolio covering Climate, Net-Zero and Clean Growth.
- **Jessika Roswall** – Swedish minister of EU affairs from the Moderate Party, assigned the Environment, Water Resilience and a Competitive Circular Economy portfolio.

The presence of Ribera, Hoekstra and Jørgensen in the team suggests that the VdL2 Commission is not going to give up its ambitious climate policy stance. In 2023, Hoekstra took over the broad climate portfolio from his compatriot Frans Timmermans, dubbed the “climate czar”, and his presence suggests continuity. Ribera and Jørgensen, have strong green credentials, and their leadership of climate and environment portfolios could suggest further increasing ambition and accelerating the transition. The most glaring and surprising absence in this group is that of Jozef Síkela – the Czech

minister of industry and trade, who was seen as the most likely candidate for an energy portfolio, but instead was nominated as potential commissioner for International Partnerships. His candidacy was associated with a more cautious, pragmatic line, emphasizing affordability, and industrial competitiveness.

The discussion around the new composition of the Commission exposes several important division lines which are likely to mark the new EP term and influence the trajectory of European green transition.

**Climate vs economy:** The Commission has already sought to address the dilemmas of increasing climate ambition and keeping the price tag of the energy transition at a level which is socially acceptable and in a way that does not negatively impact the competitiveness of the European economy. The Just Transition Fund supports most affected regions and workers, and the Social Climate Fund (created alongside the updated Emissions Trading System – ETS2) helps vulnerable groups through investments in e.g. energy efficiency and clean heating as well as clean transportation. The Commission has also mobilized significant financial resources, including one third of the of the €1.8 trillion post-pandemic NextGenerationEU Recovery Plan, to support green investments. To protect the competitiveness of EU economy, the Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism is phased in, and the Commission will oversee its implementation and continue defending it on the international arena. As the 2024 Draghi report on EU competitiveness noted, Europe must close the investment gap with China, its key competitor, and boost innovation, primarily in green technologies. Ramping up funding and mobilizing political support for this will be a major task for VdL2.

**Renewables vs biodiversity:** The EU's seeks to obtain 42.5% of energy from renewable sources by 2030, and this will further increase as renewables are the main tool for reaching climate neutrality in the energy sector by 2050. The EU was also a driving force behind the 2023 Dubai COP pledge to triple renewable energy by 2030. Even if upgrading existing wind turbines and using rooftops for solar energy is prioritized, new areas will have to be used for renewables deployment, meaning conflicts with other land uses and with biodiversity conservation are imminent. In a push to lessen dependence on Russia, the EU has sought to find ways of accelerating

renewables' rollout, identifying administrative red tape and local protests as main hindrances. Due to this, the 2022 Council Emergency Regulation or Renewable Permitting and the revised Renewable Energy Directive qualify renewable energy projects as being in 'overriding public interest' – in other words, providing a greater common good which should outweigh local opposition. Member States should designate 'special areas' where renewables can be developed faster, without full environmental impact assessment. This disappointed environmental NGOs, who pointed to negative impacts on biodiversity protection, and noted a precedent that other critical infrastructure can exploit – including less environmentally benign, like gas, hydrogen or nuclear energy.

**Nuclear vs renewables:** An important division line which has become more pronounced since 2020 is the question of technologies used to decarbonize the energy system across Europe. The Commission has emphasized its technology neutrality, but nuclear energy proponents from countries which have strong nuclear interests – primarily France, but also Czechia, Slovakia, Sweden or Finland – suggest neutrality is not enough and that the EU needs to actively support nuclear. Indeed, the past 5 years have seen unprecedented lobbying and societal mobilization in favour of nuclear energy, and some countries, most importantly Poland, are looking to make it an important element of its decarbonization plans. This conflict of energy transition visions has political impacts – for instance the choice of Ribera and Jørgensen has been interpreted as a serious blow to the nuclear sectors ambition and a snub for France. This division line is likely to grow further, as the nuclear sector is increasingly desperate to use the climate momentum as an opportunity to save its existence in an energy landscape increasingly dominated by cheaper and more scalable renewable sources. National self-interest among some member states, like France, are undermining the cohesion of EU energy policy (as nuclear energy is declared 'depoliticized', Framatome continue their collaboration with Russian Rosatom/TVEL despite sanctions and embargoes in other energy sectors).

**Climate and security:** although the RePowerEU strategy, developed in the face of Russian invasion of Ukraine, illustrates important synergies between decarbonization and increasing energy security in turbulent times, there are also significant security risks that energy transitions unlock. The most important of these relate to dependencies in critical

raw material and hi-tech value chains, influenced by China. The geopolitical reshuffling in the aftermath of the Russo-Ukrainian war demands a more proactive and assertive stance from the Commission, building a network of partnerships with third parties, and mainstreaming a holistic view of energy security – which also must include the question of value chains and cyber security of grids and energy systems.

**The risks of polarization:** Finally, the new Commission will have to face the problem of navigating the green transition in the context of increasing overall political polarization in Europe. Political plurality is an inherent feature of the European Project, but over decades it has been contained within institutional boundaries and with a broad, centrist consensus. As noted, this centre still stands strong, but the nature of contestation from the outside has changed. Anti-establishment and/or populist forces, primarily on the (far) right are not only disagreeing on policies but on the rules of the game. In climate and energy policy, this finds its expression in either open climate denialism or more subtle forms of “climate obstruction”. As the green shift picks up speed, grievances generated by poorly managed transition can be exploited by anti-establishment forces. The task for the Commission is to increase inclusiveness, ownership and democratic legitimacy of climate action and energy transition to disarm its potential as a fuel for protest. A separate issue is the increasingly polarized German political scene, which is also connected to the slowing down of the country’s economy, an important industrial “engine” of the entire EU.

## Conclusions from a Norwegian perspective

Norway has played an important role in stabilizing the European energy situation following the Russian invasion, and it is an important partner in European climate protection efforts. Across these four challenges, Norway can contribute e.g. through increasing R&D collaboration with the EU in green technologies and exploring the options to extract some critical raw materials and develop domestic value chains for green technologies such as batteries. Europe’s renewables expansion can be good news for Norway, which should continue to be able to benefit from electricity trade, buying cheap surplus renewable energy from the continent and selling flexible peak power at higher prices. For this, however, Norway must ramp up domestic renewable energy capacity. Considering the changes introduced in the revised RES Directive, this would require a very different attitude, especially towards onshore wind, where the Norwegian public discourse is among the most sceptical in Europe, and local interests are able to outweigh ‘overriding public interest’ and climate protection concerns. In the nuclear vs renewables debate, Norway is in a privileged position, not needing to take sides. However, political polarization in the EU carries societal and foreign security risks for Norway, and further efforts to strengthen liberal democratic consolidation, combat disinformation, and protect multilateralism should be considered. It is somewhat paradoxical that efforts towards maintaining European unity and an integrationist momentum should be expected from a non-member, but the current geopolitical landscape leaves Norway no choice but closer political, economic, climate policy integration with the EU.

### Kacper Szulecki

Kacper Szulecki is a Research Professor in International Climate Governance at NUPI, and a Professor II at the Centre for Development and the Environment (SUM), University of Oslo, where he is a fellow in the Include Centre for socially inclusive energy transitions.



Norwegian Institute  
of International  
Affairs

Established in 1959, the Norwegian Institute of International Affairs [NUPI] is a leading independent research institute on international politics and areas of relevance to Norwegian foreign policy. Formally under the Ministry of Education and Research, NUPI nevertheless operates as an independent, non-political instance in all its professional activities. Research undertaken at NUPI ranges from short-term applied research to more long-term basic research.

#### NUPI

C.J. Hambros plass 2D  
PB 7024 St. Olavs Plass, N-0130 Oslo, Norway  
post@nupi.no | nupi.no



Photo credit: NTB