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The Road to a Smart and Sustainable European Union

Abstract

We live in times when globalisation and the rapid progression of smart technologies bring considerable societal changes. At the same time, humanity is faced with long-term structural global-scale challenges like global warming, rising inequalities, demographic trends, and growing economic disparity. The COVID-19 pandemic came as an additional challenge, emphasising the importance of leveraging digitalisation and sustainable, green solutions even more. The policy brief summarises the key findings and policy recommendations for the selected EU member states as regards the smart and green society in the European Union context to support appropriate policy responses, which were highlighted in the ELF publication and webinar titled “The Road to a Smart and Sustainable European Union”.



**Aleksander
Aristovnik**



**Dejan
Ravšelj**



**Nina
Tomažević**

Chapter 1

Mapping the road towards a green, sustainable and inclusive European Union: A science-based approach or ideological warfare?



Rok Spruk
University
of Ljubljana,
Slovenia

Climate change and the damage caused by environmental degradation as one of the major threats and challenges confronting the European Union in its transition to sustainable and green energy. The most obvious question for an ambitious but cautious policymaker is to ask is how to achieve the policy targets set out in the European Green Deal in a feasible way. The principal aim of this chapter is to discuss the perils and pitfall of ideologically-motivated attacks on the critical perspectives of climate change policies, and the merits of broad-based scientific approach to design, implement and monitor appropriate policies.

Key Findings

- Climate change denialism and climate-related social activism becoming *raison d'être* of anti-establishment movements and policy circles around Europe
- The intellectual support for the ideas proliferated by degrowth movement is both fragile and fails to engage in a rigorous data-rich discussion of cause-and-effect relationship that is ought to help design the climate change and circular policies
- The general policy advice emanating from degrowth movement emphasizes higher taxes on capital and labour, more widespread and distortionary regulation of private sector and more generous government spending
- Ideology-centric discussion where the policy formulation is not based on peer-reviewed analysis of policy impact evaluation to draw inferences, conclusions and implications about the necessary policies to combat climate change, pursue climate neutrality goals, is particularly dangerous and should be avoided

Policy Recommendations

- Diagnosis of sources of carbon intensive production and consumption as a blueprint to devise appropriate economic, regulatory and structural policies to pursue carbon neutrality should be deployed by European Commission
- Active monitoring of member-state level progress in pursuit of European Green Deal goals should be undertaken
- Rigorous and peer-reviewed evaluation of EU-level and member-state level policies to judge the merits and effectiveness of policies in achieving the transition to green energy should be pursued in ex-ante and ex-post stage of policy formulation and implementation
- European Parliament and Commission should have zero tolerance towards scientists who publish their scholarly work in predatory journals and journals of dubious quality
- Volume of regulation that targets private-sector development should be reduced and rebalanced towards regulation of consumer behavior that causes environmental harm



Aleksandar Kešeljević
University
of Ljubljana,
Slovenia

Chapter 2

Is monitoring progress towards sustainability straightforward? Evidence from the EU-28



Nikos Chatzistamoulou
University of Ioannina, Greece



Konstantinos Kounetas
University of Patras, Greece

The European Green Deal facilitates green growth through policies and directives focusing on promoting energy efficiency, boosting resource and energy productivity as well as fostering circularity to accelerate the transition to sustainability. However, although evidence showcases that there are sustainability discrepancies among the member states, no systematic investigation focusing on the convergence-divergence path of these concepts and key variables of the green transition have surfaced yet. Thus, the interconnections and possible co-evolution of these concepts have been neglected so far even though those are among the priorities of the green transition. This study aims to fulfil this gap by making one of the first attempts employing a unique dataset covering the EU-28 over 2000-2020 period. In the first stage of our analysis, we investigate the existence of conditional and unconditional convergence by employing convergence algorithms while in the second stage a panel vector autoregression model examines the possible relationships. Evidence supports the non-convergence hypothesis and the formation of discrete clubs. Moreover, the second stage results pinpoint towards interesting relationships among the key variables.

Key Findings

- Energy productivity appears with a steadily increasing trend, except a decline for a two-year period between 2010-2011. After 2017 there is a constant rise in the volume of energy productivity while in 2020 it reaches the highest point of the period under consideration.
- The primary and final energy consumption in Greece for the period 2000-2020 follow a declining trend. In 2020 both measures reach the lowest point of the period which is a potential indication of an increase in energy efficiency.
- A steadily increasing trend for resource productivity in Greece for the period 2000-2020, except a short decline for the years 2006-2007. However, after 2008 up until the end of the examined period resource productivity is rising.
- Circular material use for Greece experiences a constant decline from 2010 until 2014, while from that point onwards it is characterized by an increasing trend to reach its highest volume in 2020.

Policy Recommendations

- Increases in energy productivity and restraining energy consumption of all types of consumers could be materialized using renewable energy, mostly solar and wind due to the geographical position of the country as well as with technology betterment to boost performance so as the same amount of energy could produce more output.
- The impact of technology in resource conservation as those challenges could be mitigated by the technologically advanced machinery and equipment to increase energy efficiency.
- Additionally, replacement of energy demanding machinery should be incentivized to cope with increasing energy costs.
- National as well as European policies need to enhance economic growth moving beyond the conventional means by incorporating renewable sources into the production paradigm, strengthen institutions and incentivize investment in human capital to boost the absorptive capacity of the country and thus competitiveness.

Chapter 3

Unmet expectations? Analysis of the adoption of country-specific recommendations in the fields of energy and infrastructure in Germany



Julia Jänisch
University
of Münster,
Germany
& University
of Victoria,
Canada

Germany is considered to be one of the leading countries in terms of climate-friendly environmental and energy policies. The German energy policy is known as the *Energiewende*. Some significant aspects of this policy include the decision to phase out nuclear power, the expansion of renewable energies, and the decision to phase out coal. These are some of the more ambitious targets within the European Union (EU). This research paper addresses the question of whether Germany meets its own expectations regarding environmental and energy policies and its leading role towards a smart and sustainable Europe.

Key Findings

- Germany on average, has not met expectations with respect to the country-specific recommendations. Conducting two case studies on the CSRs, it can be shown that Germany's progress was limited.
- Case 1: "the expansion of electricity and gas networks": Many stakeholders are involved, resulting in slow progress and high costs, much could have been implemented faster, the planning process is a very lengthy and can take up to 20 years.
- Case 2: "the elimination of barriers to competition in the railway market": While competition in regional passenger transport is steadily increasing, the Deutsche Bahn holds a quasi-monopoly in long-distance passenger transport.
- The country specific recommendations are often formulated quite general and don't offer a precise roadmap or concrete solutions, also they're not binding upon the member states. This leads to CSR sometimes not being implemented.

Policy Recommendations

- It is recommended that Germany act sooner and streamline processes. Successfully mastering the energy transition also means acting faster
- The planning process for electricity and gas networks needs to be faster. Particularly in view of the energy crisis in connection with climate change, action is needed.
- Germany should improve competition in long-distance transport, if the train is to become a superior alternative to flights and the car. The long-distance network would have to be expanded in such a way as to make domestic flights a less attractive option — this would also involve adjusting fares accordingly. A tight network as well as reasonable prices should create an incentive to shift traffic away from the car.
- The EU should formulate CSRs with clearly limited timeframes to make the CSRs more concrete. Also, we propose formulating the CSRs as measurable targets.

Chapter 4

Towards sustainable recovery in the European Union: The experience of the Spanish recovery plan



Beatriz Pérez de las Heras
University of Deusto,
Bilbao, Spain

The EU is striving to implement transformative initiatives for an inclusive and resilient recovery. The ongoing stimulus initiatives are intended not only to alleviate the consequences of the pandemic and the war in Ukraine, but also to accelerate the transition to long-term sustainable growth in line with the SDGs. With this approach and in this context, this chapter analyses the Spanish recovery plan and its alignment with the EU's sustainability priorities, while assessing its contribution to a sustainable recovery and shock-resilience in the EU.

Key Findings

- The Covid-19 crisis and the war in Ukraine are a setback to achieving sustainable development at EU.
- The European Green Deal, the integration of SDGs in the European Semester and the EU recovery package (NGEU, RRF and MFF) have placed the EU and its Member states on the road to sustainable development.
- The Spanish recovery plan (RTRP) is aligned with the EU's sustainability priorities, with 40% of the resources allocated to the green transition.
- The EU recovery funds and the implementation of the Spanish RTRP offer an opportunity to diversify the economic system and shape a more resilient model.
- The pace of implementation of the Spanish RTRP has been quite fast so far. However, additional challenges not sufficiently covered by the RTRP will also require further efforts by Spain.

Policy Recommendations

- Accelerating the decarbonisation of the economy and reduce dependence on fossil fuels by complementary efforts to meet current renewable sources and energy efficiency targets.
- Increasing the recycling capacity by additional measures and investments in order to meet the EU circular economy targets.
- Improving productivity by further investment in R&D. Reskilling and upskilling of the workforce for the green and digital transitions by higher levels of investments will contribute to productivity improvement.
- Ensuring fiscal sustainability in the medium and long-term by a fiscal policy that keeps public expenditure to below expected medium-term growth.
- Updating and adjusting policy responses and support during the lifetime of the RRF and the RTRP and beyond, in line with additional measures taken by the EU, as the recent REPowerEU plan.

Chapter 5

Waste management and circular economy: Lessons from the Greek experience



Kleoniki Pouikli

Utrecht
University,
Netherlands

Waste generation and management constitute a constantly aggravating global problem due to the modern economic and social lifestyle and consumption patterns. The comprehensive and multi-layered legal toolbox together with the rich CJEU jurisprudence in this field demonstrates that waste management is consistently placed very high on the EU agenda. In this vein, Circular Economy aspires to address this issue establishing a more sustainable production and consumption model in which raw materials are kept longer in production cycles and can be used repeatedly, therefore generating much less waste. In the wake of the latest developments at EU level, Greece is currently walking the arduous path towards the improvement of waste management landscape, by replacing the previous unsustainable legal regime, supporting the transition to circular economy and aspiring to fix the existing enforcement weaknesses.



Ariti Tsoukala

National and
Kapodistrian
University of
Athens, Greece

Key Findings

- The problematic or incomplete compliance with the dense and highly technical regulatory EU waste framework constitutes one of the long-standing problems in EU environmental law in general. The illegal waste management, such as unauthorized landfills, is a most common case before the CJEU.
- The CJEU through its case law throughout the years, has tried to contribute to the better implementation of the EU waste legislation at a national level, by interpreting its key concepts.
- The transition to Circular Economy is the overarching EU policy governing the field of waste management. It provides the necessary conditions to encourage economic and social actors to adopt strategies toward sustainability.
- Despite significant efforts of Greece to improve the situation in waste management, there are still major structural problems that have to be settled. This has been repeatedly confirmed by the Council of State's case law, where the most common cases concern site selection of waste treatment facilities or mismanagement of waste.
- The new Greek legislative framework, in line with the circular economy requirements concerning waste management, aims to address the negative aspects of waste management and encourage recycling over disposing of waste.

Policy Recommendations

- Need for more coordinated efforts by Greece to practically implement the new legislation as well as tackle the historic enforcement failures.
- Focus on systematic and carefully planned interventions avoiding discrepancies and fragmentation.
- Emphasis on prevention of waste generation and on opting for recovery over disposal.
- Some more practical ideas:
 - Uniform application of the pay-as-you-throw instrument to the municipalities
 - Re-evaluation of the amount of the landfill fee, to ensure that it serves as a disincentive for the disposal. Potential establishment of a minimum threshold
 - Tax incentives to promote secondary materials
 - Eco-labelling to raise awareness
 - Tailor-made incentives to consumers

Chapter 6

Artificial Intelligence: Different perspectives and the case of Slovenia



Eva Murko
University of
Ljubljana,
Slovenia

Artificial intelligence has the potential to profoundly transform our societies and economic systems as it is becoming one of the most significant technological developments of the century. AI can support the enhancement of industrial and technological capacity, production and public services, improve living conditions and holds great potential to support the achievement of sustainable development goals. Hence, the overall goal for the EU is to become the world-leading region in developing and deploying cutting-edge, ethical and secure AI. Accordingly, the main aim of this chapter is to present different perspectives on AI in the EU context with a specific focus on a brief overview of the situation of AI in Slovenia.

Key Findings

- AI is becoming a general-purpose technology, and the EU invested between €7.9 billion and €9 billion in AI in 2019.
- Numerous industries (financial, healthcare, transport, manufacturing, energy, etc.) are adopting AI applications or starting to, where AI can find patterns in big data sets and model complex systems to enhance decision-making and save costs.
- The alignment of the UN SDGs and AI technology could benefit sustainability on widespread adoption.
- Slovenia ranks fourth in the EU regarding the presence of research institutes (10.34%) by type of organisation, and the AI intensity in the master's programmes is the second highest in the EU.
- However, Slovenia is among the worst performers regarding AI skills and only 12% of companies reported using AI in 2021.
- Despite critical areas, there are opportunities for Slovenia to develop its digital situation and progress towards an AI-supported society.

Policy Recommendations

- To realise the vision of AI in Slovenia, the strategic program (NpUI, 2020) for the period up to 2025 presented several strategic objectives: establish a dynamic ecosystem of stakeholders for AI research, innovation and deployment; educate and strengthen human resources; support research and innovation in the field of AI; introduce AI reference solutions in the economy, public sector, public and state administration and society; establish technological infrastructure for research, development and use of AI; enhance security using AI; increase public trust in AI; ensure an appropriate legal and ethical framework; strengthen international cooperation; establish a national observatory for AI in Slovenia.
- These objectives can be transversal and helpful for other countries. Additionally, OECD (2019) recommends that policies should promote trustworthy AI systems, encourage investment in responsible research and development and enable SMEs to thrive.

Chapter 7

Energy transition in the EU: The case of Croatia



Dejan Ravšelj
University
of Ljubljana,
Zavod 14,
Slovenia

The concerns about climate change and the recent unexpected events (the Covid-19 pandemic and the Russia-Ukraine war) have dramatically affected the global economy, including the energy sector. Therefore, the energy transition is often viewed as a solution to address environmental, economic and societal challenges. Consequently, the EU and Croatia are trying to enhance the use of renewable energy sources and improve energy efficiency. Accordingly, the main aim of this chapter is to present the challenges and opportunities for energy transition with a specific focus on a comparison of the EU and Croatia.

Key Findings

- The consequences imposed by macroeconomic turbulence and recent geopolitical developments on the energy system reveal the complexities and trade-offs inherent to the energy transition in the EU and Croatia.
- Renewable energy consumption in Croatia is above the EU average but underutilized in transport.
- Croatia has a huge potential for renewable energy sources (offshore wind power plants, photovoltaic power plants, geothermal power plants and biomass power plants) and energy efficiency, which is not sufficiently exploited.
- Croatia has recently started some energy transition projects aiming at enhancing the use of renewable energy sources and improving energy efficiency.
- While Croatia is showing progress in terms of the consumption of renewable energy sources and energy efficiency, there is still room for improvement.

Policy Recommendations

- Developing a balanced approach that meets the imperatives of sustainability, energy affordability, and energy security and access – in other words, driving a resilient energy transition.
- Promoting renewable energy sources (especially in transport) and their wider use by educating citizens who are not sufficiently familiar with the opportunities already available to them.
- Ensuring and encouraging tenders for research and exploitation of renewable and efficient energy sources (wind, water, and solar power) at existing and new locations.
- Simplifying licensing, public procurement and administrative procedures by providing adequate support to investors and other stakeholders, which will consequently attract new investment for energy transition projects.
- The development of the Croatian energy sector must follow the EU and global decarbonisation trends.

Chapter 8

Smart cities in Romania and the European Green Deal



Melania-Gabriela Ciot
University
Babes-Bolyai,
Romania

Today, cities are seen as sources and solutions to our challenges. European urban areas are home to more than two-thirds of the population, which account for 80% of energy use and provide 85% of European GDP. These urban areas are and will become the “engines” of the European economy and its development. The present paper aims to identify the challenges and opportunities of European Green Deal for smart cities from Romania, selected for the 2022 European Commission’s initiative - 100 smart, climate-neutral cities, namely: Bucharest, Cluj-Napoca and Suceava. The analysis will consider three factors: clean mobility, energy efficiency and urban ecological planning.

Key Findings

- The 11th objective of Sustainable Development Goal - sustainable cities and communities –, for Romania has a lower status on all indicators: quality of life, sustainable mobility and environmental impact.
- There are different levels of understanding of the developmental policies and EGD in Romania.
- For Romania, the EGD was not approached by national authorities in an integrated manner, only at the sectoral level, mainly the “green” perspective of environmental policy.
- For the local authorities from Romania, the development of a twinning program with the similar local authority, with a similar developmental policy approach from an MS will support finding better solutions for local problems.
- Smart cities represent a phase of cities’ transformation toward climate neutrality, requiring a profound transformation of how citizens perceive their relationships with local authorities, participation, and responsibilities.

Policy Recommendations

- Developing a national digitalisation strategy, which will consider the actual international context and the specific characteristics of Romania.
- A national Green Deal (GD) strategy is a must, especially in the actual context of reorientation of it.
- At national level, developing an intergovernmental committee dealing with GD’s national implementation, subordinated to the prime minister, will help increase its importance, motivated by strategic autonomy, which requires high-level decisions.
- Expanding the international cooperation, especially with the partners from Central and Eastern European Member States, which have similar regional characteristics, will be an excellent exercise to develop an adapted model for implementation.
- There is a need for specialised personnel qualified for a better understanding of the integrated vision of EGD.

Summary Report

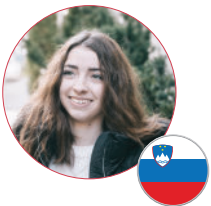
Europe's "Man on the Moon Moment": Questions on Europe's Pathway towards Climate-neutrality



Tereza Čajková
University of British Columbia, Canada

The global context of EU's pathway towards climate-neutrality

Europe's "man on the moon moment" title quotes the European Commission President von der Leyen from her speech where she laid out the executive's plans for tackling climate change at the end of 2019. What questions accompany Europe's pathway towards climate neutrality at the end of 2022? As foresight reports show, with the climate and ecosystem crises the world of the near future may become much more complex, uncertain, unpredictable and fragile. Socially and politically the world of the near future may become more polarised and fragmented in response to the global multiple-crisis. The context of global multi-crisis complexifies Europe's approach towards the green transition and may require considerable adjustments to the quickly changing reality.



Zara Jesenek Dolinar
Erasmus University, Netherlands

Current situation from a wider perspective

- Based on the National Footprint and Biocapacity Accounts, currently, to sustain the global consumption of resources, 1,75 planets Earths would be needed.
- The UN Environmental Program (UNEP) pointed out in 2021 The current mode of development degrades the Earth's finite capacity to sustain human well-being and is the driver of environmental decline through climate change, biodiversity loss and other forms of pollution and resource degradation.
- To act on the climate change, there is a commitment to limit the increase of global temperature to 1,5 degrees in the Paris Agreement.
- In the EU's, the emissions have dropped by 24% since 1990. Only emissions from transportation are rising. However, it's the energy sector that emits the most CO₂.
- The European Green Deal calls for transforming the EU into an economy where there are no net emissions of greenhouse gases by 2050 and economic growth is decoupled from resource use.

Pressing questions for the future

- In 2021 UNEP suggested that only system-wide transformation will enable humanity to achieve well-being for all within the Earth's finite capacity to provide resources and absorb human waste. However, as any proposals for a global (or European) solution based on a 'one-size fits all' approach, this raises important questions of carefully considering if it can be fully accountable to the various communities, especially to those that are unevenly affected by the contemporary global challenges.
- According to the European Green New Deal, for Europe to become the world's first climate-neutral continent it is crucial to achieve a reduction of at least 55% in greenhouse gas emissions by 2030.
- There is a range of pathways compatible with maximum warming of 1,5°C and 2°C until 2100. Both will require a radical cut of emissions. The question is if the current EU national policies support such pathways and to what extent they are realistic and socially and ecologically accountable.

Summary Report - Europe's "Man on the Moon Moment": Questions on Europe's Pathway towards Climate-neutrality

The European Green Deal and the energy crisis

The sustainable and green future the European public is dreaming of is far from the region's current reality. The Russian invasion of Ukraine, in February of this year, and the subsequent rise in energy prices put a large percentage of the population in a dire predicament. This omnipresent problem can only be solved by investing in innovative projects, listening to the individuals working on these potential solutions, therefore working bottom-up, collaborating across sectors and across borders and by spreading awareness of the urgency of taking immediate and concrete actions.

Current situation

- The main focus of the European Union is to reduce and eventually eliminate its dependence on Russian gas. This is being done through the REPowerEU initiative (its goal is in reducing the EU's dependence on Russian gas by $\frac{3}{4}$ this year and eliminating it by 2027). As well, goals that ensure gas supply for the upcoming winter were set in June 2022 (and also met in September of this year); EU underground gas storage must be filled to 80% of capacity by the 1st of November 2022 – and to 90% in the years after, in order to ensure that the European gas supply is sufficient.
- The European Green Deal's policy aimed at the energy transition focuses on ensuring an affordable EU energy supply, improving the EU energy market and prioritising energy efficiency.
- The current actions of the European Commission are those of strengthening the power grid, facilitating renewable hydrogen and collaborating with LNG suppliers.

Pressing questions for the future

- In the near future, innovation programmes, such as Horizon Europe (the EU's research and innovation programme) will take center stage as they ensure that the infrastructure needed for the large-scale adoption of renewable energy is being developed and carried out in test forms. New funding is also being added to programmes such as the LIFE Programme.
- Additional opportunities for the European Union lie in the cooperation with countries such as Azerbaijan, Algeria, Australia and major producers of gas in the Gulf, as well as in the coordination with gas buyers (Japan, China and Korea) and the exploration of export potential of countries like Nigeria, Senegal and Angola.
- Several inspiring projects are already taking place across the region, two of them that have been highlighted as examples are AURORA (which empowers zero-emissions consumers) and Bio-FlexGen (a combined heat and power plant that produces hydrogen from biomass).

Summary Report - Europe's "Man on the Moon Moment": Questions on Europe's Pathway towards Climate-neutrality

Summary of Discussion

There were three main themes that emerged from the final discussion held at the end of the workshop. The first was the fact that the green transition is first and foremost a social problem and needs to be tackled as one. The second was the importance of adjustments that need to be made in order for Europe to become a global leader in the green energy transition. And the final overarching theme covered the enormous environmental costs of this transition (here, we asked ourselves: Is new technology truly more efficient or does it create more waste, problems, and another dead end?). Taking in account the social and ecological aspects and the short window of time that is planned for the transition, the discussion showed that the transition may need to be approached with creativity and respect and accountability to all these areas.

Challenges of implementing a green transition

- Fossil fuel reliability → EU member states need to become major producers or completely shift the needs of their industries (in order to reduce imports of non-renewables)
- Disproval from local communities → the transition to green energy is not possible because of the push back from locals → spreading awareness is one of the most important objectives of policymakers
- Adjustments need to be made to Europe's circular economy, in order for the area to become a global leader in sustainable development
- There is a need to isolate sectors and implement specific changes in each individual one → a generalized strategy is not effective enough and will not lead to significant improvements
- The current energy crises may lead to the economic impoverishment of households and small businesses across the EU which may lower their capacity to invest in the transition. (However, the crisis can be seen as an opportunity for EU citizens to realise that lowering energy consumption is possible).

Pressing questions for the future

- The most important questions, highlighted in the workshop, that policymakers, politicians and researchers should take into account in the future are:
- How to divide the National as well as the European Recovery Plan in the most efficient way possible?
- Do we even have time for a green transition?
- How can we make sustainability-focused organisations profitable?
- How do we make renewable projects out of renewable sources? (For example, with what could we replace the plastic that solar panels are made out of?)
- How do we recycle infrastructure that produces renewable energy (e.g., solar panels that stop working after sixteen years – What could we do with them?)
- What will be the impact of the war in Ukraine on the EU energy sector? (For example, the move back to non-renewable energy sources such as coal that is happening across the EU member states will have ecological costs. How sustainable is the import of gas to the EU from the USA?)



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ELF was founded in 2007 to strengthen the liberal and democrat movement in Europe. Our work is guided by liberal ideals and a belief in the principle of freedom. We stand for a future-oriented Europe that offers opportunities for every citizen. ELF is engaged on all political levels, from the local to the European.

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A liberal future in a united Europe

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