


Bettina Tóth¹ 

Rightward Shift vs. EU Climate Policy

Will the 2024 EU Elections Serve the Future of Climate Policy?

The summer of 2024 brought a number of twists and turns for the future of green policy; finally, there was no change in the President of the European Commission, which partly guarantees the continuity of the European Green Deal. But a paradigm shift from the previous political priorities has been done so far, such as putting economic growth and European competitiveness at the top of the agenda. At the same time, there was a major reshuffle in the European Parliament with the emergence of the Patriots for Europe; this group has a rather different approach to the policy.

This analysis examines the likely direction of EU climate policy over the next five years, in relation with the emergence of the Patriots for Europe as the third largest political force and the significant loss of the Greens, moreover, with the re-prioritisation of the new Commission after the 2024 European Parliament elections.

Keywords: European Parliament, European Commission, climate change, climate policy, Patriots for Europe

Introduction

The European Parliament elections held on 6–9 June 2024 saw the highest turnout since 2004 (when the current Member State structure was created, except for the United Kingdom). 50.74% of eligible voters went to the polls to determine the composition of the European institutions for the next five years.² However, the turnout for the 2024 elections, which just surpassed the 2019 turnout (50.66%), was lower in more than a third of Member States, including Italy and Spain. The higher turnout may have been partly because citizens in Germany and Belgium could vote from the age of 16, in Greece from 17 and in Hungary local elections were held.³ For the latter, holding two elections on the same day resulted in an increase in turnout of more than 15% compared to 2019.

¹ Researcher, Ludovika University of Public Service, e-mail: toth1.bettina@uni-nke.hu

² European Parliament 2024a.

³ MTI–AB–HF 2024.

In most Member States, right-wing parties won overwhelmingly, mirroring the recent shift to the right in national parliamentary elections and, where applicable, in regional elections. Regarding the future of EU climate policy, the rise of right-wing parties that are climate sceptical on a number of platforms and advocate a major reform of the current green policy (which includes the transition to non-fossil energy sources and climate protection), as well as the new family of parties, Patriots for Europe, will limit the efforts of the last five years. Unless the new Commission also moves away from the previous cycle and will be dealing with building a competitive economy (with less emphasis on sustainability standards). However, climate policy activity will not cease, it is just likely to be more difficult to push new ambitions through the decision-making process, even for populist reasons.

Results of the 2024 European Parliament elections

In the period 2024–2029, 720 MEPs (compared to the body of the previous term, where the number of MEPs was reduced by the end of the term due to Brexit) will hold co-legislative office. The largest moderate right-wing European People's Party (EPP) increased its number of MEPs from 179 to 188 and the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) from 69 to 78 compared to the 2019 elections. The Left party (The Left) and Liberal Renew have seen a significant weakening. The Socialists and Democrats (S&D) have stagnated and Identity and Democracy (ID) has been forced to fold by the emergence of Patriots for Europe (PfE) and the German Alternative für Deutschland party's search for a new path, replaced by the Europe of Sovereign Nations (ESN) with 25 MEPs.⁴

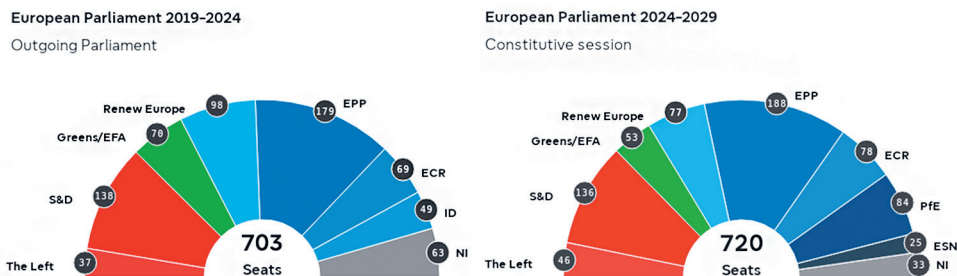


Figure 1: Fractions in the European Parliament between 2019–2024 and 2024–2029

Source: compiled by the author

In addition, the 2024 European Parliament elections are far from being a breakthrough for the Greens compared to five years ago, as there will be only twenty fewer Green MEPs in the European Parliament by 2029 than in the previous period. The projections for Greens were 55 seats, but in the end only 53 MEPs joined the fraction, dropping them to

⁴ European Parliament 2024b.

sixth place in the EP in terms of the number of MEPs. In 2019, experts were still talking about a sweeping “green wave”: in 2014 only 12.1 million Europeans voted for all Green MEPs, while five years later 23.3 million voted for all Green MEPs. This was partly due to a certain disillusionment with the left–right battles, with the Greens showing a kind of golden mean in many countries.⁵ In that time, the Commission’s strategic guidelines reflected to the needs of people, with the announcement of the European Green Deal, the goal of net climate neutrality for the European continent by 2050.⁶

According to the figures, the 2024 result shows not only a shift in European citizens’ preferences but also that many MEPs, even if they somewhat agree with the climate policy guidelines, have imagined their work for the next five years in preference to other policies and in a different political direction. Although there is indeed a decline in the Greens in terms of results, an EU opinion poll conducted before the 2024 elections does not support this finding.

In spring 2024, Europeans expressed high levels of concern about the environment and climate protection, with more than three quarters (78%) saying that environmental issues have a direct impact on their daily lives and health.⁷ On this issue, voters in Spain, Greece, Malta, Cyprus, Portugal and Italy agreed between 88% and 98%. The survey also showed that 92% of respondents in the 27 countries believe that companies should pay the costs of their pollution and 84% agreed that EU environmental legislation is necessary to protect the environment. These results are almost identical to those of the last survey at the end of 2019, highlighting the continued importance of EU policy in the public’s mind.⁸

This right-wing shift is not only reflected in European elections: in recent national elections, right-wing parties have similarly gained more support, such as the Austrian Freedom Party (Freiheitliche Partei Österreich) in Austria⁹ and the Partij voor de Vrijheid (Freedom Party) in the Netherlands.¹⁰ They are joined by the French National Rally, which, after a first-round victory, did not win the 2024 parliamentary elections, but is one of the parties with the largest citizen support in one of Europe’s leading countries.¹¹ The German Alternative für Deutschland, which has been steadily gaining strength in the state elections before, is also a not insignificant result for the 2025 federal elections.¹² The first three parties have also particular importance in the Patriots. Interestingly, the Eurobarometer survey found, for example, that the recognition of the direct impact of climate change on everyday life was prominent in countries where, following the Patriots’ stance, the right-wing parties mostly refused to talk about it.

⁵ SCHMINKE 2019.

⁶ European Commission 2019.

⁷ European Union 2024.

⁸ European Union 2020.

⁹ IONTA 2024.

¹⁰ VERHELST–HARTOG 2024.

¹¹ FELLA 2024: 37–38.

¹² FIX–WINOGRAD 2024.



But who are the Patriots for Europe?

The new political group was launched in Vienna in the weeks after the 2024 European Parliament elections, with the adoption of the so-called Patriots' Manifesto by Viktor Orbán, Prime Minister of Hungary, Herbert Kickl, President of the Austrian Freedom Party and Andrej Babiš, former Czech Prime Minister and President of the ANO party. According to the manifesto, the members of the group reaffirm the Nations of Europe which stresses the need to focus on national sovereignty rather than the federal nature of the European Union.¹³ In the days following the signing, other memberships were announced. The new group was officially announced on 8 July 2024.¹⁴ This required a minimum of 23 members from at least 7 countries to join the Patriots, a target that was significantly exceeded.¹⁵ The list summarises the number of delegates per country and how many of them joined the PFE:

Table 1: Members of the Patriots for Europe

National party	Acronym	Number of national delegates to the EP/PfE
FIDESZ-KDNP – Hungary	FIDESZ-KDNP	21/10
ANO 2011 – The Czech Republic	ANO	21/7
Coalition Přísaha a Motoristé – The Czech Republic	Oath and Motorists	21/2
Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs – Austria	FPÖ	20/6
Chega – Portugal	Chega	21/2
Vox – Spain	Vox	61/6
Partij voor de Vrijheid – The Netherlands	PVV	31/6
Vlaams Belang – Belgium	Vlaams Belang	22/3
Dansk Folkeparti – Denmark	Danish People's Party	15/1
Lega per Salvini Premier – Italy	Lega	76/8
Foni Logikis – Greece	Voice of Reason	21/2
Latvija pirmajā vietā – Latvia	Latvia First	9/1
Rassemblement National – France	National Rally	81/30

Source: compiled by the author

The Patriots for Europe, led by Jordan Bardella (National Rally), brings together 12 countries and 13 parties with 84 seats, making it the third largest political group in the European Parliament behind the European People's Party (188) and the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats (136).¹⁶ At the same time, the parties belonging to the Patriots do not yet have a significant influence in the EU institutions. The number of delegable MEPs who have joined the PFE group is relatively small, and their presence in other EU institutions is not strong either, as they are not parties that give heads of state

¹³ Hungarian Conservative 2024.

¹⁴ WAX 2024.

¹⁵ European Parliament 2024c: 27.

¹⁶ European Parliament 2024d.



or government (except for FIDESZ-KDNP and PVV). For the time being, only the FPÖ could have improved this ratio if it had succeeded in forming a government in Austria after the elections in early autumn 2024 and thus could have provided the Chancellor.¹⁷

As the Patriots' manifesto puts it, the group was essentially built around core values and policies key to preserving national sovereignty, such as illegal migration or European competitiveness, with climate and energy policy views less shaping the grouping criteria. However, it is also worth examining the attitudes of the individual parties, as the European Green Deal remains a priority on the agenda of the new Commission, although in a slightly less prominent and different way.

Energy and climate policy issues

FIDESZ-KDNP

In case of the Hungarian party coalition, the Hungarian Presidency's programme clearly shows the lines of the two policies: in the field of energy policy, great emphasis is placed on supporting the use of geothermal energy and on network construction, which is essential for further improving energy supply security.¹⁸ Furthermore, in terms of energy production, there is a strong reliance on nuclear energy. On climate policy, a reality-based approach is taken, with a focus on real results (e.g. in the circular economy or water policy) rather than on lofty targets, and a greater role for public opinion.¹⁹

ANO

The Czech ANO 2011 party's position on energy and climate policy is clear: protecting the economy is the priority.²⁰ Therefore, they reject a mandatory target for the share of renewable energy and support the use of conventional energy sources until sufficient energy production capacity is built (mostly relying on nuclear energy). They also support the EU's concept of energy independence. In terms of climate policy, they believe that the European Green Deal needs to be revised; they see the solution – alongside emissions reductions, of course – as more climate action.

Oath and Motorists

In the EP elections, the *Prísaha* (Oath) and *Motoristé* (Motorists) parties ran in coalition and achieved a landslide victory, even though they did not have a written political

¹⁷ Tagesschau 2024.

¹⁸ Hungarian Presidency 2024: 37.

¹⁹ Hungarian Presidency 2024: 28–29.

²⁰ ANO s. a.: 6–7.



programme. Their views can be deduced mostly from their statements and the party agenda on their joint website.²¹ One of their basic positions is that the European Green Deal is a destructive policy for many key sectors, such as industry, finance, education or agriculture, and therefore they ignore environmental standards and deeply condemn green activists. They also oppose the ban on internal combustion engine vehicles.

FPÖ

The Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ) has a much different vision of the policy: nuclear energy has never been dubbed green energy (this view has now changed; they see it as a 'greener' alternative than PV)²² and biodiversity protection is a priority. However, the Green Deal is viewed in a similar way to ANO: it cannot be continued in its current form, as it is a major burden on European industry.²³

Chega

The Portuguese party supports the concept of energy independence (specifically reducing dependence on Eastern energy sources), promoting offshore wind energy, green hydrogen and lithium research, and making buildings more energy efficient.²⁴ They also advocated the development of energy storage infrastructure, the use of forest biomass in public buildings, decentralised energy production (one of the instruments could be the small modular reactor – SMR), the promotion of biofuels and LNG.

With regard to climate policy, for example, they expressed support for the election of a climate-denying agriculture minister during the formation of the government; they believe that extreme weather events have always occurred.²⁵ At the same time, waste management, water conservation and animal welfare have high priorities in their programme.²⁶

Vox

The Spanish party is renowned for its climate denialist stance, mainly due to the subordination of many other policies to climate action; however, over time they have sometimes become more nuanced on the issue.²⁷ Their programme also includes a complete reversal of the 2030 targets and a shift away from a green policy approach to agricultural subsidies.

²¹ Prísaha a Motoristé 2024.

²² MAURER 2024.

²³ Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs 2024.

²⁴ Chega 2024a.

²⁵ MOUTINHO 2024.

²⁶ Chega 2024b.

²⁷ LEE 2022.



It also criticises the ‘green’ attitudes of energy policy to date (e.g. green tax), while arguing for energy independence and the continued use of hydrocarbons (specifically natural gas).

PVV

The Dutch party advocates a concrete and not EU mainstream green policy: it wants to rely on coal and gas power plants and also nuclear energy for energy production, while striving for energy sovereignty (e.g. supports the introduction of a ban on gas exports). They support a complete phase-out of emission reduction measures, the climate fund, wind power generation and solar parks, and would withdraw from the Paris Agreement and repeal the domestic climate law.²⁸

Vlaams Belang

The Belgian party offers the creation of a Belgian energy company based on nuclear energy, including SMRs, as a solution to the problem of energy dependency, including the repeal of the law abolishing nuclear power plants. In addition, blue and green hydrogen are also high on their agenda. According to the party, the European Green Deal would be abolished completely.²⁹

Danish People’s Party

The Danish People’s Party focuses on the social justice of the green transition. They focus on breaking high energy prices, abolishing the carbon tax and strict regulations on wind energy (wind turbines must not harm the environment and the daily life of the population).³⁰ The party also considers international climate agreements to be unfair, as they impose interventions that upset the balance of nature through human activity. However, they reject an ideological approach to environmental protection.³¹

Lega

The Italian party sees the energy transition and energy independence as a feasible parallel to diversification: nuclear energy (fusion, SMR), geothermal and hydroelectric energy, and biomass are all elements of this expansion. Like other members of the fraction, they propose a complete revision of the Green Deal.³²

²⁸ PVV 2023: 22–23.

²⁹ Vlaams Belang 2024.

³⁰ Dansk Folkeparti 2024a.

³¹ Dansk Folkeparti 2024b.

³² Lega per Salvini Premier 2022: 43–44.



Voice of Reason

The Greek party sets its energy policy priorities in increasing the share of renewable energy sources (solar, wind, biomass and biogas) and improving the energy efficiency of buildings. In addition to this, they also emphasise the protection of the environment, although this is not discussed in detail in the political agenda.³³

Latvia First

The party is satisfied with Latvia's energy, climate and environmental policy achievements so far (and they would like to maintain them); therefore, they do not support further action; instead, they believe that the focus should be on countries where action is lacking.³⁴

National Rally

The French party focuses its energy policy on the following pillars: nuclear energy (SMR, fast neutron reactors, etc.), expansion of hydroelectric capacity, preference for hydrogen and geothermal energy, phasing out coal, conversion of power plants to biomass.³⁵ Climate protection aspects are barely mentioned in the party programme. According to their agenda, the ban on internal combustion engine vehicles and low emission urban zones should be abolished.

Overall attitude of the PfE

On energy policy, there is no major contradiction between members of the political group: almost without exception, they support the creation of energy sovereignty, whether European or domestic, with a particular focus on nuclear energy. The only outlier is the Austrian FPÖ, who had previously rejected nuclear energy but now see it as a better alternative than even solar energy. The Dutch party has more extreme views on renewables: they want to continue to rely on gas and coal power plants for the country's energy production, alongside nuclear power. Spain's Vox wants to keep hydrocarbons in a similar role. The Czech ANO does not consider it important to have a mandatory share of renewable energy until they can achieve the transition, mainly based on nuclear energy. On this basis, the Patriots will have a fairly united position on energy policy; however, there may be disagreements between members of the fraction, for example on the issue of renewable energy, not to mention other large parliamentary groups.

³³ Foni Logikis 2024.

³⁴ Latvija Pirmaja Vieta 2024.

³⁵ Rassemblement National 2024.



On climate protection, the Patriots are not so united: while the Danes place great emphasis on balancing society and the environment, the Dutch, Belgians and Czech Oath and Motorists also reject the current international climate protection agreements and strategies. But so do the ANO, the FPÖ, the Danish People’s Party and the Lega: they believe that the European Green Deal should be revised. The National Rally has almost no mention of climate protection targets in its programme, while Chega and Vox have a more climate-denying attitude. As a result, the Patriots are likely to take a hard line against climate and environmental legislation; in the next five years, a number of situations similar to the nature restoration law will arise; in a word, a strong counter-pole in the European Parliament in this area.³⁶

What is the new Commission’s position on “green” issues?

In the run-up to the 2019 elections, there was not only a greater receptivity from society to climate action, but it also determined the candidates. Ursula von der Leyen campaigned with ambitious climate pledges and immediately after taking office,³⁷ she announced the strategic pillar for the next five years, the European Green Deal, which she then dubbed “Europe’s man on the moon moment”.³⁸

The Commission’s pro-green policy attitude is likely to continue, as it continues to be headed by the previous President, Ursula von der Leyen. Nevertheless, the results and statements so far suggest that von der Leyen’s green flagship will take on a different character than in the last five years.

A fundamental change in 2024 was that von der Leyen significantly reduced the number of green policy issues during the campaign period, focusing mostly on competitiveness, cutting bureaucracy, defence or agriculture.³⁹ In the latter context, for example, the proposal based on the European Citizens’ Initiative “Save the Bees and the Farmers” was withdrawn at the beginning of 2024, following the farmers’ protests.⁴⁰ This proposal originally aimed to reduce the use of chemical herbicides by 80%, and the Commission had already reduced it to 50% in its proposal. However, this is just one example of the “green deal fatigue” (a reference to the familiar phrase of enlargement fatigue)⁴¹ that has pervaded the EU institutions over the last 1–2 years, due to growing climate scepticism.⁴² In addition, the scepticism is no longer about whether climate change exists, but about the adequacy of the EU’s response, which in many cases is very strict and, in some cases, even contradictory.

³⁶ TÓTH 2024.

³⁷ GRÜSS 2024.

³⁸ HUTCHINSON 2019.

³⁹ GRIERA 2024.

⁴⁰ Pesticide Action Network Europe 2024.

⁴¹ STANIČEK et al. 2023.

⁴² MORITZ 2024.



The shift in emphasis was not only noticeable in the campaign, but also in her re-election speech.⁴³ After outlining the future of European competitiveness, she went on to describe what the Green Deal in action would look like. Billed as a strategy for growth, the agreement was accompanied well before the campaign period by the announcement of a plan for European industry, an approach that differs markedly from that of the last five years.⁴⁴ The new line, which converges to a lesser extent with the previous one, would not be reprehensible if the objectives of the previous cycle had been largely met: in 2019, 168 legislative packages were planned to be adopted by the end of the cycle, almost 90 of which concern the Green Agreement. These include the Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM), the directive on increasing the share of renewables in the energy mix, the review of the EU Emissions Trading Scheme (ETS), and even the long-stalled nature restoration law, which finally came into force on 18 August 2024. Of course, the fact that when the Commission took office on 1 December 2019, the European Green Deal was in the spotlight instead of the Covid-19 epidemic also contributed to the result. But the pandemic also had an impact on the Commission, followed two years later by Russia's war against Ukraine. And in the last months of the legislature, another conflict in the EU's neighbourhood, the Middle East, unfolded, adding to an already tense geopolitical environment. All these events have had a significant impact on the Commission's scope and focus.

All in all, however, the balance of the first priority is positive, with only five of the original initiatives withdrawn and four blocked by some Member States. The remaining 73 initiatives are expected to be adopted in the next cycle, but the change in strategic direction means that it is not clear that all the old draft legislation will be adopted. This is all the more the case as the announced Clean Industrial Deal and the European Competitiveness Fund will also support (less sustainable) economic competitiveness, green, digital and social transition, shifting the focus from the significant environmental aspect to the social and economic sphere.

This is the path outlined in the Letta report published in April 2024 and the Draghi report published in September, which could have a major impact on the direction Ursula von der Leyen is taking. The Letta report on the EU single market was commissioned by the European Council to Enrico Letta, while Ursula von der Leyen asked Mario Draghi to prepare a report on European competitiveness, accompanied by reform proposals. The two former Italian Prime Ministers highlighted similar points about the green future of the European economy and market, with the difference that Enrico Letta focused on socio-political aspects (e.g. a fair green transition, collective share of the transition costs), while Mario Draghi approached it from a more material (technology, energy, defence, etc.) perspective.⁴⁵ The Draghi report confirmed on several points that a paradigm shift and the breaking down of barriers (including regulatory relaxations, but not excluding possible contractual changes) may be necessary in the future to maintain competitiveness. A good example of this is the issue of clean energy, which the report argues will ultimately protect Europe from price shocks, while also offering

⁴³ European Commission 2024a.

⁴⁴ European Commission 2023.

⁴⁵ RAGONNAUD 2024: 5–7.



new economic opportunities. However, the transition will be gradual and fossil fuels will continue to play a central role in determining energy prices for the rest of the decade. However, more flexibility in EU environmental legislation will be essential if renewables are to gain traction.⁴⁶

The shift in focus cannot be criticised in itself, however, if it will result in a huge lobbying effort and the pursuit of economic interests, it will be equally far from the 2050 goals. Although the Green Deal has “significantly improved” the EU’s performance in tackling climate change, according to the Climate Action Tracker, experts say the bloc should implement further policies to align with the Paris Agreement targets.⁴⁷

Conclusions

The striking result of the 2024 European Parliament elections, with the strengthening of the right and the significant loss of the Liberal and Green parties, will make it difficult to make ambitious progress on EU climate policy, experts say. Examples of this were already evident in the previous term on important issues, such as the aforementioned nature restoration law, which was delayed due to vetoes from various member states, including Hungary. Although the majority of EU climate protection measures for the next five years will depend on the newly elected European Commission, because of its role as a legislative initiator, the European Parliament is also indispensable in this respect.

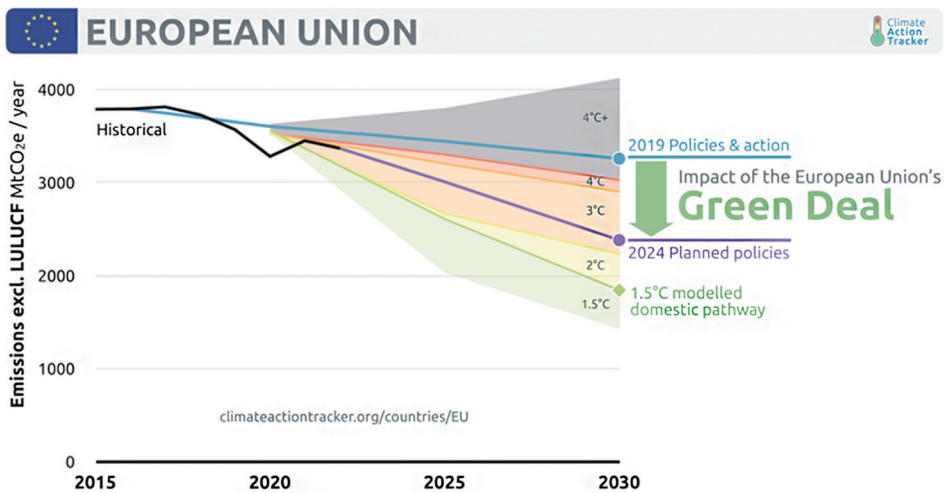


Figure 2: Impact of the European Green Deal on Europe’s emission
 Source: Climate Action Tracker 2024

⁴⁶ European Commission 2024c: 14.

⁴⁷ Climate Action Tracker 2024.



In the coming months, the new European Parliament, the new Commission and the Member States will have to agree, among other things, on an emissions target for 2040 as a stepping stone on the bloc's path to net climate neutrality by 2050.⁴⁸ The Commission's proposal would require Member States to achieve a 90% reduction in greenhouse gas emissions (compared to 1990 levels) by 10 years before the time the final goals must be achieved, including a significant increase in renewable energy capacity, a major reduction in the use of fossil fuels and the development of carbon capture and storage (CCS) technologies (including natural sinks, i.e. planting trees).⁴⁹

The rightward shift in the European Parliament and the emergence of Patriots for Europe as the third largest political force could even delay or even scrap this framework legislation – as required by the European climate law⁵⁰ – given the fundamental scepticism of many MEPs about climate change and their rejection of current international climate policy, not to mention the pro-fossil fuel attitude. Moreover, if agreement on the regulatory framework is also difficult to reach, there will be no progress in defining possible constraints in specific sectors, such as agriculture or industry. However, it already seems that the new Commission will be more concerned with developing a competitive (and less sustainable) European industry in the next five years. In this case, it may not be necessary to compromise, but it may be easier to reconcile interests; if the sectoral discontent experienced in the second half of the previous cycle (e.g. farmers' protests) is to be avoided, EU decision-makers will certainly set policies that promote economic development rather than hamper it as their flagship. Nevertheless, this will do absolutely nothing to reduce the scale of climate change, adapt to its inevitable consequences, or to reach the EU's 2050 targets. Some projections suggest that even current policy measures will not take Europe towards net climate neutrality, with emissions reductions of around 64% by 2050.⁵¹ Moreover, if regulations do not increase or are not implemented by Member States in the next few years, the success rate will be even lower. In this scenario, there will be no choice but to adapt to the impacts of climate change. Nevertheless, we must also be prepared for these situations.

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⁴⁸ European Commission 2024b.

⁴⁹ LEMPRIERE et al. 2024.

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