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Published in:
The International Spectator

DOI:
[10.1080/03932729.2021.1966188](https://doi.org/10.1080/03932729.2021.1966188)

Publication date:
2021

License:
CC BY-NC-ND

Document Version:
Final published version

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Fernandez, R., Schoenefeld, J. J., Hoerber, T., & Oberthur, S. (2021). Europe's Transition to Sustainability: Actors, Approaches and Policies. *The International Spectator*, 56(3), 1-6.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/03932729.2021.1966188>

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The International Spectator

Italian Journal of International Affairs

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: <https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rspe20>

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To cite this article: Rosa Fernandez, Jonas J. Schoenefeld, Thomas Hoerber & Sebastian Oberthür (2021) Europe's Transition to Sustainability: Actors, Approaches and Policies, The International Spectator, 56:3, 1-6, DOI: [10.1080/03932729.2021.1966188](https://doi.org/10.1080/03932729.2021.1966188)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/03932729.2021.1966188>



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Published online: 06 Sep 2021.



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Europe's Transition to Sustainability: Actors, Approaches and Policies

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In 2019, the European Commission launched the European Green Deal (EGD, see EC [2019]) as a strategic framework for policy development to achieve the aims of the Paris Agreement and the United Nations (UN) 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (see Dupont *et al.* 2020). The EGD offers an opportunity to reflect on the complexity of achieving long-term sustainability through enhanced public action in a number of relevant EU policy areas. Amidst a plethora of policy challenges (such as the refugee crisis or Brexit and Covid-19), this Special Issue uses the new context created by the EGD to engage in the debate on key topics related to this transition towards sustainability. The EGD may become the extension of ecological modernisation (Jänicke 2008), where environmental protection became a perceived chance rather than a cost. By delivering the EGD, the EU may put its action and money behind this idea.

The EGD aligns with the aim of the UN 2030 Agenda to leave no one behind. Since the EU has historically been accused of a democratic deficit (see for instance Azman 2011), it is important to explore how the EGD addresses issues of inclusivity of stakeholders (actors) in the governance system. The Special Issue analyses the drivers of policy change and possible barriers to progress. It provides insights on how the process started with the EGD can drive EU member states towards more sustainable policies; what actors, approaches and policies are particularly prominent in the EU multi-level governance system (Heritier 2010; 2017; Kohler-Koch and Larat 2009); and to what extent the EU influences third countries in the adoption of environmental policies showing its actor-ness on the international stage (Bretherton and Vogler 2005; 2008). The success of the EGD may depend on our understanding of these policy aspects. This is where this Special Issue can contribute insights on European integration.

As a baseline definition, the Special Issue retains the original interpretation of sustainable development as comprising social, economic and environmental aspects (Brundtland 1987). The EGD seems to adhere to this most coherent and comprehensive interpretation by employing economic means (investment) for environmental ends, while also paying specific attention to a fair and socially just transition (Laurent 2020). The EU thereby signals that it takes climate change seriously while keeping the economic potential of the sustainability transition in sight. As a result, the EGD allows the EU to strengthen its international environmental leadership by working towards the alignment

of economic, environmental and social benefits. In case of success, the EU can serve as a new model, which others may want to follow.

The policy agenda of the EGD calls for a holistic approach in order to become the first climate-neutral continent by 2050 (EC 2019). Interventions will be necessary beyond the typical energy, climate or environmental policies, involving for example transport, industry, agriculture and sustainable finance, because many policy areas are strongly interlinked. The articles in this Special Issue provide case studies to examine the reach of existing efforts in several policy fields, and how they are embedded in the multi-level governance system of the EU.

While the authors belong to different social science disciplines and therefore apply a diversity of research methodologies in their contributions, they all engage with two overarching perspectives: the wide-ranging literature on governance and policy change, and the more recent but sizeable interdisciplinary literature on sustainability transitions.

Against this backdrop, the articles in this Special Issue share an engagement with the mounting tension between the urgency of a speedy transition and the difficulties of achieving it in practice.

Conceptual perspectives

The interaction between actors, institutions and instruments has traditionally been part of the definitions of governance (Heritier 2017). However, this understanding has also been criticised for an excessive focus on the policy dimension of governance, demonstrating a need to account for politics and the polity (Treib *et al.* 2007).

The challenge is even bigger for the governance of sustainability transitions, because they need to address high levels of complexity, involving technological, economic, social and ecological changes (Turnheim *et al.* 2015). Part of the debate has extended beyond economic, social and political aspects to focus on the role of technology and innovation (for example, Jacobsson and Bergek 2011; Köhler *et al.* 2019; Kaiser and Schot 2014).

The complexity of the sustainability transition originates in part from attempts to bring a growing range of stakeholders into the process. The stated aim is to improve societal acceptance by means of inclusivity. This sits within the current debates on the politics of sustainability transitions, where scholars debate the need for democratic participation and the urgency of the necessary transformations to tackle climate change (Blühdorn 2013). This is particularly visible in the case of renewable energy, as Rosa Fernandez (2021, this Special Issue) demonstrates in her article on small-scale collective citizen action through ‘energy communities’, but also in Helene Dyrhaug’s (2021, this Special Issue) description of the progress of decarbonisation in the transport sector.

Additionally, Thomas Hoerber, Christina Kurze and Joel Kuenzer (2021, this Special Issue) show that the transition invariably impinges on the interests of some groups, thus potentially triggering resistance movements and a more conservative logic of climate and environmental governance, the so-called ‘Ego-Ecology’. Intense lobbying activity for retaining the status quo has also become apparent in Central and Eastern Europe, as Matúš Mišík (2021, this Special Issue) explores by analysing independent and differentiated policy positions on renewable energy in the region. Interests mobilised at the national and local level can work their way up to the EU level. Employment in the automotive sector would be an example of this, influencing the approach taken by the

Commission, as the aforementioned article by Dyrhaug (2021) shows. National interests, lobby groups and international politics feature prominently in Simona Davidescu and Aron Buzogány's (2021, this Special Issue) article on the impact of the European Union Timber Regulation in Romania and Ukraine.

More recently, the politics of the transition appear to be changing. As the financial clout to introduce policies to make the EU greener, fairer and more economically prosperous grows, the political will and support to implement the EGD appear to be strengthened, with significant implications for the EU's international role (for an earlier discussion of the EU's international role, see Bretherton and Vogler 2005) and its domestic politics. The right choice of policies that can achieve the greatest effect, for example in emissions reduction, is vital, as Jonas Schoenefeld, Kai Schulze, Mikael Hildén and Andrew Jordan (2021, this Special Issue) argue in their contribution focusing on how the EU member states report on their climate policy mixes through the EU Monitoring Mechanism/Governance Regulation. However, politics and policies do not always align, as Gabriel Weber and Ignazio Cabras (2021, this Special Issue) show for international trade in the case of coal sourced from Colombia, even if the leadership role of the EU in the international arena is hardly challenged, based on Frauke Ohler and Tom Delreux's (2021, this Special Issue) case studies on the perceived role of countries and groups of countries in environmental negotiations in three international fora.

It is also apparent through this Special Issue that the polity element (institutional and organisational infrastructure) has remained by and large untouched. The inclusion effort of the EGD in this area (polity) has so far been limited to the appointment of climate ambassadors as part of the Climate Pact (EC 2020), to facilitate dialogue with and participation of stakeholders, but with little practical role. In sum, the articles that follow contribute to the mounting evidence on the complexity of the policy-politics-polity puzzle when it comes to sustainability transitions. The calls for more integration between bottom-up and top-down approaches (Fraser *et al.* 2006) may be achieved through the EGD and its derived initiatives, but the path is far from clear, as this Special Issue highlights.

Conclusion

This Special Issue explores the potential of the EU to lead in the sustainability transition, notably in the context of the EGD. Several pertinent points arise from the contributions that follow. While the EGD has strengthened the rhetoric and political signalling of the EU, not all the external effects of EU policies have been duly considered. For example, its trade practices continue to fall short of the EU's policy aims. Furthermore, positive international perceptions do not necessarily chime with the reality of implementing the sustainability transition in Europe.

While the articles point to important potentials of the EGD and the UN Sustainable Development Goals, including for involving citizens more and shifting the discourse in new directions (for example, in the area of transport policy), major issues remain to be explored. The consequences of self-centred and nationalistic environmental policies as captured in the concept of Ego-Ecology are to be further assessed. As EU member states diverge (for example, CEE countries on renewable energy) and their climate policy mixes do not show dramatic improvements in the number and quality of climate policies, deep

and rapid change remains a tall order. Furthermore, the EU continues to struggle with a number of known and emerging policy implementation issues, as for example detected by Davidescu and Buzogány (2021) in their article on timber and forestry policies. The long-term impact of the EGD and other related high-level policy initiatives will depend on effective implementation, which will in turn affect the EU's international reputation. Assuring that implementation, potentially with the help of policy monitoring and evaluation (see Schoenefeld and Jordan 2019; Schoenefeld *et al.* 2019), will therefore be a priority in the coming decade. To this end, as shown in Fernandez (2021) and Davidescu and Buzogány's (2021) articles, sustaining and supporting a grassroots base for the transition towards sustainability will be vital, if the EGD is to get traction amongst European citizens.

Acknowledgments

The authors acknowledge the UACES Research Network 'The Role of Europe in Global Challenges: Climate Change and Sustainable Development' for the organisation of a dedicated online workshop. The Jean Monnet Network 'Governing the EU's climate and energy transition in turbulent times' (GOVTRAN: www.govtran.eu), which is funded by the Erasmus+ programme of the European Union, deserves credit for additional support.

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