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'Brussels as the new Moscow'

The EU Commission's green agenda faces strong resistance in Eastern Europe. But, as Richard Filčák argues, this is often more rhetorical than real

By 2030, the EU wants to reduce its CO2 emissions by 55 per cent. In its climate package 'Fit for 55', the European Commission has now put forward concrete legislative proposals to achieve this goal. However, in Eastern Europe especially, the Commission's proposals face harsh criticism. Why?

The criticism towards 'Fit for 55' and the green agenda more generally needs to be understood in the context of local political scenes and narratives. It partly arises from the strong political influence of the neoliberal economic school of thought in Central and Eastern Europe, combined with nationalism and increasing distrust of the 'West'. Moreover, in recent years, a furious 'anti-communism without communists' has emerged, where economic planning, pointing to market failures or speaking about social justice is labelled as return to the past, 'left', or against 'freedom'.

Meanwhile, left-wing political parties are in decline, and the Greens are only on the margins of public attention. New parties like the Pirates in Czechia or the Progressive Party in Slovakia are rhetorically green, yet they are generally weak in mainstream public discourse and powerful only in some segments of the educated and urban electorate. For mainstream voters, they often represent 'irresponsible' or 'naïve' youngsters. For many on the left, however, they resemble what Jutta Ditfurth has called 'neoliberals on bikes'.

In this context, it is mainly the perspective of big business represented by right-wing and centrist political parties in the public discourse, combining past sentiments – Brussels as the new Moscow commanding its member states – and neoliberal beliefs in the free market – Brussels as a bunch of 'communists' destroying our local economies with useless, costly, and superfluous ideas based on a climate hoax. Climate policies, then, are seen as a new form of social transfers 'punishing' good entrepreneurs for their performance. Brussels is seen as paving the way for corporations, building market

for Western green technologies on the account of our budget. However inconsistent these narratives are – Brussels is ultra-left and ultra-right at the same time – they find fertile ground in the media owned by private corporations and among people worried by the migration crisis, pandemic, and prospects on uneasy future. In this context, 'Fit for 55' is often presented as an ill-considered expensive policy with catastrophic effects on the economy.

Which measures are most criticised and why?

Not surprisingly, the biggest public debate has been about combustion engines and banning the sale of new petrol and diesel cars by 2035 as part of the 'Fit for 55' decarbonisation plan. A majority considers electric cars as expensive, and the debate generated fears of additional expenses for households.

The second criticism is cost for the industry and impacts on employment. Slovakia, Czechia, Poland, and Hungary have benefited hugely in the past decades from the outsourcing of industrial production from the old to the new member states. For instance, as much as 30 per cent of jobs in Slovakia are currently in manufacturing.

New measures are often seen as endangering the profitability of local business. At the same time, it is often neglected that even with no climate policies at all, the country would need to do something about economic unsustainability of the present model of production and consumption, declining working age population, automatisation, and the shift from low-added value production to the upper level of products and services.

If there is a risk of social imbalances, how could it be done better? In other words, how should such a climate package be designed from the perspective of Eastern Europe?

I do not see it as a problem of EU policies. The key problem is in the member states themselves and how they use the EU framework for their local solutions. Climate transformation would require a substantial shift in the local tax systems and social welfare policies. The 'Fit for 55' may provide some testing ground for experimenting with measures, accelerating the transformation, but it is up to the member states to change the production and consumption systems. And here we often get into conflicts with local business interests – producing cheap at home and sell expensive abroad –, scale of the problem – the Polish coal and energy sector –, or simply with ideological fanatics of all sorts and unlimited free market promoters like the former President of Czechia and other public intellectuals.

The Commission's recent emphasis on social aspects of decarbonisation and the just transition is crucial. At the end of the day, many Central and Eastern European countries do understand that these are not artificially obligations, but key to survive in the future we are heading to.

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) is currently warning of significantly faster global warming than originally expected. Humanity has only this decade left to slow down climate change. How are these warnings received in Eastern Europe?

The general approach of Central and Eastern European states is that we do not believe so much in climate change. But since the EU's cohesion policy, the recovery plan and other financial instruments are tied to it, we pay lip service to the Commission.

However, we also must understand that no country in Western Europe suffered as much from deindustrialisation in the 1990s – and for a substantial part of the public, environmental protection is inevitably linked to job losses. There is a rising climate movement in these countries, but it is mostly limited to urban, educated, and better-off electorate.

Many Eastern European governments reject every measure that could make the daily lives of the general population more expensive and burden the economy. As a result, they have gained a reputation in the EU as a notorious brake on climate protection. Is that so? Or is Brussels simply blind to the needs of Central and Eastern Europe?

Perhaps with the exemption of Poland, the opposition is more rhetorical than real. Above, I tried to map out the rather hostile public discourse. But the governments are not blocking common EU policies and do implement the measures agreed. The opposition is sometimes more aimed at getting some advantages and preferential treatment in the process – for instance, lower targets in the shared effort.

At the same time, Central and Eastern European countries are often in a more complicated position compared to western EU member states. They face a brain drain of the young generation, they have economies centred around manufacturing, they do not possess advantages in research, development, and patents. Most of the profits of multinational corporations are leaving the region without any taxation. Moreover, the societies are getting older, which means they are more dependent on social and medical care and more conservative in political views. I would not say that Brussels is simply blind to the needs of Central and Eastern Europe – on the contrary, cohesion policies rightly name and address the key issues here. But we need to

see strong bottom-up commitments in Central and Eastern Europe.

The economies of Eastern Europe have successfully integrated into international value chains over the last few decades, for example as suppliers to the automotive industry. How can these competitive advantages be sustained in a climate-neutral restructuring of the economy, and what role does Brussels play?

The economies indeed successfully integrated into international value chains, but mostly as providers of cheap, yet skilled labour and competitive local conditions. Research and development and higher value-added services stay, with very few exemptions, in the 'mother countries', and what is located here is extremely sensitive to the decarbonisation – for instance, steel mills, foundries, chemical industry, metal processing, and manufacturing.

Brussels is rather sensitive to this challenge and the new Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism is a step in the right direction. I am, however, sceptical of how it will survive confrontation with the WTO and pressures from the countries like China and the US.

The EU cohesion policies are a key factor in modernisation of Central and Eastern European economies and without this support, we would perhaps be miles away from where we are right now. At the same time, it is Central and Eastern European countries' problem how much we are able to utilise these tools and opportunities.

This interview was conducted by Claudia Detsch.



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