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On the edge

Climate protection is the new conflict line in European societies. Traditional parties have to offer a vision for the future

Read this article in German.

Following last month's European elections, there was a sense of relief among observers: the predicted shift to the right had seemingly failed to materialise – it wasn't as bad as had been feared. But it's worth taking a closer look at the figures. Because in the next European Parliament, right-wing, Eurosceptic parliamentary groups will hold a quarter of the seats if we include Hungarian autocrat Viktor Orbán's party and neo-fascist splinter parties that do not belong to any parliamentary group.

This may be only a small increase compared with the last European elections, but the enormous growth of stridently populist parties from Italy, France, Poland and Great Britain marks a significant change. Matteo Salvini's Lega and Nigel Farage's Brexit party each sends as many parliamentarians to Brussels as Germany's Christian Democrats (CDU) – up until now the largest party in the European Parliament. And with ten MEPs from the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD), more right-wing populists from Germany than ever before will shape European politics.

Because the green and liberal parties are also growing – first and foremost Emmanuel Macron's La République en Marche and the German Greens – whereas social democrats and conservatives are losing ground, the Parliament becomes more polarised and it's more difficult to build a majority.

This has three implications for European climate protection. Firstly: reactionary, climate-sceptical anti-Europeans will try to significantly lower climate policy ambitions for the forthcoming negotiations and to float their illiberal social and political ideas.

Secondly, the progressive parties and parliamentary groups that have been strengthened will use their social and political momentum to

demand effective and, thus, more radical climate policy.

And thirdly, the traditional major parties find themselves at a crossroads. They will not only have to rethink their approaches to climate policy. If they want to remain relevant, they will have to come up with answers that correspond to the historical-geological scale of the climate crisis. If they take their lead from those who have been holding back climate protection, they will miss their self-set climate targets once more. The opportunity for a decisive shift in climate policy will be lost.

The right's influence in Brussels

In this complex situation, the climate issue will become the new demarcation line of social conflict, where the traditional-conservative and progressive-cosmopolitan milieus collide. This results in two options.

Either the debate on the sustainable transition extends into society as a whole, the climate discourse is 're-politicised', and the European Parliament becomes the stage where future is made. Or else the traditional major parties join in the chorus of those who fear – oddly enough – that Europe's viability and competitiveness are threatened by climate protection policies. In 2016 we saw the political consensus shift to the right in the debate on refugees and migration. Are we about to experience a déjà vu with regard to climate protection?

As a stronger political force, MEPs on the right will now gain more influence in Brussels through parliamentary participation rights. They get longer speaking times and financial resources, they can table motions and proposals, commission expert opinions, summon expert witnesses and chair committees. But the shift to the right isn't only taking place in Parliament.

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In autumn, ardent enemies of Europe will propose their candidates for EU Commissioners and other top posts. Right-wing populists are already in government in eight European member states. In addition, they already have representatives in 23 of 28 national parliaments in the EU.

While the gains in the European elections were less spectacular than predicted, the overall picture clearly shows that the right-wing camp is consolidating. A strong right is the new normal. Right-wing populists in Parliament, the Council and the Commission constitute a toxic mixture for European climate protection policy: their parties are manifestations

of the forces within modern societies that seek to prevent far-reaching structural change. The catastrophic effects of climate change threaten entire societies and force millions to flee their homelands.

The green wave

One might think that global climate protection would be a welcome issue for right-wing populists, who care most about a prosperous and competitive economy and the protection of their own people from danger – which must include the effects of the climate crisis. In the past, however, more than half of all right-wing populist parliamentarians have voted against climate protection. Disinformation, scepticism towards scientific facts about man-made climate change, and an opposition to democratic institutions flourishes among these parties.

The climate crisis, for which national borders do not exist, isn't easily accommodated in the nationalist narrative. Instead, nationalists characterise climate protection as an elite project, play off climate protection against economic growth, and exploit the failure of the Christian democratic and social democratic parties to come up with ideas and plans for climate protection.

Even if the Berlin's Junge Alternative (the youth organisation of the AfD in the federal state of Berlin) now calls for the AfD to wake up to the climate issue, the Europe's ascending right wing will mobilise more fervently against international climate protection in the future. As far as climate protection is concerned, Salvini's new pan-European alliance has unanimity: its member parties have so far voted against every European climate protection initiative of recent years.

The Friday demonstrations by school students across Europe and the visible consequences of the climate crisis have shaken Europe's citizens awake – the existential importance of the climate crisis for peace and prosperity increasingly reflects in electoral choices. In 2019, climate and environmental issues were among the four most frequently cited criteria for voting decisions in the EU – in some countries, such as Germany, Sweden and the Netherlands, they even ranked first.

It's not only in Germany that conservatives and social democrats expose a lack in orientation and ideas on climate change.

Although green parties in the UK, France, Finland, Germany and Luxembourg were able to celebrate success in this election, the green wave is not yet a Europe-wide phenomenon. In Central and Eastern Europe, green parties hardly gained any seats, and in Europe as a whole the Greens are below ten per cent.

Nevertheless, the political and social momentum behind social-ecological change is likely to strengthen the progressive groups in the Parliament. Strong support within society legitimises ambitious climate policy demands and makes coalitions and alliances with the parliamentary groups of the centre more likely.

A green vision for Europe

Following considerable losses, the political groups of the European People's Parties and Social Democrats, for the first time, no longer make up a parliamentary majority. New alliances will be necessary, with liberals or Greens and – at least occasionally, and *ad hoc* – with national conservative ruling parties from Poland or Hungary. A coalition between left-wing progressive groups is also conceivable.

It's not only in Germany that conservatives and social democrats expose a lack in orientation and ideas on climate change. Throughout Europe, they have failed over decades to develop and implement strategies for CO2 pricing, for phasing out fossil fuels or for the transitions needed in agriculture and transport.

The question is: can traditional parties, conservatives and social democrats alike, now overcome what has been called 'the trap of the present' (meaning the hidden structural factors that make change appear more difficult than it is)? Can they oppose the populists' anti-elite narrative and their roll-back of climate policy measures with a credible vision of the future that is both sexy and sustainable?

If they allow populist parties to continue to set the pace for them, they will bear a major share of the responsibility for society's deferral of an essential debate. Will they be the ones to constructively address the conflicts inevitable in the face of necessary structural change? Or will they continue to shy away from only superficially radical responses of a social-ecological transformation, in the belief that the market, efficiency and technology will solve the climate crisis?

The next five years will see landmark decisions for climate protection taken at EU level: the new EU budget 2021 to 2027 will be adopted; the EU climate targets for 2030 and 2050 will have to be renewed; a kerosene tax could be introduced; and climate-damaging subsidies need to be abolished. An EU-wide phase-out of coal, the reform of European agricultural policy and the implementation of the directives at national level are all overdue. These decisions are not only about climate protection, but also about the modernisation of Europe's industrial

societies, about the realisation of a socially just transformation, and about building a political majority for this pathway.

This requires a European narrative about the future: about a Europe of competitive economies, of social security and a healthy environment. The European project of modernity will direct industrial change in a decarbonised world; invest in intelligent and resilient transport and energy infrastructure that transcends national borders; promote research and development for transformative technological innovations; develop rural areas; and strengthen educational systems and cultural programmes that make Europe a tangible reality. It will promote creativity, social skills and societal engagement, guarantee fair wages in all phases of life and affordable housing, protect ecosystems and biodiversity, and create islands of peace and leisure in Europe's big cities. That's what is on offer; nothing less.



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