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Beyond the 'greenlash': Building back a better European sustainability agenda

Europe's current wave of greenlash is threatening to unravel Europe's green deal. This chapter traces how the promising early momentum behind Ursula von der Leyen's signature agenda gave way to a perfect storm caused by a populist backlash against climate policies as well as deteriorating fiscal and geopolitical conditions. It argues that progressives must resist the temptation for abdication and instead reconstruct Europe's sustainability agenda as a new socio-ecological contract, centred on protection, sovereignty and broad-based wellbeing.

An aircraft rarely crashes because of one failure. It takes a chain of mistakes: technical; human; and particularly inauspicious conditions, such as an unforeseeable storm. Europe's green transition is now experiencing its own multi-layered breakdown. The backlash against climate action – the so-called 'greenlash' – is not a spontaneous revolt. It is the result of accumulated institutional missteps, communication failures, political misjudgements and a fertile environment for those eager to dismantle the European Green Deal.

Understanding this moment is essential if Europe is to recover its bearings and avoid a far more damaging crash: a return to external fossil dependency; shrinking competitiveness; and compromised democracy. European progressives must resist the temptation of abdication, and instead, lay the foundations for a new socio-ecological contract in Europe and elsewhere.

Autopsy of a policy crash

The most visible public expressions of greenlash include the *gilets jaunes* protests in France, resistance to green technologies (heat pumps, wind farms and the phase-out of thermal cars) or the large-scale farmers' protests across Europe. These movements share a rejection

of environmental regulation perceived as too costly or disruptive, combined with anxiety about the future and fear of socioeconomic relegation, as well as territorial inequality and rural-urban resentment. Meant to expose the links between inequality and climate change, the now-familiar contrast between billionaires 'allowed' by a broken system to trash the planet through luxury lifestyles and green investments, while ordinary people are asked to sacrifice, also fuelled a perception of double standards. The progressive forces promoting greater sustainability often underestimated the emotional impact of this narrative, which led to a rejection of the green agenda altogether. These images increasingly displaced the earlier imaginaries that gave birth to the Green Deal: the Fridays for Future mobilisations, the momentum of which was first interrupted by Covid-19 and later lost legitimacy in parts of mainstream opinion under negative media coverage and growing criminalisation of non-violent civil disobedience. The youth climate movement's decision to present opposition to the war in Gaza as integral to the climate struggle also alienated segments of the public, illustrating how the climate movement can unintentionally narrow its audience when it adopts positions that many perceive as unrelated or polarising.

Politically, the greenlash has taken the form of dilution, delay and rollback of key environmental legislation at both the EU and member state levels. Organised resistance crystallised around the Nature Restoration Law, which narrowly passed the European Parliament after months of intense debate. Since the 2024 European elections – which shifted the parliamentary majority to the right – pressure has steadily mounted to slow or water down Green Deal measures by delaying reduction targets, multiplying exemptions and stretching 'pragmatic' timelines. The Omnibus 'simplification' package is the most emblematic episode. Across sectors, environmental ambition has been quietly diluted: the EU sustainable finance taxonomy, the Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive and the Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive have all seen their scope or impact reduced. The ambition in nature protection, chemicals, agriculture, buildings and transport was also severely reduced. The EU Deforestation Regulation was delayed, the Green Claims Directive suspended and implementation of the Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM) softened. The shift in discourse and priorities is also visible inside the Commission. The 2026 Work Programme and the 2024 Political Guidelines still mention climate and environment, but their symbolic and strategic weight has clearly declined. 'Green' is no longer the backbone of the project; it has become one priority among many, subordinated to competitiveness, defence, migration management and regulatory 'simplification'. The Draghi report,[1] the EU Competitiveness Compass and the Letta report[2] accurately diagnose Europe's economic weaknesses and the urgency of reindustrialisation, highlighting the importance of innovation, investment and strategic autonomy. Yet they primarily treat green policy as an instrument of competitiveness, rather than as the structural condition for social development, sovereignty and long-term stability.

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1   Draghi, M. (2024) "The future of European competitiveness". European Commission.
2   Letta, E. (2024) "Much more than a market – speed, security, solidarity". European Commission, April.

Populist leaders and parties – supported at times by orchestrated media campaigns – deliberately frame the green transition as elitist, externally imposed and hostile to workers. Far-right and nationalist forces have capitalised on perceptions of unfairness, disruptiveness or irrationality among rural residents, older people and regions dependent on fossil fuels. Even in the absence of evidence, they have successfully linked rising living costs, sluggish growth or deindustrialisation to 'green red tape', marketing the rollback or dilution of environmental rules as a silver bullet. More deeply, they have inserted green policies into a broader culture war, presenting them as urban impositions against rural or industrial traditions, or even as 'woke' attacks on masculinity and heritage. The 2024 EU election manifesto of the Dutch Party for Freedom is emblematic, portraying climate policy as Brussels elites attacking everyday choices: eating meat, flying or driving petrol cars are cast as decisions that "belong to ordinary people, not Brussels", while EU climate rules allegedly leave Dutch families "out in the cold" as eurocrats stay warm on high salaries.

This narrative has not been confined to the far right. Fearing being outflanked in national and European elections, the European People's Party – once more balanced on climate and energy – has increasingly adopted similar frames and voting patterns, aligning with the far right in the European Parliament. Parts of liberal parties have joined the bandwagon, adding 'green overreach' to their familiar critique of market regulation.

Media and social media coverage reflected and amplified the greenlash by highlighting stories of individual hardship, energy poverty or local resistance, often exaggerating trade-offs or relaying misinformation. A 2024 investigation by fact-checking networks found that posts piggybacking on farmers' protests frequently spread false claims, including assertions that the EU was planning to force synthetic meat or insect-based food on citizens.[3]

From promising skies to a perfect storm

When Ursula von der Leyen pledged in July 2019 to launch a European Green Deal within her first 100 days, she surprised many observers in Brussels. In December 2019, she articulated a vision that responded to scientific warnings and voter pressure: reconciling the economy with the planet and reshaping production and consumption "to make it work for our people". The policy package promised not only a climate law enshrining climate neutrality by 2050, but also measures on biodiversity, pollution, innovation, public and private finance, a just transition, and trade. Environmental issues were placed at the centre of her programme.

At the end of 2018, the European Environment Agency had sounded the alarm, projecting that two thirds of the EU's environmental targets for 2020 would be missed.[4] Public concern was rising. The Eurobarometer ahead of the 2019 elections showed

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3   "Disinformation about farmers' protests keeps growing in February, fueling anti-EU sentiment". Monthly brief no. 33. EDMO, 15 March 2024.
4   European Environment Agency (2018) "Environmental indicator report 2018 – in support to the monitoring of the 7th Environment Action Programme". Publications Office of the European Union.

climate and environment as a top priority for citizens, just behind economic growth and on a par with migration. Many voters also recognised the EU's added value in environmental action, thanks to visible successes, such as tackling acid rain, cleaning coastal waters and improving waste management – issues that clearly require cross-border solutions and leverage over reluctant member states. In her 11 December 2019 speech, von der Leyen explicitly invoked these election results: "It is the people of Europe who have called us to take decisive action against climate change […] It is for them that we are presenting such an ambitious Green Deal for Europe".[5] Yet this Copernican turn also reflected the political conditions of her appointment. Progressive forces, scarred by their experience with the previous Commission, conditioned their support on a concrete programme with robust green and social elements.

Science, public opinion and electoral incentives appeared aligned. In the first two years of von der Leyen's mandate, the pace and volume of legislation were remarkable by Brussels standards. Several tailwinds helped. In 2019, EU growth averaged around 1.5%, public debt hovered around 78% of GDP and defence spending averaged just 1.3% of GDP, leaving more room for long-term investment. However, the economic and geopolitical context rapidly deteriorated, casting a shadow over the Green Deal. The initial years of legislative success coincided with a period of relatively ample fiscal space (2019 debt around 78% of GDP, defence spending at 1.3% of GDP). Since then, this space has drastically shrunk due to the pandemic, economic stagnation and the energy crisis. Debt ratios have climbed, and defence budgets are sharply approaching 2% of GDP. The geopolitical landscape also changed profoundly: with the invasion of Ukraine, the return of Donald Trump to power and the deepening authoritarianism in the other two superpowers (China and Russia), the stability of borders and norms can no longer be taken for granted. Climate and energy policies now sit at the heart of an ecological cold war between a 'green entente' and a petro-axis. Mass disinformation, turbocharged by digital technologies, became a central weapon, particularly dangerous for democracies, whose policy debates can be easily distorted. These campaigns are amplified by European parties, lobbies and trade associations eager to tilt the conversation to their advantage.

A fateful combination of technical glitches and political errors

A combination of structural flaws undermined the successful launch. The legal nature of the Green Deal was a key mistake: as a Commission strategy, it lacked formal prior approval from member states. The European Council merely 'took note' of it, allowing many capitals to later complain about insufficient consultation. This lack of co-ownership weakened implementation, enabling domestic policymakers to easily blame a 'top-down agenda' from Brussels, thereby fuelling Euroscepticism instead of confronting domestic trade-offs.

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5   European Commission (2019) "President von der Leyen in the EP on the European Green Deal". Document code: SPEECH/19/6751. European Parliament, 11 December.

This fragile legal foundation was coupled with a failure in communication. The Commission never convincingly answered fundamental public questions – between whom is this deal concluded? For whose benefit? – and shifted its focus to the post-Covid-19 recovery plan, NextGenerationEU. The under-resourced Climate Pact failed to secure the necessary societal participation, creating a democratic deficit, especially damaging given the Green Deal's profound implications for the cost of essential goods and services and SME competitiveness.

Furthermore, von der Leyen's decision to secure support by framing sustainability primarily as a driver of economic growth, the so-called 'win-win' approach, forgot the deep, unavoidable trade-offs between sectors, regions and generations that a genuine socioecological bargain required. While Europe's industrial future must be anchored in innovative, capital-intensive green sectors, structural constraints – such as the absence of a common energy policy and slow progress on renewables – already limit room for manoeuvre.

The weak social pillar and unilateralism

The social pillar of the Green Deal was also weak from the outset. The framing of the Green Deal effectively displaced the broader sustainable development goals (SDGs) narrative, which had a stronger social agenda. The Green Deal focused on a narrow vision of a 'just transition', centred on formal job losses in coal regions. The slogan "leaving no one behind" remained vague and modest compared to the idea that the transition should reduce extreme inequalities and correct the perception that burdens are unfairly shared. Debates surrounding the 'Fit for 55' package have highlighted the regressive potential of carbon pricing and certain regulations for low-income households, which spend a higher share of their income on energy-intensive goods and services. Divergent electricity mixes and heating systems across member states resulted in significantly unequal impacts. The promised Social Climate Fund arrived late, was limited in scale and fell short of establishing a robust automatic system to recycle carbon revenues to those most affected. In parallel, the progress of the European Pillar of Social Rights was extremely disappointing, reinforcing the impression of a lopsided agenda.

Instead of grounding EU climate and energy policy in the SDG framework, which could have framed the Green Deal as the implementation of a universally agreed agenda, the EU opted for a strongly unilateral approach. Post-Paris disillusionment played a role. The Trump administration's withdrawal from the Paris Agreement and the faltering of multilateralism made unilateral regulatory power – through the single market – appear more effective. The EU had already used this strategy with REACH and vehicle standards, exporting its norms globally. The Green Deal was conceived in that tradition, as symbolised by the decision to develop a CBAM, a topic that was taboo just a few years before. It was designed with limited consultation of the countries most affected, and early concerns about fairness, capacity and adjustment costs were largely dismissed. This lack of genuine engagement has weakened Europe's diplomatic standing at a time when it most needs partners.

The way forward:
Reclaiming Europe's sustainability agenda

Faced with this setback, the temptation for political abdication is high – especially for progressives. That would be a historic mistake.

Decarbonisation is not a cultural fad or 'woke' agenda; it is a pragmatic and strategic approach to security and power for Europe. Fossil dependence carries mounting fiscal and strategic costs, from volatile import bills to exposure to coercion by petrostates. Energy sovereignty, industrial strength, food security and technological leadership all hinge on reducing fossil fuel use and scaling domestic low-carbon capacity. The war in Ukraine exposed the price of complacency, while evolving US policies are only adding to the pressure. Europe must shift the narrative: a completed green transition is not a luxury, but the foundation of long-term security, competitiveness and social stability.

This requires a strategic reframing of Europe's Green Deal story, away from guilt and technocracy, towards protection, sovereignty and broad-based wellbeing. The transition should be narrated as a pathway to safer, richer lives defined by dignity, security and abundance, with sufficiency framed as 'positive peace' and mutual care rather than sacrifice. This, in turn, depends on strong alliances with social partners and local actors and on concrete social preconditions: higher wages; shifting taxation from labour to pollution and wealth; rebuilding care systems; and advancing a richer concept of sustainable prosperity that captures social, ecological, institutional and security dimensions beyond GDP alone.

Greenlash politics rests on a false choice between the environment and prosperity. Parts of the centre have absorbed this framing, but there is no durable growth on a collapsing ecological base. Environmental sustainability is not anti-growth and is perfectly compatible with vibrant economic activity that internalises planetary limits to avoid self-destruction. The core question is not whether Europe can 'afford' transition, but whether it can afford to lock-in a fossil-centred economic system that leaves households, firms and regions exposed; entrenches strategic dependence; and fails to meet demands for sustainability and fairness.

Despite the polarisation, citizens continue to rank planetary risks among their main concerns. Yet the 'deal' framing reinforces a sense of trade-off between social progress and sustainability and was never backed by a felt contract. A renewed sustainable prosperity agenda must be co-created with citizens and economic actors, drawing on democratic innovations, the conference on the future of Europe and ongoing participatory processes for future generations. This deliberation should be paired with a technical effort to complement GDP with a concise dashboard of indicators that capture 21st century European progress across social, environmental, institutional, peace and security dimensions.

To move from rhetoric to practice, the EU's next budget must be aligned with this agenda. Resources within the EU budget and external instruments need to be clearly earmarked and shielded from erosion, with funding directed not only to infrastructure but also to care systems, minimum income schemes, public services and rural revitalisation,

so that the transition leads to genuinely fair outcomes, based on a balance between give and take, for all households, sectors, regions and generations in Europe.[6] New vehicles, such as a pan-European people's sovereign fund channelling savings into social and green investments, should be explored.

Trust also depends on binding political accountability: a clear communication effort tied to milestones for sustainable prosperity and a mandatory mid-term stocktake of all corresponding European key policies. Without such mechanisms, everyone can support the principle of sustainable prosperity while no one owns its implementation. Within this agenda, environmental sustainability must be felt as an everyday material improvement. Policies should deliver near-term, place-based co-benefits: lower household bills through building renovation; local jobs; cleaner air; community energy and shared-ownership models; and long-term benefits such as reduced health burdens, fewer disasters and lower fossil import dependence.

Clean industrialisation presents a great opportunity to integrate the green and social agendas: it should evolve toward an Industry 5.0 approach that is human-centred, resilient and sustainable, backed by a renewed rural policy that treats vibrant rural regions as core to Europe's sustainable prosperity. Innovative instruments, including green debt swaps enabling agroecological transitions while restructuring farm debts, deserve testing in Europe and beyond. Raising environmental ambition is compatible with institutional reform. Simplification should mean accelerating delivery and improving legal quality, not quietly weakening standards. Large packages warrant rigorous impact assessment and transparent debate, rather than serving as vehicles for deregulation.

Internationally, as post-2030 debates unfold, progressives need to work with partners globally on a framework that reinforces the indivisibility of human development, while recognising that geopolitics cannot be ignored. Earlier retreats from the SDG narrative were a mistake: for all its flaws, it sought to transcend zero-sum thinking between economic, social, environmental and institutional goals. In an era of intensifying conflict between ecomodernisers and petrostates and prolonged struggles over critical resources, only a genuinely global green transition that fairly shares benefits and burdens can deliver greater security, grounded in positive peace, shared prosperity and justice.

The backlash is real, and it must be taken seriously. But retreat would be far more dangerous. In the current phase of the greenlash, European progressives bear a heavy responsibility: prevent further dismantling of the environmental acquis while preparing the ground for a renewed acceleration when the Overton window reopens. This will be difficult in a landscape shaped by disinformation and demagoguery. But abandoning the green agenda would be far worse. It would betray those whose lives and livelihoods are already affected by climate destabilisation and environmental degradation, and it would deprive Europeans of sustainable prosperity and positive peace for decades to come.

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6   Groupe d'études géopolitiques (2023) "Après la Cop 27: géopolitique du Pacte vert". Green, 3.