

Paris climate conference: why the EU should redouble its efforts to reach full decarbonisation

The 2015 United Nations Climate Change Conference will be held in Paris from 30 November to 11 December. Drawing on research in a recent edited volume, [Sebastian Oberthür](#) and [Claire Dupont](#) assess the EU's progress in reducing emissions in the lead up to the conference. They write that while the EU remains the world leader in efforts to tackle climate change, there are still some substantial challenges that will need to be overcome before the EU can reach full decarbonisation.



As the world approaches the [Paris climate conference](#), where it is expected to adopt a new global climate agreement, the European Union is striving to maintain its traditional leadership role on climate change. This leadership seemed to hit a high point in October 2009, when the European Council of Heads of State and Government agreed to reduce greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions by 80-95 per cent by 2050, compared to 1990 levels. No country outside the EU had made such a political commitment.



On 18 September 2015, EU environment ministers reconfirmed this objective and advocated a global long-term vision of 'climate neutrality' in the second half of this century. Nothing less than the 'decarbonisation' of the EU is at stake. Is the EU leading by example to phase-out fossil-fuel use? Are internal policies equipped to achieve the mammoth task of decarbonisation? Are external energy relations prepared for the deep transition that is unfolding?

These questions are examined in our recent edited volume, [Decarbonization in the EU: internal policies and external strategies](#). Decarbonisation means transforming our infrastructure, energy, transport, agriculture and industrial sectors away from fossil fuels. This grand challenge is amplified by the contexts of economic and financial crises in Europe from 2008 onwards; current political tensions with Russia; and changing geopolitics in light of the rise of 'emerging powers' such as China, India, and Brazil. The response should be a long-term, strategic approach to integrate the goal of decarbonisation into day-to-day policymaking, both for internal policy development and external energy relations – something the EU still has to achieve more fully.



Assessing EU climate and energy policy

Decarbonisation requires continuous efforts guided by and tuned toward the long-term goal. The EU has long been the 'best in class' among the major economies on climate policy. It is likely to overachieve its target of reducing greenhouse gas emissions by 20 per cent by 2020 (from 1990 levels). With its target of reducing emissions by at least 40 per cent by 2030, the EU remains the most ambitious player internationally on climate change. Nevertheless, these efforts fail to live up to the decarbonisation benchmark that requires steeper reductions. The EU appears to have gotten stuck in a cycle of 'catch-up governance': time and again too little action is taken too late so that improvements on past policies never quite catch up with what is required to achieve decarbonisation.

The various policy sectors (power production and grid infrastructure, industry, transport, buildings) require approaches tailored to their specific opportunities, incentive structures and barriers. Mature technologies for carbon-free power production, energy-efficient consumption and zero-energy buildings do exist, but steep technological development is required in the transport and industry sectors. The latter faces particular challenges in the establishment of innovative and expensive breakthrough technologies in a competitive international environment.

Decarbonisation requires policies to address the sector-specific key challenges. These include, for example, establishing sufficient ambition and removing non-market barriers (e.g. buildings); identifying and commercialising breakthrough technologies (industry); supporting technological innovation paired with infrastructural change and adaptation of concepts and planning of mobility (transport); and advancing infrastructure and storage (power). In several areas of policy-making, this also requires juggling with the old theme of the division of competences across the multiple levels of EU governance.

The EU's emissions trading scheme (ETS), while providing a key plank in the EU's governance framework for climate and energy, is not a silver bullet by itself. Not only are its price signals insufficient to address barriers in the non-ETS sectors (buildings and transport), but complementary action is also required in the core ETS sectors: Rolling out new breakthrough technologies in industry and addressing the key challenges of grid infrastructure in the power sector require targeted policy action in addition to the ETS.

Transforming external energy relations

In comparison, the decarbonisation agenda has even further to go with regard to the EU's external energy relations. The geopolitics of the EU's decarbonisation strategy have only begun to be explored and are hardly understood, even though EU decarbonisation will have a profound and in some cases dramatic impact on the EU's relations with partner countries, including Russia, the Caspian Sea region and Norway.

EU external energy relations are more often focused on securing supplies of fossil fuel energy sources in the short and medium-term, with little regard to the longer-term decarbonisation goal. In some cases, the energy security agenda leads to blinkered diplomacy. Such is the case with relations with the Caspian region, where serious human rights abuses and the EU's own climate change objectives are overruled by desires to access supplies of natural gas.

Even where some thinking on the effects of decarbonisation has been initiated, it has so far had rather limited impact on external relations on the ground. In many cases the possible and likely effects on external relations remain to be explored systematically to feed into the development of an appropriate long-term external strategy.

Future research

The decarbonisation goal also raises a rich agenda for future research. What exactly are the challenges and opportunities arising from decarbonisation for EU external relations? How can decarbonisation be pursued effectively within the EU's multilevel governance framework? What policy mixes and tools have the best prospects in different economic and societal sectors and what are their likely external effects? How are decarbonisation policies going to affect those most vulnerable in society and what is their scope for increased equality and sustainability? How does long-term policymaking on decarbonisation interact with short-term cycles of democratic governance? These are but a few questions of a research agenda on decarbonisation in the EU.

Overall, consistent and sustained political commitment to decarbonisation is crucial for its achievement across internal policies and external relations. Climate change is a complex challenge that requires long-term, cross-sectoral and cross-border action. If Paris succeeds in sending a strong signal, the window of opportunity may widen for the next attempt to catch up on requirements to achieve decarbonisation in the EU and to integrate fully the implications in external policymaking.

For a longer discussion of this topic, see the authors' recent edited volume [Decarbonization in the EU: internal policies and external strategies](#) (2015, Palgrave Macmillan)

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About the authors

Sebastian Oberthür – *Vrije Universiteit Brussel (VUB)*

[Sebastian Oberthür](#) is Professor for Environment and Sustainable Development at the Institute for European Studies at the Vrije Universiteit Brussel.



Claire Dupont – *Vrije Universiteit Brussel (VUB)*

[Claire Dupont](#) is a post-doctoral researcher at the Institute for European Studies and the Political Science department of the Vrije Universiteit Brussel.



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