

## CLIMATE PROGRESS IN THE EU AND THE WORLD



Stephen Minas

# CLIMATE PROGRESS IN THE EU AND THE WORLD

Charting a just and social transition  
in a volatile age



**FEPS**  
Primer Series



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# Contents

<b>Foreword</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>Executive summary</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>1 Introduction</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>PART A: CONFRONTING THE CLIMATE CRISIS</b>	<b>21</b>
<b>2 Why climate change matters</b>	<b>21</b>
Climate science	21
Climate change and the economy	25
A historical overview of climate politics and diplomacy	27
<b>3 Key issues in climate politics</b>	<b>34</b>
Denial, delay and doomism	34
Climate justice(s)	38
Regulation, markets and growth	47
Challenges of multilevel governance	58
The geopolitics of transition	60
Case study: Russia's war on Ukraine and energy and climate geopolitics	69
Geoengineering	75
<b>4 The international community's climate goals</b>	<b>79</b>
International climate law in context	80
UN Climate Convention	82
Kyoto Protocol	85
Paris Agreement	87
The mitigation goal	89
The adaptation goal	91
Finance flows and support	91

Social and human rights elements	92
Nationally determined contributions	94
Progressive implementation of international goals	95
<b>PART B: POLICIES FOR CLIMATE PROGRESS</b>	<b>97</b>
<b>5 EU climate law and policy</b>	<b>97</b>
Climate law and policy in the EU	97
Making the economy climate-friendly	102
Shifting finance flows	107
Transitioning to clean energy	110
Protecting communities from climate impacts and response measures	116
Making the climate transition inclusive	121
Greening trade and investment	124
Building strategic autonomy	129
Practising international solidarity	138
<b>6 Towards a progressive and European climate transition</b>	<b>142</b>
Progressive principles for strengthening climate policy	142
<b>ANNEX</b>	<b>153</b>
Key documents	153
Key institutional actors	155
Some key European figures in climate policy	157
Climate change and the EU timeline	160
Acronyms	165
<b>Bibliography</b>	<b>167</b>
<b>Reviews</b>	<b>182</b>
<b>About the Author</b>	<b>185</b>
Acknowledgments	186

# Foreword

**“Climate change is not a distant threat, it’s a clear and present danger. The European Union has a moral obligation to lead the fight against climate change and protect our planet for future generations.”**

Frans Timmermans

It is hard to find a topic in which politics and activism have influenced so much. This interplay between politics and activism is not a mere coincidence; it is the very essence of a thriving democracy. It is the embodiment of the people’s power to hold leaders accountable and demand a sustainable, equitable, and habitable world for all.

It is also hard to find a policy area that has developed more than climate action over the recent past. The EU has a long track record of work on the decarbonization of the economy - a priority that has shaped EU spending for over two decades now - but it is indeed with the launch of the EU Green Deal that substantial progress has been attained in the fight against climate change and climate change deniers.

For these two reasons, the connection with democracy and activism and the fast-paced advancement made in EU politics, a FEPS Primer on climate policy is timely and spot-on.

Progressive politics have played a major role in shaping EU climate policy, and social democrats all around Europe are being called upon to lead efforts in addressing the critical stage of the climate crisis whilst adapting welfare and employment policy to ensure justice in the transition. This primer encapsulates the essence, rationale and construct of EU climate law and policy, and outlines progressive principles that can help achieve the necessary changes to advance climate progress in the EU and globally. Given that climate policy is influenced by science, economics, and international affairs, the primer provides an overview of key developments in these areas as they relate to the political agenda on climate change.

Importantly, the primer summarizes key debates in climate politics worldwide, as these debates set the context for policy decisions in specific jurisdictions, such as the EU and its Member States.

Stephen Minas is well placed to take us on this journey across the development of EU climate law as he's not only a top expert on EU climate action but an authority in terms of global climate action and can put the European path towards climate justice in perspective vis-à-vis climate policy developments in other parts of the globe and crucially, he can report on the EU role in shaping the multilateral agenda for environmental protection. As an academic at Peking University and King's College London, Stephen Minas assures the highest scientific standards, but what makes him extraordinarily fit to illustrate the making of climate policy is also his drive for the cause and the connection with policy-making, for instance thanks to participation in the IUCN World Commission on Environmental Law. Besides that, he has also been a very active member of the FEPS Young Academics Network and part of the steering group of the UNited for Climate Justice<sup>1</sup> policy proposals.

As we embark on this exploration of EU climate action, it is therefore necessary to also contemplate the ability of progressive politics to channel the requests of the climate movement into the highest level of EU policy-making.

Specifically, the Executive Commission's former Executive Vice President Frans Timmermans, in charge of the EU Green Deal, has left an enormous legacy: an unprecedented body of laws meant to address the climate crisis, protect biodiversity, steer a just transition and move towards renewable energy.

One of the politically relevant results of his action at the Commission has been the ability to mainstream climate and avoid addressing climate targets in a silo. The European Green Deal has in fact addressed EU social and cohesion matters, thanks to the Just Transition Fund and the Social Climate Fund; it has updated the economic framework including sustainability as a pivotal objective of EU eco-

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1 <https://fepeurope.eu/publication/692-united-for-climate-justice-declaration-with-guiding-proposals-for-progressive-climate-action/>



conomic governance as visible in the Annual Sustainable Growth Survey and in the earmarked funds for climate within the Recovery and Resilience Facility; it has relaunched green industrial policy and climate diplomacy for a just approach to raw materials; it has elevated housing policy to an EU matter thanks to the Renovation Wave. To put it in the words of Timmermans: *“the European Green Deal is not just an environmental agenda, it’s an economic, social, and geopolitical agenda. It’s about creating a sustainable, fair, and prosperous future for all Europeans.”*

Detractors and some uncompromising environmentalists complain that Europe has done too little and this is probably true. EU Member States could have done more or could have started sooner to revert the worrisome trend of pollution and nature’s destruction. Someone less factional or more of a connoisseur of EU policy-making would however point out that, in a context in which EU institutions are governed by a political coalition led by conservative forces that have no shame in running a campaign to vote against nature restoration laws and some Member States are run by right-wing extremists that even flirt with climate change denial, achieving what Frans Timmermans have attained was a masterpiece of political strong will and policy design.

The European Green Deal still has to deliver and attain its full potential, but it has set already a course of action that signals discontinuity with the past and witnesses the potential of progressive forces in shaping the future and protecting our planet and the people living in it.

Dr David Rinaldi  
FEPS Director of Studies and Policy

# Executive summary

## Why climate change matters

As the IPCC has reported, there can be no doubt that human activities are causing global warming. The global surface temperature has already increased by 1.1°C.

Anthropogenic climate change is already impacting every region of the globe and affecting vulnerable people more severely than others.

Climate change is a whole-of-economy problem. To tackle it, we need transformational change across economic sectors. Economic responses to climate change must address ‘negative externalities’ but also avoid regressive and inequitable outcomes.

International climate governance has multiple action channels but is centred on the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) regime and most notably the 2015 Paris Agreement, which sets ambitious goals and has nearly

universal adoption. However, there is still a substantial gap between what the Paris goals require and aggregate implementation. Progressives must work through multilateral, bilateral and other channels to strengthen the climate transition.

## Key issues in climate politics

While almost everyone agrees that managing climate change should be a top priority, complete consensus has not been achieved on climate policy either within the EU or internationally.

While the consolidation of scientific consensus has made outright climate denial untenable in mainstream politics, opponents of climate action continue to deploy other strategies, ranging from ‘techno-optimism’ to ‘doomism’. Progressives must be alert to these techniques.

While ‘climate justice’ concerns are at the centre of climate politics, many different approaches are possible. Alongside other important aspects of justice, such as proper procedure, progressives must always place a concern for the disadvantaged at the centre of climate policy.

Climate justice has intra-state, inter-state and inter-generation-

al strands. Policymakers must address all of them.

As we go through the climate transition it is imperative to ensure greater respect for human rights and to strengthen democracy at multiple levels, both within the EU and internationally.

Climate regulation is a response to greenhouse gas emissions as a major instance of market failure. Various regulatory mechanisms – including market-based mechanisms such as emissions trading – have been introduced to correct this failure. Such market approaches are essential but they must be designed and implemented in such a way that they do not burden already disadvantaged citizens.

Notions of ‘de-growth’ are inconsistent with the improvement of economic wellbeing. They are also potentially regressive and are probably impossible to implement in a democracy. Instead, progressives should push for the use of economic indicators that better capture social wellbeing, sustainable development and the need to stay within planetary boundaries.

The role of the private sector in the climate transition is con-

tested. Progressives should reject the claim that climate action should be confined to state planning, but they should also lay down regulations and incentives for private actors to contribute to climate action, and channel funding towards climate solutions and away from harmful activities.

Climate policy and geopolitical developments are interdependent. First, climate change is a global security threat multiplier. Second, climate change affects intra- and international competition for commodities and territory. Third, aspects of the response to climate change, such as electrification and digitalisation, bring their own security challenges. Fourth, while responding to climate change will leave every state better off, compared with inaction, climate action creates relative winners and losers. The EU has much to gain from the climate transition in terms of energy security and trade balances. However, security challenges from states that see themselves as ‘losers’ will need to be managed.

Russia’s invasion of Ukraine exemplifies the relationship between geopolitics and climate

policy. Within the EU, it demonstrates the risks of energy reliance on potentially hostile third states and the crucial role in energy security of domestic renewables and storage.

Because global aggregate climate mitigation is still inadequate, ‘geoengineering’ proposals, research and experimentation are growing in prominence. International governance of these activities is fragmented and uncertain.

### **The international community’s climate goals**

The EU has been a major player in the negotiation of international climate law. In turn, international climate objectives are the starting point for the development of EU climate law and policy.

While the UNFCCC process has had both successes and failures, overall it has fallen short of tackling climate change, resulting in even more ambitious targets and more compressed timelines.

International climate law is the product of broader international currents, especially when it comes to the distribution of resources and efforts between

developed and developing countries.

International climate law is being implemented primarily at the domestic level, with typically weak enforcement mechanisms at the international level.

Following the adoption of the 1992 UN Climate Convention and the 1997 Kyoto Protocol, the 2015 Paris Agreement created a universal framework for climate action in all countries, although there are important differences between the commitments of developed and developing Parties. The Paris Agreement sets mitigation, adaptation and finance objectives.

The progressive commitment to multilateralism and international solidarity requires that we work towards the Paris goals and strengthen support for poorer countries, both because it is just and as a key means of unlocking greater ambition.

### **EU climate law and policy**

The EU’s competences for regulating climate change derive from EU treaty law. Both the EU and its Member States have roles in climate policymaking. EU climate policy and law result from negotiations among the EU