

“Our most pressing challenge is keeping our planet healthy. This is the greatest responsibility and opportunity of our times. I want Europe to become the first climate-neutral continent in the world by 2050.” – this is how Commission President Ursula von der Leyen outlined her vision for the EU in her [maiden speech](#) delivered one year ago, in the summer of 2019. She went on to propose a “Green Deal for Europe”, which is a set of policy initiatives for decarbonization and sustainable economic development.

After a long period of inattention, the climate crisis had been finally picked up at the highest level of political leadership with determination.

It is beyond any doubt that this was a response to the wave of massive protests held in 2019 owing to the admirable dedication to the issue by young activists. The same year, a “[green wave](#)” swept through the European Parliament elections, with environmentalists registering their strongest-ever showing on this occasion is yet another telling sign that a tipping point had been finally reached regarding the climate crisis.

However, these were not the only significant mass mobilizations touching on the issue of a green transition in Europe. The 2018-19 “[Yellow Vest](#)” protests, prompted by a proposed carbon tax in France that critics argued was unaffordable for low-income people, brought into sharp relief the crucial importance of taking the socio-economic impacts of clean energy seriously. **The backlash catalyzed discussions in the EU about how to achieve a just transition to a sustainable future.**

This was also picked up by the Commission. In the words of von der Leyen: “[...] what is good for our planet must also be good for our people and our regions. Of course I know about the importance of cohesion funds. But we need more. We need a just transition for all.”

Accordingly, a Just Transition Fund was devised as part of the European Green Deal with the [stated aim](#) “to alleviate the socio-economic impacts of the green transition in the regions most affected, by for example supporting the re-skilling of workers, helping SMEs to create new economic opportunities, and overall diversifying economic activity, investing in the future of the most affected regions.” These are unevenly distributed across the EU, with the most affected regions clustering in East-Central Europe.

In December 2019, the European Council approved the European Green Deal plan, even though Poland decided to opt-out from the policy. Subsequently, on 15 January 2020, the

majority of MEPs in the European Parliament [supported](#) the deal too, calling for even higher ambition on some crucial points.

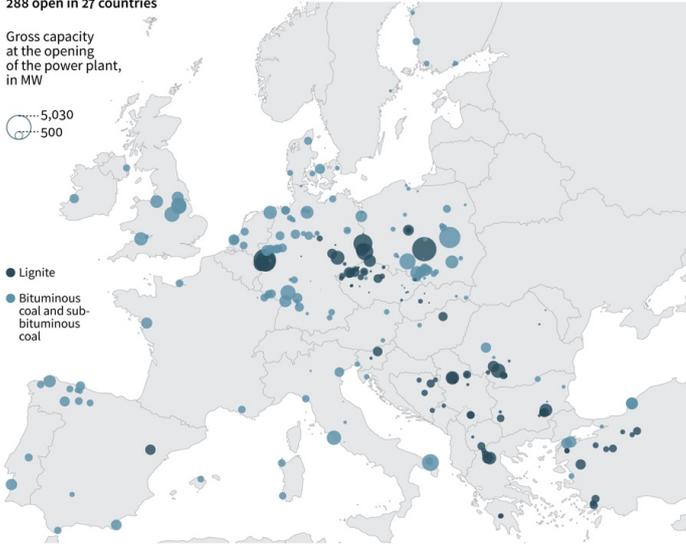
Coal-fired power plants in Europe

288 open in 27 countries

Gross capacity
at the opening
of the power plant,
in MW

5,030
500

● Lignite
● Bituminous
coal and sub-
bituminous
coal



Source: Europe Beyond Coal

Data as of June 18, 2019

© AFP

Source: [Only eight EU countries to phase out coal by 2030](#)

Enter COVID-19

By that point in time, the novel coronavirus had been spreading in the European region [undetected](#). In mid-March, Europe would be declared the [epicentre](#) of a global pandemic, falling into a devastating public health crisis compounded by a deep economic crisis. The Eurozone economy shrank at a record pace, with GDP falling by -3.8% in the first quarter of 2020 – lower than the lowest point of the great recession a decade beforehand. The fallout from the crisis resuscitated with a vengeance old conflicts between member states regarding the appropriate forms and amount of burden-sharing. Moreover, as national governments and EU officials scrambled to provide aid to ailing sectors, the question became whether the short-term recovery efforts would undermine the long-term project of green transition. Would the Green Deal also succumb to COVID-19?

Looking at political attitudes across space and time, he found that new generations of voters raised in societies where economic and physical security was widespread tended to become more interested in pursuing “higher-order” goals

At the intersection of the two crises two competing narratives emerged. On the one hand, it was argued that the adverse economic consequences of COVID-19 posed an immediate threat to people's lives and livelihoods and that therefore their alleviation should be prioritized. Indeed, the Commission [delayed](#) a number of Green Deal initiatives because they were considered “less essential.” The Commission also refrained from attaching “green strings” to member states' gigantic aid programs (even though Frans Timmermans, Executive Vice President of the European Commission for the European Green Deal, encouraged governments to do so).

Additionally, the COVID-19 crisis amplified already sceptical voices from East-Central Europe that had been less than enthusiastic of the Green Deal beforehand and who were now arguing that under current conditions the Green Deal was untenable and that it should be postponed. The Czech premier, Andrej Babiš, [stated](#) that “Europe should forget about the Green Deal now and focus on the coronavirus instead.” Polish Deputy Minister of State Assets Janusz Kowalski, [said](#) that “[t]he results of fighting coronavirus will be painful. It is obvious that countries will be looking for extra money to help their business and citizens.”

The Hungarian Minister for Agriculture [echoed](#) these assessments: “In the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, [...] it is clear that the Commission should also have postponed the publishing of the proposals that form part of the Green Deal.”

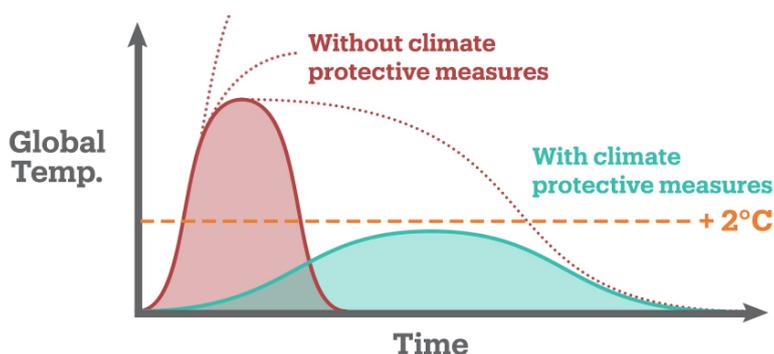
Ronald [Inglehart's](#) theory of post-materialism can help shed light on this way of thinking. Looking at political attitudes across space and time, he found that new generations of voters raised in societies where economic and physical security was widespread tended to become more interested in pursuing “higher-order” goals, such as autonomy and self-expression, including, according to him, protection of the environment. While Inglehart spoke about generational change, his theory pertains more generally to how people weigh value priorities: i.e. material concerns come first and tend to crowd out “post-material” ones. Viewed in this light, the prioritization of economic recovery over green transition makes perfect sense.

Yet, a second narrative linking the climate crisis and the COVID-19 crisis has sought to go beyond this stark dichotomy. According to this view, **the goal of rescuing the economy complements rather than competes with the goal of rescuing the environment.** Hence, the Commission has launched plans for a '[green recovery](#)', and Von der Leyen has characteristically [stated](#) that “the Green Deal will be the “motor” of the revival of the European economy.

“As we now plan to slowly go back to work and to invest billions of euros to restart our economy, we should avoid falling back in old polluting habits. Instead, we should bounce back better from this pandemic. **We can make our society and our planet healthier** [...]” – she has [said](#).

Note the clever framing of the issue in terms of “health.” This is in line with the established environmental discourse which has long used the conceptual metaphor of HEALTH/ILLNESS to make sense of environmental degradation and climate change. But in the context of a global pandemic, this metaphor has taken on a deeper meaning, given that the audience has just witnessed first-hand the destruction of a public health crisis.

This brings the issue of climate change closer to the everyday experience of people, directing attention to the parallels between the climate and COVID-19. For example, it reinforces a sense of solidarity, i.e. that “we are all in this together”, and social justice, i.e. that such crises impact people differently, and we should help those most in need.



Source: [David J. Hayes: Flatten the \(Climate\) Curve](#) NYU School of Law

This framing can also be helpful in order to sustain public support for policies tackling the climate crisis, which otherwise constitutes a “[policy problem from hell](#)” because most people consider it a distant problem. In particular, it seems that the COVID-19 crisis has provided a

mental model of thinking about the climate crisis that was not accessible before, i.e. in terms of “flattening the (climate) curve.”

Conclusion

The COVID-19 crisis could have pulled the rug from under the EU Green Deal by presenting the EU policy-makers with more pressing policy priorities. This, however, did not happen. Even if the Green Deal is a long-term strategy, and it has been framed as such by the President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen, there is an undeniable sense of urgency that the EU institutions attribute to it; the COVID-19 crisis provided new justifications and ways to make sense of and pursue it. And while many of the instruments that will deliver the Green Deal are still hanging to the 2021-2027 MFF negotiations, it has become evident by now that the EU is not willing to put the greening of Europe's economy on hold.

Photo credits Flickr CC: [European Parliament](#)