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What next for the green transition? The EU's challenge to sustain its common approach amid rising internal challenges

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What next for the green transition?

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Abstract

At the start of this decade, the EU positioned itself as a global leader in the green transition, announcing the European Green Deal in 2019. At the centre of the Deal was the principle of a Just Transition, where no member state or region would be left behind as the EU transitions towards a greener future. However, as we enter the halfway mark of this decade, the EU's faces challenges in delivering this ambitious and just deal among increasingly complex internal challenges, exacerbated by the unpredictable geopolitical landscape.

This thesis will argue that that the success of the Green Deal is inseparable from the strength of EU cohesion and the Just Transition. I will argue that a diluted Green Deal risks exacerbating the very regional disparities that the EU's Just Transition and Cohesion policy aims to address. I argue that the EU stands at a critical juncture as it reviews its Cohesion policy and highlight that Cohesion and Just Transition Funds can, and must, be leveraged more strategically to deliver a truly fair and unified Just Transition.

Although the European Green Deal was established to usher in a transformative change to Europe, internal pressures have repeatedly undermined its ambitions and created division within the bloc- a dynamic this thesis will examine. Industrial lobbying has played a central role in this, including powerful lobbies in the agricultural, fossil fuel and car manufacturing industries. These industries have been chosen due to their economic importance to the EU, their high emissions profiles, and their strong influence over EU policymaking. Between them, these industries exemplify the tension between regional economic disparities and environmental ambition.

Chapter one explores how targeted financial instruments, such as the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), the Cohesion Fund, and the Just Transition Fund, can fill gaps left by the EU's Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) and help sustain a common EU approach, particularly by supporting sustainable agriculture in more vulnerable regions. Chapter two and Chapter three will focus on the role of fossil fuel and car manufacturing lobbies in diluting the Green Deal's ambitions. I will argue that

without stronger regulation, robust safeguards and targeted interventions, powerful industry lobbies will continue to undermine the EU Green Deal.

Introduction

The problem

2024 was the hottest year on record.[1] Recent data shows that the planet surpassed the 1.5°C warming threshold for the first time, despite previous diplomatic efforts to avoid this from happening.[2] The data highlights the dangerous trajectory of global temperatures, with UN Secretary-General António Guterres stating that the series of record temperatures are signs of "climate breakdown."[3]

According to the European Environment Agency, Europe has suffered the first-hand effects of climate change, exposing deep regional and socio-economic inequalities.[4] In their 2024 report, they found that Southern Europe is particularly at risk with the growing impacts of heat and droughts on agricultural production.[5] They found that regional and local economies, highly dependent on tourism, agriculture and fisheries, are particularly vulnerable to climatic changes.[6] They also found that EU regions with high levels of unemployment, poverty and ageing populations had a lower capacity to adapt to the changes brought about by climate change, with such regions being concentrated in Central and Eastern Europe.[7]

From 2021-2023, Spain lost 51,000 jobs in agriculture, with water shortages cutting the production of certain foods by as much as 50%.[8] In 2024, Greece experienced devastating wildfires, ravaging over 100,000 acres of land due to record high temperatures.[9] The fires affected agricultural areas such as the Thessaly plain, known as the breadbasket of Greece, and led to a 20% loss to the nation's crop yield.[10] In 2024, Portugal experienced its worst ever wildfires, with over 135,000 hectares of land being

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[1] 'World's Hottest Year: 2024 First to Pass 1.5C Warming Limit', BBC News, 10 January 2025, https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cd7575x8yq5o.
[2] 'World's Hottest Year'.
[3] 'World's Hottest Year'.
[4] 'European Climate Risk Assessment', 10 March 2024, https://www.eea.europa.eu/en/analysis/publications/european-climate-risk-assessment.
[5] Ibid.
[6] Ibid.
[7] Ibid.
[8] 'Spain Loses 51,000 Jobs in Agriculture in Two Years Due to the Drought', accessed 20 March 2025, https://www.lavanguardia.com/mediterranean/20241223/10233884/spain-loses-job-agriculture-drought-economy-water-food-cereal-fruit-olive-price.html?
[9] Lucy Perrin | Claudia Rowan | Qin Xie, 'Greece Wildfires 2024: Is It Safe to Travel or Should I Cancel My Holiday?', 14 August 2024, https://www.thetimes.com/travel/advice/is-it-safe-to-travel-to-greece-rhodes-corfu-kos-crete-zante-flrxcmxj2.
[10] Ibid.

destroyed by fire in just a few days.[11] Furthermore, Romania and Bulgaria have experienced more severe flooding in recent years, with damages to infrastructure and housing estimated at a cost of €2 billion.[12] These examples show how climate change can exacerbate existing socioeconomic frailties, with these countries already grappling with falling incomes, declining populations and sluggish growth. Without action, these disproportionate climate impacts threaten to widen regional disparities.

Recent reports show that the EU's poorer regions, especially in Southern and Eastern Europe, are less equipped to invest in climate adaptation and mitigation technologies.[13] A recent European Investment Bank report found that while wealthier Member States such as Denmark and Germany invest over 2% of their GDP in green infrastructure, whereas countries such as Greece and Bulgaria only invest 0.5%.[14] 70% of citizens in Germany and Sweden believe that their government is supporting green innovation, whereas only 38% of Romanians and 42% of Bulgarians believe the same.[15]

I will argue in this thesis that this gap in green investment risks becoming a self-perpetuating cycle where the very regions suffering the worst effects of climate change are the most unable to boost their resilience to it.

Purpose of the study

The purpose of the study is to analyse the EU's cohesion and resilience in the face of growing internal challenges surrounding the Green Deal. It will interrogate whether the Green Deal can truly deliver a Just Transition among the growing internal challenges of industry lobbying – with a focus on the farming lobby, the fossil fuel lobby and the car manufacturing lobby. The thesis will critically assess the role of critical EU interventions such as its cohesion policy, which will be argued as a foundational pillar for driving forward the ambitions of the Green Deal and allow the EU to maintain ambition.

The study will delve into mounting concerns that the Green Deal's original focus on the Just Transition is being eroded by political pressure, backsliding and unequal capacity and ambition from Member States across the EU. Through an analysis of the recent activity and interrogation of the literature, the thesis will highlight that cohesion is not just a normative value, but an integral part of the EU realising its ambitions to transition to a sustainable future.

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[11] 'Beset by Wildfires, Portugal Gets Help from Spain, Morocco | Reuters', accessed 31 May 2025, https://www.reuters.com/business/environment/beset-by-wildfires-portugal-gets-help-spain-morocco-2024-09-18/.
[12] 'European Commission | Climate Action', accessed 31 March 2025, https://climate.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2023-10/.
[13] 'EIB Investment Report 2022-2023: Europe Must Take Action Now to Address Structural Challenges', European Investment Bank, accessed 31 May 2025, https://www.eib.org/en/press/all/2023-078-eib-investment-report-2022-2023-europe-must-take-action-now-to-address-structural-challenges.
[14] Ibid.
[15] Ibid.

As pointed out by Maucorps et. Al, less developed regions will need a higher share of their GDP in the green transition to reach the same goals as their more developed peers.[16] They argue that the lack of funds and poor private investment has meant that the long-term growth of potential and 'catch-up prospects' of these nations is severely affected. [17] Maucorps et. Al point to the challenges for regions specialising in carbon-intensive industries such as coal mining, and fossil fuel production. In my view this is a compelling argument and one that will form a foundation of argumentation in this thesis. I will go further and argue that these countries are compelled to protect key industries that have a central place in their economies, with a focus on farming, the energy sector and automotive industries.

Innovation of the Study

This thesis offers an analysis of the regional dimension of the Green Deal and offers a unique contribution that cohesion policy is central, not a periphery, component to deliver the Grean Deal. The study will recommend that without deliberate, equity focused deployment of cohesion tools, the EU risks exacerbating the very regional differences it seeks to address.

The study breaks new ground in incorporating recent lobbying efforts by car manufacturers, oil and gas companies and farmers and how they have played a role in watering down the ambitions of the green deal. Specifically, the thesis will draw upon recent events, including the dilution of the pesticide targets under the EU's Farm to Fork strategy, and the 2035 Internal Combustion Engine (ICE) car ban rollback from the Commission, conveying how internal resistance has diluted the deal, and has been weaponised by political groups.

Background to the European Green Deal

In 2019, the EU drew its lines in the sand and laid claim to its position as a leader in climate policy and environmental regulation. The European Green Deal was launched in 2019 with the overarching aim of transforming the EU to become climate neutral or climate positive by 2050.[18] The deal provided a framework for reducing greenhouse (GHG) emissions, restoring nature and biodiversity, and transitioning to a circular economy. The deal is one of the boldest commitments by a major power to the 2015 Paris agreement, whereby global leaders committing to limiting global warming to 1.5°C. Critically, the deal set out a "leave no one behind" principle by embedding a Just

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[16] Ambre Maucorps et al., 'The Impact of the Green and Digital Transition on Regional Cohesion in Europe' 2023, no. 2 (2023): 102–10.
[17] Ibid.
[18] 'The European Green Deal - European Commission', 14 July 2021, https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/priorities-2019-2024/european-green-deal_en.

Transition mechanism to ensure lower socio-economically developed regions could realise the ambitions of the green transition.[19]

Since 2019, the EU has adopted various packages that relate to the European Green Deal. The initial few years of the deal was met with widespread optimism, with President Ursula von der Luyen calling it Europe's "man on the moon moment".[20] There was a sense that the green transition was the blueprint that other nations around the world would follow; a perception that was clear in the COP26 conference in Glasgow in 2021.[21]

A Eurobarometer survey in 2023 found that 93% of Europeans view climate change as a serious global problem, and 58% support accelerating the green transition, especially following recent energy price spikes and supply chain concerns.[22] Therefore, it is clear that the Green Deal aligns closely with public demand.

The different proposals of the Green Deal that are relevant for this thesis deserve further elaboration.

Fit for 55 Package

The EU's Fit for 55 package is a comprehensive set of proposals with the aim of reducing the EU's GHG emissions by at least 55% by 2030 compared to the levels seen in the 1990s. The proposals expand upon existing climate and energy policies aiming to accelerate the transition to a climate neutral economy. The package includes measures such as strengthening the Emissions Trading System, promoting cleaner transport and increasing renewable energy targets.

Petrol and Diesel Car ban

A key component of the Fit for 55 package was the planned phase out of new petrol and diesel cars by 2035.[23] The proposal mandates that all new passenger vehicles traded

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[19] 'A Just and Fair Transition, Leaving No One behind | Research and Innovation', 5 September 2024, https://projects.research-and-innovation.ec.europa.eu/en/strategy/strategy-2020-2024/environment-and-climate/european-green-deal/green-deal-projects-support/green-deal-resources/just-and-fair-transition-leaving-no-one-behind.
[20] 'President von Der Leyen on the European Green Deal', Text, European Commission - European Commission, accessed 31 May 2025, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/SPEECH_19_6749.
[21] 'Glasgow: The Decisive Role of EU Climate Diplomacy | EEAS', accessed 31 May 2025, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/glasgow-decisive-role-eu-climate-diplomacy_en.
[22] 'Eurobarometer: Majority of Europeans Consider That the Green Transition Should Go Faster', PubAffairs Bruxelles, accessed 13 March 2025, https://www.pubaffairsbruxelles.eu/eu-institution-news/eurobarometer-majority-of-europeans-consider-that-the-green-transition-should-go-faster/.
[23] 'EU Ban on the Sale of New Petrol and Diesel Cars from 2035 Explained', Topics | European Parliament, 3 November 2022, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/topics/en/article/20221019STO44572/eu-ban-on-sale-of-new-petrol-and-diesel-cars-from-2035-explained.

within the EU must be emissions free. The trend has now shifted to towards production of battery powered electric vehicles (EVs).[24]

Emissions Trading System (ETS)

The EU has introduced a range of policies aimed at reducing GHG emissions. One of the key instruments for doing this is the Emissions Trading System (ETS). The revised version of the ETS now includes carbon pricing, also known as the 'polluter pays' principle where companies pay for their emissions, for buildings, road transport (from 2027) and maritime sectors.[25]

The Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism

The EU's Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM) is a tax on imported goods from countries with weaker climate policies and introduced to prevent carbon leakage.[26] The goal is to level the playing field for European industries by ensuring that imported goods incur the same carbon costs as products produced in the EU.[27]

RePowerEU initiative

The RePowerEU programme sets out an ambitious vision where the EU maps out how a transition to renewable energy, a diversity of suppliers and affordable prices can be achieved simultaneously.[28] The programme focuses on the five key goals of energy efficiency, accelerating a transition to clean energy, geographical diversity of EU energy dependencies, smart investment and enhanced preparedness for future energy shocks.[29]

Renewable Energy Directive

The EU aims to significantly increase its renewable energy capacity, with the Renewable Energy Directive setting a target of 42.5% renewable energy by 2030, aligning with the EU's Fit for 55 package.[30] The Energy Efficiency Directive introduces binding targets for

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[24] Ibid.
[25] 'About the EU ETS - European Commission', accessed 13 March 2025, https://climate.ec.europa.eu/eu-action/eu-emissions-trading-system-eu-ets/about-eu-ets_en.
[26] 'Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism - European Commission', accessed 13 March 2025, https://taxation-customs.ec.europa.eu/carbon-border-adjustment-mechanism_en.
[27] Ibid.
[28] Susi Dennison, "Tough New Beginnings: The EU's Bold Leap Towards a Better Energy Future," *Horizons: Journal of International Relations and Sustainable Development*, no. 22 (2023): 68–75.

[29] Ibid.
[30] 'Directive - EU - 2023/2413 - EN - Renewable Energy Directive - EUR-Lex', accessed 13 March 2025, https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A32023L2413&utm_source.

reducing energy consumption, mainly through building renovations and industrial improvements.[31]

Farm to Fork Strategy

The EU's Farm to Fork Strategy takes a holistic look at the food system as a whole, with a focus on production all the way to consumption.[32] The motives behind the strategy were clear; the EU must reduce the environmental impact of the food and farming system, which contributes 10% of the EU's GHG emissions.[33] The strategy also goes beyond the environmental ambitions and aims to improve the health of EU citizens, tackle food waste and ensure the transition is equitable and resilient.

Biodiversity Strategy

The EU Biodiversity Strategy was introduced in May 2020, and set out ambitious goals to halt biodiversity loss and restore critical ecosystems. The objectives of the strategy included protecting 30% of EU land and sea, which included expanding protected areas to cover 30% of Europe's terrestrial and marine environments.[34] It also included a deforestation-free supply chain regulation, which ensured that products within the EU could not be traced to global deforestation, and a plan to strengthen indigenous rights and sustainable resource use, designed to safeguard indigenous communities.[35]

Water Framework Directive

This directive established a framework for the protection of inland surface waters, transitional waters, coastal waters, and groundwater, aligning closely with the European Green Deal's objectives. Within the framework of the European Green Deal, the Water Framework Directive serves as a primary foundation, setting key goals and objectives for water policy across Europe.[36]

Circular Economy Action Plan

The EU Circular Economy Action Plan, launched in 2020, promotes sustainability by improving product lifecycles, reducing plastic waste, and ensuring higher environmental standards for batteries, vehicles, and construction materials. There is

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[31] 'Energy Efficiency Directive', accessed 13 March 2025, https://energy.ec.europa.eu/topics/energy-efficiency/energy-efficiency-targets-directive-and-rules/energy-efficiency-directive_en.
[32] 'EU "Farm to Fork" Strategy: State of Play', Epthinktank, 13 February 2024, https://epthinktank.eu/2024/02/13/eu-farm-to-fork-strategy-state-of-play/.
[33] Ibid.
[34] 'Biodiversity Strategy for 2030 - European Commission', accessed 13 March 2025, https://environment.ec.europa.eu/strategy/biodiversity-strategy-2030_en?utm_source=chatgpt.com.
[35] 'Biodiversity Strategy for 2030 - European Commission', 7 March 2025, https://environment.ec.europa.eu/strategy/biodiversity-strategy-2030_en.
[36] 'Water Framework Directive - European Commission', 10 March 2025, https://environment.ec.europa.eu/topics/water/water-framework-directive_en.

also a strong focus on food waste reduction and resource efficiency and circularity in agriculture.[37]

The Just Transition

A central pillar of the Green Deal is the principle of a Just Transition. The Just Transition acknowledges that the transition to a low-carbon economy must be inclusive and fair, leaving no Member State behind.[38] A Just Transition seeks to support communities, the workforce and critical industries that are the most vulnerable to significant changes brought about by the transition, especially in sectors such as coal mining, heavy industry such as construction, and intensive agriculture.[39]

The Just Transition focuses around three pillars: the Just Transition Fund, the InvestEU 'Just Transition' scheme, and a Public Sector Loan Facility.[40] Together, these pillars are expected to generate over €100 billion in the period 2021-2027, which would be targeted at regions heavily dependent on carbon intensive industries.[41] The European Commission introduced a €55 billion financial package which would be targeted at regions most impacted by the transition.[42]

The Just Transition Fund (JTF) provides grants to support diversification of industries, as well as the reskilling of workers in the most impacted areas. In the Netherlands, the JTF is investing in training 49,000 workers currently employed in fossil fuel industries, allowing them to master new skills that align with renewable industries.[43]

The InvestEU 'Just Transition' scheme, aims to leverage private investments through budgetary guarantees, focusing on transport, green energy, education programmes and small businesses.[44]The Public Sector Loan facility is a combination of EU grants with loans from the European Investment Bank to support public sector projects that relate to the environmental, economic and social challenges related to the transition.[45]

[37] 'Circular Economy Action Plan - European Commission', accessed 13 March 2025, https://environment.ec.europa.eu/strategy/circular-economy-action-plan_en.
[38] 'The Just Transition Mechanism - European Commission', accessed 31 May 2025, https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/priorities-2019-2024/european-green-deal/finance-and-green-deal/just-transition-mechanism_en.
[39] Ibid.
[40] Ibid.
[41] Ibid.
[42] Ibid.
[43] 'EU Cohesion Policy: €623 million for the Netherlands', Text, European Commission - European Commission, accessed 31 May 2025, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/pl/ip_22_7372.
[44] 'InvestEU - European Union', 22 May 2025, https://investeu.europa.eu/index_en.
[45] 'Just Transition Mechanism - European Commission', 17 March 2025, https://cinea.ec.europa.eu/just-transition-mechanism_en.

EU Cohesion funds

Cohesion policy is often labelled "the glue that binds Europeans together".[46] The EU's cohesion policy is a critical pillar in its efforts to balance development across Member States, with the goal of reducing regional disparities. The policy is carried out through a range of funds, with a specific area of development.[47] The European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) is centred around bolstering economic and social cohesion by supporting infrastructure projects, innovation and sustainable development.[48] The European Social Fund Plus (ESF+) is focused around improving employment opportunities, investing in skills and education, and promotion of social inclusion.[49] The Cohesion Fund (CF) gives support to member states with a gross national income per capita below 90% of the EU average, with a focus on transport and environmental infrastructure.[50] Cohesion funds have had demonstrable success stories across the EU. In Poland, the ERDF has funded new railway lines, significantly improving connectivity and improving travel times.[51] The CF has also contributed the development of wastewater treatment facilities in Romania.[52]

As part of its 2025 mid-term review, the Commission is revising the €392 billion cohesion policy to align more closely with their strategic priorities[53] set out for 2024-2029. The priorities include a focus on EU competitiveness, decarbonisation, defence, energy transition, affordable housing and food and water resilience. The goal from the Commission is to enhance policy effectiveness by inviting Member States to reprogramme 2021-2027 funds to address emerging challenges, while still reducing economic disparities across the bloc.[54] Some of the proposed measures include increasing support for large enterprises in critical sectors, water infrastructure upgrades and clean energy systems.

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[46] Thomas Schwab, 'Quo Vadis, Cohesion Policy? European Regional Development at a Crossroads' 2024, no. 5 (2024): 284–92.
[47] 'The European Regional Development Fund / Cohesion Fund', accessed 31 May 2025, https://www.fi-compass.eu/funds/erdf-cf.
[48] Ibid.
[49] 'What Is the ESF+? | European Social Fund Plus', accessed 31 May 2025, https://european-social-fund-plus.ec.europa.eu/en/what-esf.
[50] Ibid.
[51] 'Inforegio - EU Cohesion Policy: Over €145 Million to Modernise Railway Infrastructure in Polish Regions', accessed 31 May 2025, https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/whats-new/newsroom/01-06-2023-eu-cohesion-policy-over-eur145-million-to-modernise-railway-infrastructure-in-polish-regions_en.
[52] 'Inforegio - EU Cohesion Policy: More than €159 Million for the Development of Water and Wastewater Infrastructure in Iași County, Romania', accessed 31 May 2025, https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/whats-new/newsroom/03-08-2023-eu-cohesion-policy-more-than-eur159-million-for-the-development-of-water-and-wastewater-infrastructure-in-iasi-county-romania_en.
[53] 'European Union Priorities 2024-2029 - European Union', accessed 22 May 2025, https://european-union.europa.eu/priorities-and-actions/eu-priorities/european-union-priorities-2024-2029_en.
[54] 'Cohesion Policy', Text, European Commission - European Commission, accessed 22 May 2025, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_25_929.

I argue that this moment of review offers a critical opportunity that cannot be missed. Cohesion funds have to be deployed more strategically to support a regionally balanced green transition, aligning the funds with long term resilience from further climate related shocks.

Chapter 1- Farming

Introduction

The first chapter will focus on the challenges around farming and the Farm to Fork strategy. I have chosen to examine the agricultural elements of the Green Deal because although it contributes just 1.3% of the EU's GDP, the EU is a major player in agricultural exports on the global market.[55] Furthermore, agriculture accounts for 10% of the EU's total GHG emissions.[56]

Agriculture remains a significant beneficiary of EU subsidies and is at the centre of the debate around EU cohesion and integration. Within the EU Green Deal was the EU's Farm to Fork Strategy, which will be the focus of this chapter. I will argue that the Farm to Fork to Strategy was a bold and ambitious piece of legislation, and an example of the EU showing environmental leadership.

However, the last few years have seen a watering down of the strategy because of internal pressures, made worse by a challenging geopolitical context. This trend reinforces the central argument in this thesis; internal and external pressures are testing EU cohesion and risk undermining the transformative potential of the EU Green Deal and the potential of a Just Transition.

The significant weakening of the Farm to Fork Strategy led by lobbying and coordinated farmer protests, seen most vividly in 2024, highlights how a lack of cohesion within the EU can derail critical environmental ambitions and exacerbate regional disparities.[57] This chapter argues that EU cohesion is not simply a support mechanism for the Green Deal- it is foundational. I will argue that Just Transition Funds aimed at sustainable agriculture in more vulnerable regions could help avoid further divergence and help the EU maintain its common approach.

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[55] 'EU Agri-Food Exports and Imports Reached Record Levels in October 2024 - European Commission', 27 May 2025, https://agriculture.ec.europa.eu/media/news/eu-agri-food-exports-and-imports-reached-record-levels-october-2024-2025-01-24_en.

[56] Joe Lo, 'EU Floats 90% Emissions Target but Drops Green Farming Measures', Climate Home News, 7 February 2025, https://www.climatechangenews.com/2024/02/07/eu-floats-90-emissions-target-but-drops-green-farming-measures/.

[57] Paul Taylor, 'Farmers Are in Revolt and Europe's Climate Policies Are Crumbling. Welcome to the Age of "Greenlash"', *The Guardian*, 16 February 2024, sec. Opinion, https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2024/feb/16/europe-farmers-climate-green-protest-eu.

Recent Developments

The motives behind the Farm to Fork strategy were clear; the EU must reduce the environmental impact of the food and farming system, which contributes to 10% of the EU's greenhouse gas emissions.[58] The strategy also goes beyond environmental ambitions and aims to improve the health of EU citizens, tackle food waste and ensure the transition is equitable and resilient.[59] Some examples of the targets for achieving these aims were a reduction of pesticide use by 50%, increasing organic farming to 25% of total farmland, and reducing food waste by 50%.[60]

However, the European Commissioner for Agriculture, Janusz Wojciechowski, has downplayed the importance of the strategy and the Green Deal as a whole, stating that the "Green Deal is not a law".[61] One example of the significant weakening of the Deal is the diluting of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) reforms. The European Commission initially aimed to align the CAP with the Green Deal by introducing "eco-schemes" to reward environmentally friendly farming practices, enhancing conditionality, and increasing funding for sustainable agriculture. However, due to pressure from powerful farming lobbies, the Commission proposed to dilute the environmental rules linked to the subsidies.[62]

Other significant rollbacks include the pesticides pledge, which aimed to reduce the use of pesticides across the bloc but was defeated by a vote in the European Parliament following significant lobbying efforts by agrochemical businesses.[63]A particularly high-profile rollback was related to the Nature Restoration Law, a flagship policy under the Green Deal's Biodiversity Strategy.[64] The law faced strong opposition from the European People's Party (EPP), who claimed that the law placed undue burdens on farmers and landowners.[65] The high-profile pressure, made more intense in an election year, led to a removal of key provisions, including the mandatory target for wetlands.[66]

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[58] Joe Lo, 'EU Floats 90% Emissions Target but Drops Green Farming Measures', Climate Home News, 7 February 2025, https://www.climatechangenews.com/2024/02/07/eu-floats-90-emissions-target-but-drops-green-farming-measures/.
[59] Ibid.
[60] Ibid.
[61] 'From Farm to Flop? Political Risks Choke EU's Green Food Plan', POLITICO, 26 January 2023, https://www.politico.eu/article/blocked-and-delayed-political-risks-choke-eus-green-food-plan-farmers/.
[62] Kate Abnett and Kate Abnett, 'EU Proposes Curbing More Green Rules on Farming Subsidies', *Reuters*, 14 May 2025, sec. Climate & Energy, https://www.reuters.com/sustainability/climate-energy/eu-proposes-curbing-more-green-rules-farming-subsidies-2025-05-14/.
[63] 'Conservative Backlash Kills off EU's Green Deal Push to Slash Pesticide Use', POLITICO, 22 November 2023, https://www.politico.eu/article/european-parliament-kills-off-landmark-pesticide-reduction-bill/.
[64] The Brussels Times, 'EU Adopts Flagship Nature Restoration Law after "Months of Uncertainty"', accessed 31 May 2025, https://www.brusselstimes.com/eu-affairs/1097349/eu-adopts-flagship-nature-restoration-law-after-months-of-uncertainty.
[65] Ibid.
[66] Ibid.

Analysis

Instead of the two being regarded as mutually exclusive, I believe that the Farm to Fork Strategy should be reinforced as a solution to food security and food shortage issues further down the line, which as discussed earlier in this thesis[67], will be exacerbated by a changing climate. Fanzo et. Al argue that a sustainable food and farming system will enhance resilience against the negative impact of climate change and enhance food security.[68] They argue that both sustainable farming and food security are two sides of the same coin. I believe that this argument carries weight, as all too often both food security and environmental policies are pitted against each other. While the challenges farmers face around higher costs and shrinking profits are entirely valid, the economic cost of climate change could be even more consequential for farmers' livelihoods, especially in regions that have smaller and less diverse economies.

A mounting concern surrounding the Farm to Fork strategy is the rising populist narratives surrounding the green transition and the Farm to Fork strategy. One narrative that is emerging is one that positions the Farm to Fork Strategy as elitist, disconnected from the needs of ordinary people.[69]This sentiment has gained traction in rural areas most affected by the reforms, as well as in areas that will be severely affected by the negative effects of climate change. Van der Ploeg argues that this line of argument fuels political and cultural backlash in rural areas, where the green transition is conveyed as an out of touch Brussels elite, who know nothing of the needs of local people.[70] This argument carries significant weight in my view, as we saw powerful farming unions in France, Germany, Poland and Romania express their concerns with regulatory overreach in 2024, with politicians riding on the coat tails of these unions.[71] I take the view that these arguments obscure the reality that these rural and agricultural areas are among the most socioeconomically deprived in the EU, and the most at-risk countries from climate change. For example, the Polish farming unions advocated for a watered down strategy at the same time as Polish farmers reported significant wheat yield losses

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[67] Phoebe Weston, 'Rampant Heatwaves Threaten Food Security of Entire Planet, Scientists Warn', *The Guardian*, 21 July 2023, sec. Environment, https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2023/jul/21/rampant-heatwaves-threaten-food-security-of-entire-planet-scientists-warn.
[68] Jessica Fanzo et al., 'The Effect of Climate Change across Food Systems: Implications for Nutrition Outcomes', *Global Food Security* 18 (1 September 2018): 12–19, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.gfs.2018.06.001.

[69] Hermann Tertsch, 'Farm to Fork Strategy: A Partial Response to Our Farmers' Needs', *Euractiv* (blog), 27 July 2020, https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/opinion/farm-to-fork-strategy-a-partial-response-to-our-farmers-needs/.
[70] '(PDF) Green Policies, Gray Areas: Farmers' Protests and the Environmental Policy Dilemma in the European Union', *ResearchGate*, accessed 31 May 2025, https://doi.org/10.62560/csz.2024.02.03.
[71] Tertsch, Euractiv

due to a record-breaking drought.[72] [73]This underscores the need for sustainable agriculture and robust support mechanisms to facilitate this transition.

Janusz Wojciehowski, the EU's Agriculture Commissioner, has called for a review and reconsideration of the Farm to Fork Strategy following food security concerns, fuelled by the War in Ukraine.[74] The Commissioner called for balance when discussing the Farm to Fork Strategy and the more pressing concerns surrounding food security.[75] Matin Qaim argues that the Farm to Fork Strategy could have profound implications for food security in Europe if the balance isn't managed carefully.[76] Qaim points to potential 'unintended consequences' of strict environmental measures.[77] On the other hand, Tim Lang et. Al argues that the Farm to Fork strategy has the capability of enhancing food security by creating resilient and sustainable farming practices that can withstand shocks.[78] Lang acknowledges that while there may be short term challenges with transitioning at first, the need to reduce dependence on fossil fuels outweighs these challenges.[79] I believe that Lang's argument carries weight as we have already seen drastic food shortages, job losses and huge economic challenges in the last few years caused by climate change, effecting the most vulnerable EU member states.[80] One striking example is the chestnut harvest in Thessaly, Greece, which plummeted by 90% due to heatwaves and prolonged droughts in 2024.[81] Ultimately, I believe that the debate has become too polarized, with the strategy being pitted against the need for better food security, when in fact the strategy could significantly enhance the EU's ability to manage shocks to food supply chains based on the impact of climate change.

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[72] KG-web editor, 'The Farmers Protests in Poland and Dilemmas for the Left', *Transform!Europe* (blog), 27 March 2024, https://transform-network.net/blog/report/the-farmers-protests-in-poland-and-dilemmas-for-the-left/.
[73] 'Drought in Poland: Huge Losses in Cereals, Strawberries, and Fruit Bushes', Tridge, accessed 31 May 2025, https://www.tridge.com/news/drought-in-poland-huge-losses-in-cereals-str-iqvuwq.
[74] From Farm to Flop? Political Risks Choke EU's Green Food Plan – POLITICO'.
[75] Ibid.
[76] Kai P. Purnhagen et al., 'Europe's Farm to Fork Strategy and Its Commitment to Biotechnology and Organic Farming: Conflicting or Complementary Goals?', *Trends in Plant Science*, Special Issue: Feeding the World: The Future of Plant Breeding, 26, no. 6 (1 June 2021): 600–606, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tplants.2021.03.012.
[77] Ibid.
[78] Sonnino, R., Callenius, C., Lähteenmäki, L., Breda, J., Cahill, J., Caron, P., Damianova, Z., Gurinovic, M. A., Lang, T., Laperriere, A., Mango, C., Ryder, J. Verburg G., Achterbosch, T., den Boer, A.C.L., Kok, K.P.W., Regeer, B.J., Broerse, J. E. W., Cesuroglu, T., Gill, M. (2020). Research and Innovation Supporting the Farm to fork Strategy of the European Commission. Published by FIT4FOOD2030. Available through https://fit4food2030.eu/reports-publications/

[79] Ibid.
[80] Strengthening Europe's Food System against Climate-Driven Shocks - EIT Food', accessed 9 June 2024, https://www.eitfood.eu/blog/strengthening-europes-food-system-against-climate-driven-shocks
[81] 'Greece's Chestnut Harvest Set to Shrink, Hit by Drought and Heat | Reuters', accessed 29 May 2025, https://www.reuters.com/business/environment/greeces-chestnut-harvest-set-shrink-hit-by-drought-heat-2024-10-24/.

On the other hand, Tangermann argues that the Farm to Fork Strategy will affect EU farmers' competitiveness in global markets.[82] Tangermann argues that stringent environmental regulations as posed by the strategy will impede EU farmers from being competitive compared to other agricultural superpowers and will risk them being undercut by cheap prices from foreign exports.[83] This will have a knock on effect on the food security of the EU, in his view, as it could encourage a reliance on food imports.[84] However, Baldock and Buckwell argue that the strategy will enhance EU's farmers' competitiveness in the long run, and will place the EU as a climate leader on sustainable agriculture.[85] Buckwell points to the opportunities of discovering new markets and the importance of adapting in tandem with consumer trends, who are fast becoming more environmentally conscious with their food choices.[86] I believe that Buckwell's arguments carries weight, as we have seen a stark rise in consumers wanting to make more healthy and sustainable choices in recent years, pointing to a more ethical consumer base.[87] Thus the demand for environmental products is increasing and the EU could lead the way in supplying this growing demand.

One could argue that the Farm to Fork Strategy is leading by example on the world stage, and putting the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and Conference of the Parties (COP) commitments into action. The UN's SDGs outline the need to "End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture".[88] At last year's COP28, it was acknowledged that nations should divest from fossil fuels and scale up activities that promote sustainable food security.[89] Dupont argues that the EU is showing climate leadership in the Farm to Fork Strategy and sets a benchmark for other nations to follow.[90] Dupont argues that the EU is showing boldness in enacting the strategy and establishing themselves as regulatory leaders in this field.[91] I would argue that this argument carries weight given the mixed success of many nations, including global superpowers such as the US and China, at

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[82] Tangermann, S. (2020). The Farm to Fork Strategy vs. the global agricultural market - who wins? Agrekon, 59(1), 1-15.
[83] Ibid.
[84] Ibid.
[85] Baldock, D. and Buckwell, A. (2021) Just transition in the EU agriculture and land use sector, Institute for European Environmental Policy

[86] Ibid.
[87] Consumers Want Sustainable Options. What Food Producers, Suppliers, and Retailers Can Do Now', World Economic Forum, 16 January 2023
[88] Food Security and Nutrition and Sustainable Agriculture | Department of Economic and Social Affairs', accessed 9 April 2025, https://sdgs.un.org/topics/food-security-and-nutrition-and-sustainable-agriculture
[89] COP28 Declaration on Food and Agriculture', accessed 9 April 2025, https://www.cop28.com/en/food-and-agriculture.
[90] Dupont, C., & Oberthür, S. (2021). "The European Union: A leader in international climate policy?" International Environmental Agreements: Politics, Law and Economics, 21(3), 365-381.
[91] Ibid.

enacting the global commitments made at the COP conferences. I believe that the EU has put its head above the parapet and showed ambition to make bold regulatory action in between the COP declarations, which isn't always the case with other nations.

The European Commission's Just Transition Fund and Cohesion Policy were designed to prevent vulnerable communities from falling behind. Yet without more localised investment in sustainable farming transitions, the EU runs a risk of ceding ground to populist actors and powerful unions.

For example, Italy and Greece's long-standing traditions of small-scale farming offer huge potential for diversified organic horticulture, including fruit, vineyards and olives.[92] Lampkin et. Al argue that Italy excels in nature friendly farming through agroforestry and organic crops.[93] Kizos and Vakoufaris assert that the marginal lands in Greece, often not suitable for intensive farming, are perfect landscapes for low input, sustainable agriculture that tackles land degradation.[94] García-Martínez et al. argue that Spain can enrich it's already European leading organic sector and point to its enormous potential in scaling up regenerative agriculture that improves water use efficiency and soil carbon sequestration in its dryer regions.[95]

I believe that the potential can be unlocked through targeted financial mechanisms such as the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), the Cohesion Fund, and the Just Transition Fund, designed to support less affluent regions in adapting to environmental transitions. One example of the success of such funds is the ERDF funded AgriGo4Cities project in the Danube region, which championed urban and peri urban agriculture across Europe.[96] The fund was designed to create jobs, and social inclusion in deprived areas.[97] Furthermore, the ERDF funded urban gardens project in Salamanca, Spain, revitalised over 100,000 m2 of degraded land, transforming the spaces for urban agriculture.[98] Learning form the successes of this financial support, the EU could broaden the scope of such funds that targets areas most at risk from climatic shocks.

Furthermore, the Just Transition Fund can fill gaps currently made by EU current agri-payment schemes. A recent report by the European Court of Auditors (ECA) found

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[92] Lampkin, N.H., Measures, M., Padel, S., & Foster, C. (2015). *Organic Farming and Agroforestry in Europe: Benefits for Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services*

[93] Ibid.

[94] Kizos, T., & Vakoufaris, H. (2011). *Rural marginalization and sustainability in Greece: Land use and agricultural practices on marginal lands*

[95] García-Martínez, A., Martínez-García, G., & others (2020). *Scaling up regenerative agriculture in Spain: Opportunities for water use efficiency and soil carbon sequestration*.

[96] 'Inforegio - Using Urban Agriculture to Promote Social Inclusion in the Danube Region', accessed 31 May 2025, https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/en/projects/Romania/using-urban-agriculture-to-promote-social-inclusion-in-the-danube-region.

[97] Ibid.

[98] 'Urban Farming in Castilla y León (Spain)', Interreg Europe, 16 April 2020, https://projects2014-2020.interregeurope.eu/cityzen/news/news-article/9147/urban-farming-in-castilla-y-leon-spain/.

significant gaps between the EU farming incentives and the Green Deal goals.[99] The ECA highlighted discrepancies between the EU's Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) and the Green Deal, outlining that despite revisions and updates to the CAP over the years, the impact on climate targets remains uncertain.[100] I take the view that this underscores the need for a bespoke Just Transition Fund for supporting sustainable agricultural practices as existing funding mechanisms are ineffective for two reasons; they have not been effective in driving environmental practices and green transitions among farmers in the EU, and they have not addressed regional inequalities across the EU and supported vulnerable regions adequately.

The EU has recently proposed Just Transition funds targeted for the adoption of sustainable agricultural practices.[101] Baldock and Muro, IEEP, argue that the EU's agrifood sector is in need of transformative funds to meet its sustainability goals and make clear that current CAP funding is not meeting the needs for this transition.[102]They propose a dedicated Just Transition Fund for agriculture to allow more targeted financial support for farmers adopting new sustainable practices and building new skills. They argue that the fund will help champion climate goals and ensure more fairness for vulnerable rural communities.[103] They argue that the fund must be integrated into the existing policy landscape in the EU, contain clear eligibility and accountability frameworks and balance social and economic objectives.[104] I believe this is a powerful argument, as the current CAP disproportionately favours wealthier regions and larger landowners.[105] Over 80% of CAP's direct payments go to just 20% of beneficiaries, with smaller scale farms in Eastern and Southern Europe being bypassed.[106]In my view, this inequality severely undermines EU cohesion and increases the chances of pushback when the EU proposes sustainability reforms through the Farm to Fork Strategy. I agree with the arguments laid out by the IEEP, and believe that a strongly designed Just Transition fund that targets small scale farmers in less affluent member states could correct these imbalances and lay the groundwork for a more regionally inclusive shift towards the ambitions of the Green Deal.

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[99] Julia Payne, 'Major Gaps between EU Farming Incentives and Green Deal Goals, ECA Says', *Reuters*, 30 September 2024, sec. Sustainability, https://www.reuters.com/sustainability/major-gaps-between-eu-farming-incentives-green-deal-goals-eca-says-2024-09-30/.
[100] Ibid.
[101] 'Bridging the Gap: Why the EU Needs a Just Transition Funding Mechanism for Agriculture', *IEEP AISBL* (blog), accessed 27 May 2025, https://ieep.eu/publications/bridging-the-gap-why-the-eu-needs-a-just-transition-funding-mechanism-for-agriculture/.
[102] Ibid.
[103] Ibid.
[104] Ibid.
[105] Isabel Dinis, 'Examining Disparities in Common Agriculture Policy Direct Payments among Farming Systems: Evidence from Portugal', *Agricultural and Food Economics* 12, no. 1 (9 February 2024): 7, https://doi.org/10.1186/s40100-024-00299-6.
[106] Ibid.

Chapter 2- Energy

Introduction

The energy sector is critical to the EU economy and the largest contributor to its GHG emissions.[107] The next chapter will explore how the fossil fuel lobby, the oil and gas industry, has lobbied to water down key proposals in the Green Deal.

The inclusion of this chapter aligns with the core argument of this thesis; that internal divisions and dilutions of the Green Deal risk weakening the principle of a Just Transition and will only inflame socioeconomic disparities across the EU. I argue that fossil fuel lobbyists have played a central part in fragmenting the Green Deal in order to protect their own interests, which will in turn increase fossil fuel dependency and will harm the very country's it is claiming to protect.

I will further argue that the EU must retain its ambition to avoid further deepening regional disparities and use cohesion funds, ERDF, and Just Transition Funds to address these challenges. This chapter argues that EU cohesion policy is not simply a support mechanism counteracting powerful fossil fuel lobbies and geopolitical pressures- much like the Farm to Fork Strategy, it is foundational pillar for safeguarding the very integrity of the Just Transition.

Recent Developments

There has been a noticeable decline in the EU's energy mix since Russia's invasion of Ukraine. There have been some positives in the last few years, with the EU achieving a record 47% of its electricity generation from renewable sources in 2024, with wind surpassing gas for the second consecutive year.[108] The starkest signal of renewables replacing fossil fuels is the rise in solar power generation, which has now surpassed coal for the first time in the EU, contributing to 10% of the energy mix compared to coal's 10%.[109]

However, despite the progress being made towards renewables, 70% of the EU's total energy mix in 2024, including electricity, heat and transport, came from fossil fuels.[110] Subsidies for fossil fuels within the EU also saw a rise in recent years. Responding to the energy crisis caused by Russia's invasion of Ukraine, subsidies for fossil fuels rose

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[107] European Commission. Joint Research Centre., *Estimation of the Global Average GHG Emission Intensity of Hydrogen Production*. (LU: Publications Office, 2023), https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2760/744837.
[108] 'Europe Posts Record Year for Clean Energy Use as Trump Pulls US toward Fossil Fuels | AP News', accessed 13 March 2025, https://apnews.com/article/europe-renewables-climate-change-solar-wind-fossil-fuels-4a6ff96bbde3251cb42109e1d9d4b399.
[109] Ibid.
[110] IEA Bioenergy, Implementation of bioenergy in the European Union – 2024 update, https://www.ieabioenergy.com/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/CountryReport2024_EU27_final_v2.pdf

from €60 billion in 2021 to €136 billion in 2022, before decreasing to €111 billion in 2023.[111] Over 60% of the fossil fuel subsidies went to Germany (€41 billion), Poland (€16 billion), and France (€15 billion).[112]When taking into account subsidies as a percentage of GDP, Slovakia, Poland and Malta stand out, with each allocating 1.5% or more of their GDP to fossil fuel subsidies in 2024.[113]This exemplifies the complexity with transitioning from fossil fuels to renewables, as subsidies continue to favour carbon intensive industries, despite the EU's ambitious agenda to phase out fossil fuels.

Fossil fuel dependence significantly varies across EU member states. In 2024, Demark achieved a milestone of 84% of its electricity sourced from low-carbon sources and wind energy accounted for nearly 60%, the highest proportion of wind in the world.[114] The efforts made by the Netherlands in reducing greenhouse gas emissions has received international recognition, with the country ranked 5th in the 2025 Climate Change Performance Index (CCPI).[115] On the other hand, Poland has been historically much slower at transitioning away from fossil fuels, largely down to their reliance on coal, which accounts for 63.8% of their energy sector.[116]

The lobbying efforts by companies such as France's Total Energies, Italy's Eni or Poland's Orlen, all with an annual revenue of over $88 billion, cannot be ignored.

From 2010-2018 the top five publicly trade oil companies in the EU spent €251 million in lobbying EU officials and held 327 high-level meetings with European Commission officials since 2014.[117] This significant lobbying power underscores the challenges in retaining EU cohesion and high-level ambition of the EU Green Deal.

Industrial lobby has been reinforced by political power as well, with countries such as Hungary, Poland and Germany resisting binding targets for coal phase outs or

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[111] 'EU Countries Must Do More to Phase out Fossil Fuels Subsidies by 2030: EC Report', S&P Global Commodity Insights, 29 January 2025, https://www.spglobal.com/commodity-insights/en/news-research/latest-news/natural-gas/012925-eu-countries-must-do-more-to-phase-out-fossil-fuels-subsidies-by-2030-ec-report.
[112] Ibid.
[113] Ibid.
[114] 'Understand Low-Carbon Energy in Denmark through Data | Low-Carbon Power', accessed 31 May 2025, https://lowcarbonpower.org/region/Denmark.
[115] 'Climate Change Performance Index 2025 | NewClimate Institute', accessed 31 May 2025, https://www.newclimate.org/resources/publications/climate-change-performance-index-2025.
[116] 'The Share of Coal in the Energy Sector Has Decreased to 63%. - WysokieNapiecie.Pl', 3 January 2024, https://wysokienapiecie.pl/en/96618-the-share-of-coal-in-the-energy-sector-has-decreased-to-63/.
[117] Nick Ferris, 'How Green Lobbyists Helped Drive Unprecedented EU Climate Action', *Energy Monitor* (blog), 22 December 2022, https://www.energymonitor.ai/finance/corporate-strategy/how-green-lobbyists-helped-drive-unprecedented-eu-climate-action-in-2022/.

completing ending fossil fuel subsidies.[118] The EPP has sided with fossil fuel interests on numerous occasions, often citing over-regulation as a risk to economic stability.[119]

Analysis

van Asselt argues how entrenched fossil fuel interests slow down the formulation of ambitious climate policies within the EU, with a particular analysis of the challenges posed by powerful industry actors.[120]Building upon van Asselt's insights, an analysis by Transparency International EU reveals that fossil fuel companies have been among the most active lobbyists in the context of the Green Deal.[121] The study found that two fossil fuel giants ranked in the top 10 organisations with the most meetings in the European Commission regarding climate legislation.[122] This extensive lobbying has raised concerns about the potential dilution of climate policies due to disproportionate corporate influence. Both van Assets and Transparency International's findings underscore a critical argument in this thesis- the Green Deal is susceptible to vested interests which undermines and weakens the Green Deal. Without safeguards against these powerful forces, the very principles of the Just Transition are under threat.

Scholars including Unruh and Seto et. Al coin the term 'carbon lock in', which describes the fossil fuel infrastructure and vested interests that create self-reinforcing systems that are resistant to change.[123] In the context of the EU, the lock-in has been inflamed by the aforementioned persistence and resourcing of this lobbying. I believe that this argument carries weight as the resistant to phase-out timelines and approval of new liquified natural gas terminals all illustrate this dynamic.[124] This argument supports a central argument of this thesis, that without political cohesion and stronger commitment to the principles laid out in the Green Deal, the potential of the deal will fall short. This begins to explain why the transition to the green energy has been uneven throughout the EU, posing a significant risk to EU integration and cohesion.

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[118] Lisa O'Carroll, 'EU Split over Subsidies for Coal Plants as Poland Seeks Extension', *The Guardian*, 19 June 2023, sec. World news, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/jun/19/eu-split-over-subsidies-for-coal-plants-as-poland-seeks-extension.
[119] Ibid.
[120] Harro van Asselt and Fergus Green, 'COP26 and the Dynamics of Anti-Fossil Fuel Norms', *WIREs Climate Change* 14, no. 3 (2023): e816, https://doi.org/10.1002/wcc.816.
[121] LatteCreative and Pia Engelbrecht-Bogdanov, 'Transparency International EU and Fossil Free Politics Campaign Demand Tighter EU Lobbying Rules Following Investigations into Fossil Fuel Access', *Transparency International EU* (blog), 25 September 2024, https://transparency.eu/transparency-international-eu-and-the-fossil-free-politics-campaign-demand-tighter-lobbying-rules-after-investigation-reveals-alarming-level-of-fossil-fuel-industry-access-to-european-commission/.
[122] Ibid.
[123] 'ETDEWEB: Project Metadata', accessed 31 May 2025, https://www.osti.gov/etdeweb/biblio/20098489.
[124] Petra Stock, 'Victoria Says It Is Getting out of Gas – so Why Has It Approved a New LNG Import Terminal?', *The Guardian*, 30 May 2025, sec. Environment, https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2025/may/31/victoria-says-it-is-getting-out-of-gas-so-why-has-it-approved-a-new-lng-import-terminal.

Goldthau and Sitter point to the EU's recent history in this area.[125] They argue that in the 1990's and 2000s, the EU was hesitant about flexing its regulatory muscles on energy to avoid member state resistance.[126] Furthermore, they argue that Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 placed greater importance on the EU's energy policy and underscored the critical nature of energy security for the Europe. I would now argue that the ground has been made more fertile for more interventions from the EU, as Russia, despite early warning signs from the Crimean invasion, is universally perceived as an untrustworthy source of energy supply. The shift has not only legitimised a more interventionist role for the EU in the green energy transition, but it has made the shift to the transition a matter of cohesion and resilience. In my view, the EU must use cohesion policy and funds not just to manage regional inequalities, but to counterbalance geopolitical shocks and fossil fuel dependence.

Despite the strong industry resistance and lobbying, new visions for a clean and just energy transition have emerged in recent years. van der Ploeg and Rezai argue that fossil fuel divestment, carbon pricing and green public investment should be paired with social protections to ensure legitimacy.[127] They argue that the EU's ability to deliver this will rest upon decoupling policies from fossil fuel influence and embracing more regulatory instruments, rather than voluntary actions.[128] This argument carries weight as it highlights how market forces alone, which will be subject to the distorting effects of vested fossil fuel interests, are insufficient to achieve the transformative potential of the Green Deal. Without significant state intervention, through carbon pricing and strategic public investment through the cohesion fund or Just Transition fund, the risk of policy dilution remains high.

Szulecki et.al argue that coal subsidies argue that coal subsidies remain deeply entrenched in the EU due to historic ties with coal unions, which is in turn exacerbated by lobbying efforts from these unions and low conditionality on EU funding.[129] Szulecki et.als argument is supported by the current interests within EU mechanism such as the Just Transition Fund. The Transition Fund have in practice allowed member states to channel resources into preserving coal-sector jobs, with very little environmental

[125] Andreas Goldthau and Nick Sitter, "Power, Authority and Security: The EU's Russian Gas Dilemma," *Journal of European Integration* 42, no. 1 (January 2, 2020): 111–27, https://doi.org/10.1080/07036337.2019.1708341.
[126] Ibid.
[127] Katja Heinisch, Oliver Holtemöller, and Christoph Schult, 'Power Generation and Structural Change: Quantifying Economic Effects of the Coal Phase-out in Germany', *Energy Economics* 95 (1 March 2021): 105008, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.eneco.2020.105008.
[128] Ibid.
[129] Szulecki, K., Oei, P.-Y., & Mendelevitch, R. (2020). The political economy of coal in Poland: Drivers and barriers for a shift away from fossil fuels. *Energy Policy, 144*, 111621

outcomes.[130] Research undertaken by CAN Europe[131] and Bankwatch substantiate this argument, and show that some member states have used these funds to prolong coal use or invest in technologies that do not align with the principles of the Green Deal. This exemplifies how the low and poorly enforced conditionality of the Just Transition Funds enables behaviour that undermines the Green Deal's decarbonisation objectives. This underpins the need for a new way of looking at Just Transition funds.

Kern argues that EU cohesion policy is at the heart of supporting sustainability transitions.[132] He highlights that the Just Transition Fund is critical in aiding regions that are severely affected by structural changes, especially coal regions.[133] Kern stresses that EU cohesion is one of the most significant financial tools and should be utilised to ensure no region gets left behind. I tend to agree with Kern as the effectiveness of the Just Transition Fund has been demonstrated by recent developments across the EU. Slovenia for example, received €258 million under the JTF to ensure a just transition in its coal regions, with a focus on diversifying the local economy, investing in renewable energy and supporting workers.[134] Romania also secured €2.14 billion to support its commitment to phase out coal by 2032, with the funds being focused on helping workers find new employment and supporting SMEs in carbon intensive regions.[135] While the Just Transition shows significant potential, ongoing lobbying efforts risk undermining this progress. To fully realise the potential, more strategic and targeted interventions, such as the ones seen in Romania and Slovenia, will be needed to prevent more climate related economic disasters to vulnerable EU countries.

The Just Transition Fund is an integral mechanism to reconcile environmental, social and economic objectives. I believe that by targeting regions most affected by decarbonisation, especially coal dependent areas such as Poland, the Fund could mitigate socioeconomic disparities.

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[130] Ibid.

[131] c.dascalu, 'The EU Member-States Which Are Set to Receive Most of the Just Transition Fund Plan to Stick with Coal', *CAN Europe* (blog), 15 September 2020, https://caneurope.org/report-the-eu-member-states-which-are-set-to-receive-most-of-the-just-transition-fund-plan-to-stick-with-coal/.

[132] 'EU Cohesion and Structural Policy Is to Be Socio-Ecologically Orientated: Florian Kern on the Academic Sounding Board "Cohesion for Transition"', 22 November 2023, https://www.ioew.de/en/news/article/eu-cohesion-and-structural-policy-is-to-be-socio-ecologically-orientated-florian-kern-on-the-academic-sounding-board-cohesion-for-transition?utm_source=chatgpt.com.

[133] Ibid.

[134] 'Inforegio - EU Cohesion Policy: More than €258 Million for a Just Climate Transition in Slovenia', accessed 28 May 2025, https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/whats-new/newsroom/16-12-2022-eu-cohesion-policy-more-than-eur258-million-for-a-just-climate-transition-in-slovenia_en.

[135] Haptic, 'EU Cohesion Policy: €2.14 Billion for Romania', *Haptic* (blog), 11 December 2022, https://www.haptic.ro/eu-cohesion-policy-e2-14-billion-for-romania/.

Chapter 3- Automobiles

Introduction

This chapter will examine how the car manufacturing lobby successfully lobbied against an EU ban on internal combustion engines (ICE) as a case study to exemplify the core argument of this thesis. I argue that resistance from powerful car manufacturers and their political allies has diluted the Green Deal and undermined EU cohesion, exposing a rift between the member states who prioritise perceived economic competitiveness over climate ambition.

The case study reinforces the dynamic explored in this thesis- internal fragmentation through industry pushback, unequal socio-economic interest and political opposition, is a significant threat to the success of the Green Deal and the Just Transition. The Chapter shows that compromising the move to electric cars risk deepening socioeconomic inequalities and weakening its global leadership on the green transition. I will argue that cohesion policy and the Just Transition can counteract powerful lobbies and leverage huge potential in the so called left behind regions.

Recent Developments

The car manufacturing sector has attempted to derail key policies within the EU Green Deal. In 2021, the European Commission proposed a 100% reduction in CO2 reduction for all new cars by 2025, which would in effect ban new petrol and diesel cars.[136] The measure was a central pillar in the EU's 'Fit for 55' legislative package, which aimed to reduce greenhouse gas emission by 55% by 2030 compared to levels in 1990.[137] The proposal was a key part of aligning the transport sector with the Green deal's goal of being climate neutral by 2050.[138] The regulation was approved in February 2023 and was adopted by the Council of the European Union in March 2023.[139]

The proposal was born out of a need to decarbonise the transport sector, which accounts for 25% of the EU's GHG emissions and 7% of its GDP.[140]The Commission assessed that existing CO2 standards were not sufficient to meet the Green Deal targets.[141]

Major German car manufacturers, including Mercedes-Benz, Volkswagen and BMW, actively lobbied for a dilution to the proposal, arguing that the ban will harm them

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[136] 'Fit for 55: Why the EU Is Toughening CO2 Emission Standards for Cars and Vans', Consilium, accessed 31 May 2025, https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/infographics/fit-for-55-emissions-cars-and-vans/.
[137] Ibid.
[138] Ibid.
[139] Ibid.
[140] 'Transport and Mobility', 10 February 2025, https://www.eea.europa.eu/en/topics/in-depth/transport-and-mobility.
[141] Ibid.

economically and is unfeasible technologically.[142]Oliver Zipse, the CEO of BMW, warned that the ban could "significantly shrink the automotive industry"[143] highlighting the damage it will do to Europe's car sector, which is worth over €400 billion to the EU economy.[144]Zipse argued that the regulation would increase dependency on Chinese battery manufacturing, and did not take low carbon fuels, such as e-fuels, into consideration.[145] Carlos Tavares, the CEO of Stellantis, also argued that the financial strain imposed by the 2035 ban would push industry costs up by 40%.[146] He highlighted that increasing costs at this time when consumers are hesitant to purchase high end electric vehicles will lead to plant closures and significant job losses.[147]

Furthermore, political opposition has emerged on the ICE ban, most notably from the European People's Party (EPP), the largest political group in the European Parliament. The EPP leader, Manfred Weber expressed strong concerns regarding the ban, and advocated for the EU to modify the proposal, arguing that a more 'realistic' approach is needed.[148] EPP's lead for climate law, Peter Liese, agreed with this argument, expressing that the ban 'needs to go' and strongly advocated for modifications to the Green Deal that take into account economic realities.[149]

The central concerns of the EPP come from the Green Deal's alleged inability to address the economic impact on Europe's extensive automotive industry.[150] In a draft position paper, the EPP made clear that only a reversal to the ban to allow cars to run on biofuels or other alternative fuels, until 2035 will be economically fair for Europe's automotive manufacturers.[151]

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[142] 'German carmakers urge soften, accessed 31 May 2025, https://www.reuters.com/business/autos-transportation/german-carmakers-urge-eu-soften-electric-car-ban-2022-12-06/.

[143] William Wilkes and Albertina Torsoli, 'BMW CEO Says EU Combustion-Engine Ban "No Longer Realistic"', *Bloomberg.Com*, 15 October 2024, https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2024-10-15/bmw-ceo-says-eu-combustion-engine-ban-is-no-longer-realistic .

[144] *ACEA - European Automobile Manufacturers' Association* (blog), accessed 31 May 2025, https://www.acea.auto/industry/economic-contribution/.

[145] William Wilkes and Albertina Torsoli, Ibid.

[146] Thomson Reuters, 'Stellantis CEO Says EU Carbon Rules Are Pushing Industry Costs up by 40%', *COOL FM | WQXC & WFAT | Battle Creek & Kalamazoo, MI* (blog), accessed 9 May 2025, https://wqxc.com/2024/10/11/stellantis-ceo-says-eu-carbon-rules-are-pushing-industry-costs-up-by-40/.

[147] Ibid.

[148] Balkan Green Energy News, 'Right-Wing Victors in European Election Seek to Scrap 2035 Ban on Combustion Engines', *Balkan Green Energy News* (blog), 11 June 2024, https://balkangreenenergynews.com/right-wing-victors-in-european-election-seek-to-scrap-2035-ban-on-combustion-engines/.

[149] Ibid.

[150] Kate Abnett and Kate Abnett, 'EU's Largest Political Group Pushes to Weaken Combustion Engine Ban', *Reuters*, 10 December 2024, sec. Europe, https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/eus-largest-political-group-pushes-weaken-combustion-engine-ban-2024-12-10/.

[151] Ibid.

Despite the EPP's best efforts in diluting the ban, the Commission has resisted altering the proposal. However, the Commission brought forward the 2026 review of the policy to 2025, and extended compliance deadlines for 2025 emission limits.[152] Furthermore, Germany's Free Democratic Party (FDP) blocked the final approval of the ICE 2035 ban, strongly pushing for exemptions for vehicles that use e-fuels. The move by the FDP was supported by Poland, Italy and Bulgaria.[153]

Analysis

Scholars including Hassel and Palier argue that industrial lobbying in the EU is disproportionately biased towards powerful Member states, which in turn sidelines smaller or less socio-economically powerful Member States.[154]In their view, this leads to 'regulatory capture' where powerful industrial lobbies have better access to decision makers, which undermines EU cohesion and integration.[155] This argument carries weight in the context of the Green Deal, as the powerful car manufacturing lobby has been proven to have better access to decision makers. A further study by Mind the Gap examined the German car industries influence on EU environmental regulations.[156] The study points to the historical lobbying that has taken place with German car manufacturers and Government policy in recent years, going back to early 2015 where Germany delayed the adoption of stricter diesel testing, aligning with the car industry's interests.[157] Lobby control highlighted deep ties between the car industry and the German government, and reveals the combination of economic might and access to government officials made the German car manufacturing lobby a force to be reckoned with. During the Dieselgate scandal in 2017, Lobbycontrol revealed that Chancellor Angela Merkel held multiple meetings with the German car industry, including five with BMW and three with Volkswagen.[158] Meanwhile no meetings were held with

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[152] Kate Abnett and Kate Abnett, 'EU Lawmaker Group to Challenge Combustion Engine Ban This Year', *Reuters*, 12 March 2025, sec. Autos & Transportation, https://www.reuters.com/business/autos-transportation/eu-lawmaker-group-challenge-combustion-engine-ban-this-year-2025-03-12/.

[153] 'Von Der Leyen Fails to Steer a Deal between Berlin and Brussels on Car Engine Ban', POLITICO, 5 March 2023, https://www.politico.eu/article/von-der-leyen-fails-to-steer-a-deal-between-berlin-and-brussels-on-car-engine-ban/.

[154] '(PDF) Who Lobbies the European Union? National Interest Groups in a Multilevel Polity', ResearchGate, accessed 31 May 2025, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/228160131_Who_Lobbies_the_European_Union_National_Interest_Groups_in_a_Multilevel_Polity.

[155] Ibid.

[156] CASE STUDY: The German Car Industry's Regulatory Capture', *Mind the Gap* (blog), accessed 24 May 2025, https://www.mindthegap.ngo/harmful-strategies/utilising-state-power/avoiding-regulations-through-corporate-lobbying/example-the-german-car-industrys-regulatory-capture/

[157] Ibid.

[158] 'CASE STUDY: The German Car Industry's Regulatory Capture', *Mind the Gap* (blog), accessed 24 May 2025, https://www.mindthegap.ngo/harmful-strategies/utilising-state-power/avoiding-regulations-through-corporate-lobbying/example-the-german-car-industrys-regulatory-capture/

environmental or consumer advocacy groups.[159] I take the view that this lobbying distorts cohesion efforts and weakens the legitimacy of EU integration, and shows an alarming level of access from powerful lobby groups, often from Member states that will are less affected by the disastrous impact of climate change.

Zhen Jie et. al argue that the Just Transition should go beyond protection of legacy industries and instead should involve more proactive green job creation in regions that are falling behind.[160] They argue that the lobbying efforts preserves the status quo, which benefits industrialised nations at the disadvantage of others who are trying to progress their economies into a green economy.[161] I believe this argument carries significant weight as we have seen some member states act much slower in turning to EVs- Bulgaria experienced a 20.5% decline in new EV registrations in 2024.[162] I argue that while powerful member states like Germany protect their automotive industries through diluting the Green Deal, regions with a small car sector but higher environmental vulnerability, including Romania, Greece or Spain, do not see the benefits of these compromises. These internal dynamics directly challenge the very principle of the Just Transition, which aims to address regional inequalities during the green transition. I take the view that industrial lobbying reinforces fragmentation and drives divergence among member states. I believe that due to Germany's large and diverse economy, it can on one hand protect it's automotive industry, and then invest in renewable energy on the other- whereas other countries who have less diverse economies cannot do this.

Kluver coins the term 'dual-track lobbying' in the EU, whereby the private industry lobbying of large companies does not align with their public stance.[163]. According to Kluver companies simultaneously preserves brand reputation by placating the strong public sentiment towards the green transition, while actively working behind the scenes to delay or dilute measures that would threaten their economic interests.[164] A study by Influence Map revealed that major automakers, including BMW and Volkswagen have

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[159] 'CASE STUDY: The German Car Industry's Regulatory Capture', *Mind the Gap* (blog), accessed 24 May 2025, https://www.mindthegap.ngo/harmful-strategies/utilising-state-power/avoiding-regulations-through-corporate-lobbying/example-the-german-car-industrys-regulatory-capture/.
[160] 'A Green but Also Just Transition? Variations in Social and Industrial Policy Responses to Industrial Decarbonisation in EU Member States - Zhen Jie Im, Caroline de La Porte, Elke Heins, Andrea Prontera, Dorota Szelewa, 2025', n.d., https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/14680181241246763.
[161] Ibid.
[162] 'Bulgaria: Total EV Stock Grew by 53,5% in 2024 | European Alternative Fuels Observatory', accessed 31 May 2025, https://alternative-fuels-observatory.ec.europa.eu/general-information/news/bulgaria-total-ev-stock-grew-535-2024.
[163] 'Beholden to Lobbies? – DW – 02/14/2013', dw.com, accessed 31 May 2025, https://www.dw.com/en/is-the-eu-beholden-to-lobbyists/a-16597580.
[164] Ibid.

actively lobbied against policies promoting EV's.[165] The study, published in 2024, highlights that despite being publicly supportive of climate policies, the lobbying activity of their industry tells a different story, with a notably low alignment with science-based policies from the automotive industry.[166] This evidence supports a central argument of this thesis - that industrial lobbying is undermining the EU's climate ambitions and EU cohesion. The divergence between public support, in order to satisfy an environmentally conscious public as outlined by the aforementioned Eurobarometer study, the private lobbying efforts exemplify the internal fragmentation on the Green Deal, hampering its path to success.

Sandmann et. Al discuss the challenges with the Just Transition given it is interpreted and implemented in different ways across the EU, with the study focusing on differing interpretations in Finland, Germany, France and Romania.[167] The study states that the variety of interpretations of the just transition have led to significant inconsistencies with policy implementation, which in turn has affected the allocation of funds and responsibilities.[168] This argument is supported by Romania's struggles to use funds for green transitions in mobility or industrial renewal projects, mainly due to limited capacity and differing interpretations.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I believe that the success of the Green Deal is intrinsically linked to the strength of EU cohesion. Taken together, the evidence gathered in this thesis have demonstrated the extent to which the Green Deal has been systematically watered down by entrenched industrial lobbies in the farming, energy and automobile sector.

As highlighted at length in this thesis, industrial forces and lobbying counteract the progress made on the Green Deal, leading to policy rollbacks. This in spite of the clear evidence surrounding climatic events affecting everything from farmer yields to flooding, exacerbating regional socio-economic disparities across Europe.

To uphold the values of the Just Transition, I believe that the EU must be more strategic with the way it allocates its Cohesion funds and Just Transition funds. The case has been made clear that stronger intervention is needed to avoid vested interest led market forces watering down the Green Deal. I have argued that EU cohesion is not only integral to counteract powerful industrial lobbying, but a powerful to counteract populist

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[165] 'InfluenceMap Automaker Lobbying Against Climate Policy Threatens the Electric Vehicle Transition', accessed 31 May 2025, https://influencemap.org/pressrelease/Automaker-Lobbying-Against-Climate-Policy-Threatens-the-Electric-Vehicle-Transition-28103.
[166] Ibid.
[167] Leona Sandmann et al., 'The European Green Deal and Its Translation into Action: Multilevel Governance Perspectives on Just Transition', *Energy Research & Social Science* 115 (1 September 2024): 103659, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.erss.2024.103659.
[168] Ibid.

narratives that we have seen surrounding the Farm to Fork strategy and the ICE ban. The Just Transition Fund has the ability to fill gaps left by existing payment schemes such as the CAP and can help target the worst regions effected by climate change, learning from the success of existing projects funded by schemes such as the ERDF.

While the Green Deal lays out an ambitious plan towards sustainability, its effectiveness will remain limited unless the EU reclaims policy space from powerful industrial actors and imposes stricter conditionality on funding. The powerful lobbies, bolstered by privileged access to decision makers, have actively worked to dilute the EU's environmental ambition for their own interests. This imbalance distorts the principle of the Just Transition and reflect a deep fragmentation across the bloc. Without stronger intervention and more strategic use of Just Transition and Cohesion Funds, the Green Deal risks becoming a fragmented patchwork of ideas, implemented at different speeds, that further pushes regional divides across the EU.

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