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**Environmental Policy Ambition and Hypocrisy
in the European Parliament, European Commission,
and Council of the European Union**

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Introduction.

The European Union (EU) – the amorphous supranational body that is unable to fulfill the criteria of a federation, yet far exceeds the mandate of an international organization – has been a work in progress since its inception in 1951 as the European Coal and Steel Community (Chirapascanut, 2023). 70 years later, as the EU continues to challenge the norms of inter-state cooperation, the environment has found itself to be a cornerstone in the Union’s reputation. Widely regarded as a masterclass in adopting ambitious policies and challenging the status quo, the EU first became a beacon of environmental friendliness in the 1980s upon the adoption of the Single European Act (SEA) (Kurrer & Lipcaneanu, 2023; Burns, 2019). This act set the stage for overarching environmental policies under which member states were obligated to comply. Through its layered institutions, the EU was able to promote environmentalism across member states and around the world, so much so that it has become a source of identity for European policymakers.

Environmental policies in the EU range from issues of reducing pollution and biodiversity conservation to resource use and circular economy, to regulating chemicals and protecting water sources (Kurrer & Lipcaneanu, 2023). This broad mandate has granted the European Parliament, European Commission, and Council of the European Union jurisdiction over diverse subject matter that has resulted in the adoption of more than 1,500 unique policies since 1992 (European Environment Agency, 2021). Most environmental policies are triggered by larger directives, a form of legislation that obligates member states to reach its objective, however does not require any specific approaches to accomplishing mandated goals (EU Publications Office, n. d.).

While the achievement of implementing these many policies is commendable, experts hypothesize that the ambition behind newer policies has waned since the Eurozone crisis struck in 2010 (Burns & Tobin, 2016). The EU has been lauded as an environmental leader ad infinitum, but do their actions in the last decade uphold this reputation? Evidence suggests that the EU is employing more face-saving mechanisms than it is ambitious environmental policy. To determine if there is validity to this hypothesis, I will review literature regarding the environmental attitudes of each of the three legislative institutions of the EU. Within this literature, I will analyze the perception that each institution has of its environmental ambition since the Eurozone crisis and compare this to the actual actions toward environmental policy. Finally, I will discuss the reason that a lack of ambition may or may not have been detected, and I will relate this to the European Union's long-term environmental goals.

The European Parliament: a beacon of consistency despite crisis.

The European Parliament maintains democracy within the European Union, and, despite its formerly limited power, has made environmental issues a major component of its policy (Burns, 2019). In fact, environmental advocacy helped this institution expand its influence over the European Commission and Council of the European Union (the Council). 705 elected Members of the European Parliament convene alongside the Council to serve as a legislative body for the European Union. The Parliament has adopted its own environmental policy, with the opening statement claiming that:

“The European Parliament recognizes its responsibility for making a positive contribution to sustainable development as a long-term goal. Parliament fulfils this responsibility in its political and legislative role, but also in the way it operates and the decisions it takes on a day-to-day basis.” (Sassoli & Welle, 2019).

This policy covers the commitments that the European Parliament must follow to uphold ecologically sound organizational practices, following the rising trend of corporate and institutional social responsibility across the globe. Its influence over environmental matters, however, has been more conservative since the introduction of ordinary legislative procedures (Burns, 2019). In a bid to promote success in its co-legislative role with the Council, its approach to environmental policies has been more conservative to ensure those policies remain attractive enough for member states to agree to their adoption. This is a stark contrast to the ambition that was present upon the advent of the SEA. What is more, politically right-wing coalitions formed by Members of the European Parliament have begun to form voting coalitions against environmental matters that come across the floor (Burns, 2019).

Though the perfect storm of multiple crises has stifled the urgency of environmental policy within the European Parliament, legislators have remained vigorous to continue promoting environmental interests when possible (Burns, 2019). Following the Eurozone crisis of 2010-2015 (Gourinchas, Marin, & Messer, 2023) spending priorities were focused on stabilizing the economy and re-legitimizing the Euro. Much to the dismay of many European environmentalists, their interests were not deemed a high priority and environmental policies requiring economic investments were regarded as a luxury that could not be afforded by Member States (Burns, 2019). While this downturn in environmental policy at the height of the Eurozone crisis is an expected symptom of economic strain, this event has, luckily, not instigated a prolonged trend against environmental policy within the parliament.

With this being said, the European Parliament is the only institution of the main legislative authorities that has upheld its commitment to the environment through tangible actions (Badell & Rosell, 2021; Burns, 2019). Between 2004 and 2016 there was a steady decline

in the number of environmentally minded proposals reviewed by the Parliament, however the ambition of their content remained relatively stable over that time period (Burns, 2019). Further, the European Parliament has engaged in strong institutional measures for its personal sustainability such as green product procurement, the only governing institution to do so (Badell & Rossel, 2021). Aside from having measurable outcomes toward the progress of their sustainable development goals, this is also an indication that the Parliament is willing to endorse monetary investments in pursuit of the EU's reputation as a green leader. Further, there is evidence suggesting that, while the Parliament is not actively proposing new policies, they are taking measures to strengthen existing policies that tackle figuratively low-hanging fruit such as single-use plastic waste reduction.

The European Commission: hypocrisy of the highest order.

The Von der Leyen presidency of the European Commission is one that has repeatedly proclaimed its interest in the environment over the last 4 years of its term (Von der Leyen, 2023). In particular, it has been characterized by the December 2019 proposal of the European Green Deal (Directorate-General for Communication, n. d.). The Commission is responsible for setting targets that member states must achieve to promote climate action, a successful pursuit credited to positioning environmental interests as trade issues (Knill, Steinbach, & Fernández-i-Marín, 2020). While the original goal of this strategy was to bring member states on board with the idea that a healthy environment would protect free trade, the measures put forth by the Commission quickly expanded beyond the movement of goods. The Commission, composed of 27 appointed Commissioners each representing a member state, has become known for employing mild manipulation tactics to leverage political dynamics in favour of environmental concerns. This combination of detecting unique entry points for policy, as well as its ability to appeal to member

states, is part of the reason that the Commission could push ambitious and overarching policies during the late 1980s and through the 1990s (Knill, Steinbach, & Fernández-i-Marín, 2020). Specific Directorate Generals exist that seek to uphold topics of interest for the Commission, some of which include the Environment, Climate Action, and Energy Directorate Generals.

This reputation, however, has not been shared amongst all Commission Presidents. For example, under the preceding Juncker presidency (2014 – 2019), the environment was effectively absent from any policy directions put forth by the commissioner (Čavoški, 2015). Priorities were instead on economic reform and EU growth, with the only mention of the environment falling under the umbrella of ‘energy’. This presidency seemingly sowed the seeds of hypocrisy within the commission, as its priorities were unabashedly out of alignment with EU environmental principles at the time, including the Environmental Action Programme, the single guiding agenda for environmental policy in the Union (Directorate-General for Environment, n. d. [a]). The Commission has become guilty of failing to uphold actions that favour environmental priorities: following the Eurozone crisis, the introduction of new environmental policies dropped off significantly, and the ambition of what few policies were proposed suffered greatly (Knill, Steinbach, & Fernández-i-Marín, 2020). Further, infringement proceedings on environmental policies have been increasingly pursued with no condemning verdicts being granted, suggesting that upholding enacted environmental legislation is not a primary concern of the Commission. This evidence is corroborated by the European Commission deeming green product procurement an inappropriate measure to include in directives from the Environment or Climate Action directorates (Badell & Rosell, 2021).

This has all unfolded in parallel with the publication of over 250 documents from the Environment directorate since 2009 (Directorate-General for Environment, n.d. [b]), including a sharp increase in publications since 2020, as seen in Figure 1.

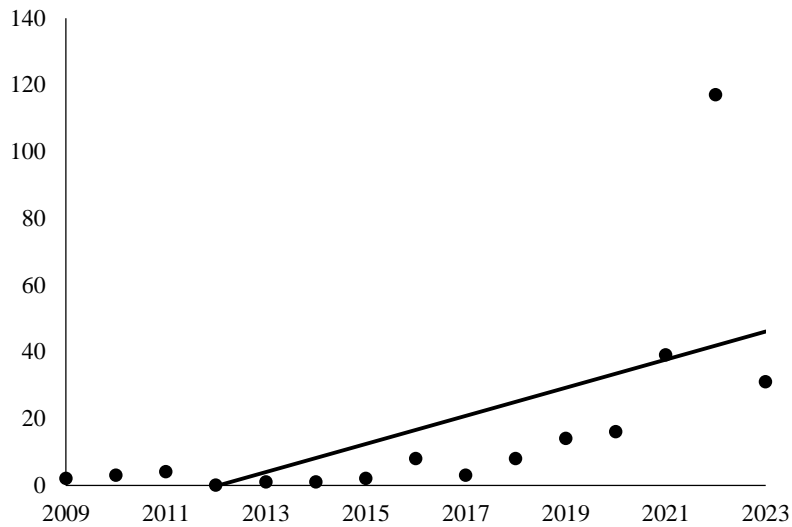


Figure 1. Number of publications from the EU Commission’s Environment Directorate General over time, where solid points represent the number of publications for the year, and the solid line summarizes the average number of publications over the sampled time period. Data adapted from Directorate-General for Environment (n.d. [b]).

The increased number of publications occurring alongside decreased policy adoption and legal enforcement contributes to literature claiming that the Commission has become hypocritical. From this data, it stands to reason that the EU is more willing to perform research and provide recommendations on topics about the environment than it is willing to apply that information to tangible actions.

The Council of the European Union: domestic and international claims of glory.

The Council of the European Union (the Council) is a co-legislative body alongside the European Parliament that consists of ministers representing 10 separate topics, called configurations (General Secretariate of the Council, 2023). For this exploration of ingenuine environmental actions within EU institutions, the Environment Configuration will be of the

utmost interest. This particular configuration is assembled four times per year where discussions about European Commission policy initiatives are held. Alongside the Parliament, decisions are made regarding the pursuit of environmental policy. Such decisions are made through the continual reviewing and approval or denial of amendments by the Parliament and the Council through respective readings by each body (Selin & VanDeveer, 2015). The vast majority of environmental legislation brought before the Council requires only one reading, with a mere 11% of cases requiring second or third readings.

There is a dissonance that exists, however, between the proclamations of the Council and the policies it approves in its configuration meetings. Returning to our running example of green product procurement as an indicator for institutional environmental attitudes, the Council has publicly announced its interest in this particular act of sustainable development, however has made no effort to pursue such a mandate in earnest (Badell & Rosell, 2021). This remains true for other policy pursuits: despite good intentions, the Council falls victim to frequent industry lobbying that impedes – and often ceases – considerations for environmental policies that may influence EU economics (Wurzel et al., 2019). Many of the issues the Council faces with actions being incompatible with its declarations come back to power at the Member State level. Ministers must accurately represent their States' interests, including when national priorities are not aligned with environmental issues. The intergovernmental nature of the Council, therefore, may contribute to its hypocrisy, whether intentional or not (Burns, Eckersley, & Tobin, 2020). In fact, a relatively clear divide has arisen between Council Ministers, one that can be best described as an East-West split. After the 2004 period of enlargement, special provisions were given to member states, excusing them from environmental policies if they could provide evidence of an urgent need to first repair their economies. This has translated into a continuous

lack of interest in the environment from Eastern member states, and a subsequent overcompensation from those in the West (Burns, Eckersley, & Tobin, 2020). The main leaders of environmental actions have grown tired of the expectation to uphold the entire Union's ideals, and so the Council's ambition with environmental policy has been suppressed.

The duplicity of environmental attitudes also translates to the international scale due to the Council's close involvement in preparing positions for global conferences (Çelik, 2022). This is arguably the most important arena for upholding perceptions of the EU as an environmental leader and leads the Council to prepare statements that have little substance for personal action. These opinions make suggestions for policy avenues that *should* be pursued, however are non-committal for the EU or any other organization. Generally, this approach to conferences and the like is rooted in a desire to respond to the expectations of the international populous instead of being frank about their intentions and realistic about what can be accomplished.

Conclusion.

While it is undeniable that the European Union has blazed a trail for environmental policy and international cooperation on climate change, the research presented in this paper provides reason to believe that ambition and true commitment to upholding European values have been in decline since the mid-2000s. From my research, it is clear that the European Commission and the Council of the European Union are the limiting factors for environmental policy ambition within the Union as a whole (Knill, Steinbach, & Fernández-i-Marín, 2020; Burns, Eckersley, & Tobin, 2020). The Commission, responsible for putting forward legislation and policies to the Parliament and the Council, has struggled to maintain the momentum of its proposals since the Eurozone crisis, making it more difficult for the Parliament and Council to have ambitious policies to adopt. A further issue perpetuating the loss of environmental consciousness in policies

is a form of burnout plaguing Ministers at the Council (Burns, Eckersley, & Tobin, 2020). Unequal distributions of responsibility between member states when it comes to upholding environmental policies have promoted a disinterest in pursuing cutting-edge legislation. Seeing as the Council and the Parliament work laterally with one another, this makes it difficult for the Parliament to reach the full potential of its unchanged attitude toward leveraging legislation in favour of the environment.

Being in the unique position of having not one but three legislative institutions to coordinate around issues of environmental policy, the EU may be at risk of sustaining this trend: evidence suggests that, under current EU environmental policies, 2030 carbon emission reduction targets will not be met (Commission to the European Parliament et al., 2023). It is clear, therefore, that hypocrisy at the supranational level is leading to dangerous levels of stalling on unignorable environmental issues. This can be rectified by reinstating the idea that publicly held opinions of the Commissions, such as those expressed through publications, serve as grounds to expect the EU to take appropriate action on an issue (Schoenefeld & Jordan, 2019). Continued election of environmentally-minded members of parliament can continue this momentum, and lobbying for pro-environmental policies – as opposed to industry-based lobbying that is taking place at the moment – can reignite environmental ambition in the Council (Grey, 2018).

With its identity at stake, the European Union is forced to reckon with its motivations for taking action in favour of the environment. Becoming stuck in a continual crisis-response mode has made it difficult to promote genuine environmental policy across the continent of Europe. To move beyond face saving mechanisms and empty promises, the EU must address the lack of ambition and presence of hypocrisy within its legislative institutions.

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