

From 2020 to 2030, from Copenhagen to Paris: a mindset change for the European climate policy?

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The European Councils of March 2007 and October 2014 have defined the major guidelines of the European climate policy for the **2010-2020 and 2020-2030 decades**. These commitments have then been used as negotiation roadmaps for two major conferences on climate held under the United-Nations umbrella, in **Copenhagen in 2009** and in **Paris in December 2015**. In both cases, the aim was, and still is, to reach a global agreement to take over the Kyoto Protocol. The first one was a failure for the European diplomacy and all hopes are now placed in the second, which may well be the **last chance** for the international climate talks.

After seven years, **timeframes look similar but the context is very different**. Domestically, the **economic crisis** has constrained the investment capacity of Member States and pushed competitiveness higher in the ranks of priorities. Internationally, the centre of gravity of energy demand and greenhouse gases emissions has shifted to **emerging countries**¹, advocating for an update of the North-South paradigm which had governed the Kyoto protocol. Lastly, although there is no coordinated action against global warming at this stage, **the urgent need to act receives a wider support** and more and more initiatives are taken, such as the ones recently announced by China and the United-States.

Because of these elements, among others, the EU cannot simply extend the approach initiated seven years ago. **The European climate policy opens a new chapter** and the conclusions of the European Council of October 2014 have clearly set the tone. A change of mindset may have occurred, in the sense that the 2030

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¹ As of 2007, the annual emissions of industrialised to annex I of the United Nations' Framework Convention on Climate Change went below the emissions of developing countries (non-annex I). (WRI, 2014)

targets **reaffirm Europe's commitment** to the shift towards a low carbon economy, while instigating **more flexibility** to ensure stronger cost-effectiveness. It is a strong signal for the world but this renewed approach still needs to be **consolidated**, both in the way of implementing the key reforms announced and in the way of approaching the Paris conference.

I. “Lead by example”, a strategy running out of steam?

The agreement between heads of states and governments was finally reached in October, although it was initially foreseen for the March European Council. The news triggered **relief** in Brussels. Further postponement might have put the EU at risk of not being able to fulfil its commitment, taken in Warsaw in 2013, to submit its **post-2020 “contribution”** well ahead of the Paris conference. Reflecting the prevalent state of mind, Jose Manuel Barroso declared that *“this agreement keeps Europe firmly in the driving seat in international climate talks”*. Europe actually managed to avoid the threat of breaking the UN dynamics by giving the impression it was moving backwards.

Considering the divergent views between Member States, the likelihood of a disappointing outcome was real. Member States of Central and Eastern Europe have an energy mix largely dominated by coal and a GDP per capita below the one of their Western neighbours. Gathered in the **Visegrad group² led by Poland**, they tried to restrain the European ambitions for fear of competitiveness losses. On the opposite side, the members of the **Green Growth group³** pushed for a strong action but without agreeing on which instruments to favour. The energy transition is a central theme for all members of this group but they have decided to take different roads to get there, with for example Germany betting mostly on renewables and the United-Kingdom determined to make nuclear energy and natural gas the two main pillars of its energy future. Consensus on the way beyond 2020 was very difficult to reach and this is in particular because the 2007 approach has led to mixed results.

3x20 objectives soon reached but inconsistencies are evident

If the European climate policy is to be judged according to CO₂ emissions reduction, then it can be considered a success. In 2012, total emissions of the EU were 18% lower compared to the 1990 levels. Based on the Member States' projections, **emissions are set to decrease by 21% in 2020 compared to 1990** (EC, 2014a). The EU is therefore well on track to meet its target. However, this performance is not attributable to the European policies only. It is also the result of the economic recession, which contributed to almost half of emissions reductions linked to the combustion of fossil fuels over 2008-2012 (EEA, 2014).

The main criticism of the 3x20 relates to its **inconsistencies**. The EU has not opted for full technological neutrality to achieve its emissions reduction. As a complement to carbon pricing with the European Trading Scheme (ETS), the decision was made to provide a specific support to two areas; the deployment of renewable sources with a binding 20% target of electricity demand coverage and further energy efficiency with an indicative 20% target for energy consumption reduction compared to 2020 projections. This multi-faceted approach finds its justification in the **pursuit of objectives that are complementary** to emissions reduction. For instance, it aims at reinforcing the EU's energy security but also at favouring learning experience for technologies that are deemed essential in the perspective

² Group led by Poland and gathering Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Hungary, Romania and Slovakia

³ Group gathering Belgium, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Portugal, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden and the United Kingdom

of a fully decarbonised energy system. Beyond these objectives, **controlling the interactions between the different mechanisms in place has proven very complex**. In the context of the economic crisis with electricity demand decreasing, the large scale deployment of renewables, helped by support schemes, has amplified the decrease in carbon allowances demand (see in particular EC 2014b; Van den Bergh and al., 2013; Weigt and al., 2013, Gloaguen and Alberola, 2014). Whereas this market was supposed to become the flagship of European climate policy, the surplus in allowances has led to a **sharp drop in carbon prices**, reaching 4.5€/t in July 2013 and then stabilising around 5-7€/t in 2014. Because of these undesirable developments, the carbon market has not allowed for a credible price signal to emerge and to really influence the choices of market players, neither on short term (fuel switching) nor on long term (investments in the lowest emitting technologies). In the power sector, the use of coal plants increased at the expense of gas plants, although the latter emit twice as less CO₂. The carbon price remains too low to counterbalance the decrease of coal prices in Europe (IEA, 2014). It is clear that emissions have declined since the launch of the 3x20 objectives but **the cost-effectiveness of the abatements is questioned**. In addition, **the lack of a strong and stable signal** hampers investment decisions taking into account the carbon constraint and thus **endangers Europe's ability to reach its emissions targets at the lowest cost on the longer term**.

When climate ambitions face the competitiveness challenge

In 2007, the European Council opened its conclusions noting that Europe was *“enjoying an economic upswing and [that] reforms [were] starting to translate into growth and jobs”*. In October 2014, the economic situation is much bleaker and the dominant question is whether Europe can still afford its leadership position on climate, without putting at risk industrial competitiveness and vulnerable consumers.

The first issue of concern is that, because of the climate policy, European market players face such additional costs compared with their international competitors that it would lead them to **relocate their activities and investments beyond the borders of Europe**. However, the carbon price remains very low and the industrial activities that are highly emitting and exposed to international trade are protected by the free allocation of allowances. To date, academic literature concludes that there is **no empirical proof of carbon leakage** for these sectors (Marcu and al, 2013).

Carbon pricing has not been a hurdle for European competitiveness but **the rising costs of energy have become a major concern**. Electricity prices for industrial customers are now twice higher in Europe than in the United-States and Russia and 20% higher than in China (EC, 2014c). Many factors can explain the price differentials and climate action is one of them, in particular **policies supporting renewables**. Besides the cost of the subsidy to the producer, network costs to integrate these new sources have to be added, as well as system costs to manage their intermittency. Finally, the advantages granted to renewables affect the business model of the other production means. Because the latter remain essential for the security of electricity supplies, setting new remuneration schemes becomes necessary. The sum of these costs represents a **considerable surplus on electricity bills**, and it is largely due to a poorly-controlled development rate for renewables (Cruciani, 2014). The impact of climate policy on energy costs is also a sensitive issue because, in the meantime, **the United-States**, one of the EU's biggest trade partners, **have become more competitive** in some sectors including petrochemicals (Cornot-Gandolphe, 2013), while the emissions of

the power sector have decreased since 2005⁴ (EIA, 2014), **thanks to shale gas developments.**

The “lead by example” strategy meant going ahead on its own in the first place, demonstrating that it is a winning choice and thus inspire global action. The EU’s GDP did increase by 45% between 1990 and 2012 while emissions decreased by 18% but this decoupling is **not enough for Europe to be a real flagship of green growth**, neither from the point of view of citizens, nor from the point of view of the other parties to the negotiation. **Europe has been a prime-mover on climate action but it can only be in a leadership position if it achieves greater cost-effectiveness.**

II. Towards 2030, reaffirming the commitment while adjusting the instruments

The EU’s cumulated emissions over the period 1850-2011 (WRI, 2014) are the second largest behind those of the US. Pushing forward its climate policy over the 2020-2030 decade therefore means that the EU commits to fulfilling its historical responsibilities. The European Council of October 2014 expressed support for a binding 40% emissions reduction target, a 27% target share of renewables in energy consumption that is binding at the EU level and finally a non-binding 27% target for energy efficiency. With such targets, Europe confirms to its partners that it believes firmly in the potential of the low carbon economy, despite its current difficulties for finding a way out of the crisis.

The long term trajectory is now confirmed

In October 2009, the European Council set the objective of **reducing emissions by 80-95% compared with 1990 levels by 2050**. This long term target is based on the fourth evaluation report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) published in 2007⁵, which included a calculation of the efforts necessary to limit temperature rise to 2°C. This exercise showed that industrialised countries should commit to emission reduction ranges of 25-45% in 2020 and 80-95% below 1990 levels in 2030. The impact assessment published jointly with the Commission’s proposal of January 2014 indicates that, **with these -40% in 2030, Europe is in a position to reach its 2050 objectives**. Nonetheless, this conclusion has been challenged. Some argue that the efforts are too slow and will force Europe to double its annual emissions reduction rate over 2030-2050, compared with the 2010-2030 period (Ecofys, 2014).

Whether this agreement is ambitious or not is debatable. It is true that **the sole implementation of measures already enacted will already lead the EU to reduce its emissions by 32% by 2030** (EC, 2014d). The reference scenario fulfils part of the task but the remaining efforts to reach the additional eight points are not negligible, in particular because the “easiest” reductions have been performed in the last decade and because the EU will no longer be able to use the international credits obtained thanks to the implementation of projects beyond the borders of Europe. What is clear is that **the EU remains more ambitious than its major partners**, when it comes to emissions reductions.

⁴ Between 2005 and 2013, replacing the most polluting fossil fuels (coal and oil) by natural gas led to avoid emitting 1 billion tones of CO₂. This being said, the use of coal plants has been increasing in 2013, because of the increase of natural gas prices. (EIA, 2014)

⁵ IPCC, 4th Assessment Report, Climate Change 2007: Working Group III: Mitigation of Climate Change, chapter 13.3.3 Proposals for climate change agreements, box 13.7

In their recent agreement with China, the United-States offered to reduce their emissions by 26-28% in 2025 compared to 2005 levels. This means doubling the annual reduction rate over 2020-2025 for it to reach 2.3-2.8% compared with 1.2% over 2015-2020. This being said, it is equivalent to a decrease of -16% in 2025 compared with 1990 levels, which remains below the European goals.

The target is therefore **ambitious indeed, without being bold**. At least, it **confirms the long term trajectory**, which is essential to avoid the lock-in effect and sustainably drive investments towards the low carbon economy.

Flexibility as the new motto

For 2030, the EU moves partly away from the famous trio renewables – emissions reduction – energy efficiency and **makes the -40% emissions target the central piece of its strategy**. This new focus is presented as the **least-cost pathway** to achieve the low carbon economy and would also indirectly increase the share of renewables and improve energy efficiency (EC, 2014d).

It is a clear **reflection of the challenges raised by the fast deployment of renewables over the last years**. Within the Green Growth group, the United-Kingdom showed strong opposition to an extension of the renewables targets for all Member States. For the British, the target support to renewables is not always compatible with a decarbonisation trajectory at the least cost and introduces a bias in innovation efforts, at the expense of carbon capture and storage technologies for instance. More broadly, given the interferences with the ETS and the impact on electricity bills, Member States agreed to the idea of **optimising the development of renewables of the EU scale**. The 27% target of energy consumption coverage is therefore binding at the EU level but not complemented with a precise burden sharing. **Member States have thus gained flexibility** for reaching their emissions target and they can take better account of to their national circumstances and priorities.

Flexibility is also guaranteed for the members of the Visegrad group who feared that the European ambitions on climate would reveal too costly. In the first place, it was decided to maintain the free allocation of allowances for industries exposed to a risk of carbon leakage as well as the compensation of direct and indirect carbon costs. In the second place, efforts to reduce emissions in the ETS and non-ETS sectors are still differentiated according to Member States' financial capabilities. In addition, Member States with a GDP per capita lower than 60% of the European average still have the possibility to allocate allowances for free to their energy sector and a new 2% reserve of allowances is created to finance investments for modernizing the energy systems of the same countries. Looking at these concessions, Ewa Kopacz, the Prime Minister of Poland could announce right after the European Council that **“the new are good for the Poles”**.

Last flexibility tool, Member States with significantly higher emissions reduction targets than the European average will now be able to adjust the burden sharing between their ETS and non-ETS sectors. They will have the possibility to use carbon allowances (from the ETS) to cover part of the emissions of their non-ETS sector which includes transport, agriculture and also buildings. **This new provision will benefit those Member States which have long engaged in reducing the emissions of their non-ETS sectors** and are now struggling to achieve further improvements.

This **flexible approach** played a crucial role in building consensus between Member States

and in alleviating concerns about cost escalation. The 2030 targets can be a success for Europe but the challenge is now to consolidate the change and meet the next challenges, both internally and externally.

III. The year 2015 as a demonstration of European climate policy success

To live up to expectations, Europe still needs to translate the Council's conclusions into concrete actions, to transform its carbon market into a robust instrument and to help reaching a global agreement on climate in December 2015. If this is achieved, then this second chapter of the European climate policy will have taken a very good start.

One priority: reducing the uncertainties around the future of the ETS

The European commitment will only be considered credible once the issue of the surplus of carbon allowances is addressed. Raising the emissions reduction objectives for 2030 is a step in the right direction as it will progressively reduce the amount of allowances allocated each year. However, recent experience has also shown that it should be made possible to **adjust the volume in circulation**, according to the economic situation and the decrease in emissions obtained with instruments other than the carbon market. Without that, the carbon price cannot provide **a signal that is sufficiently strong, stable and predictable to drive investments towards emissions reduction in a long term perspective**.

To reinforce the **resilience of the ETS against imbalances**, the European Council expressed its support for the Commission's proposal to introduce a **market stability reserve** for the fourth implementation phase, which is to start in 2021. This mechanism aims at adjusting automatically the volume of allowances that is auctioned each year according to predefined rules. In its January proposal, the Commission suggested to put allowances in the reserve (12% of the allowances in circulation) if the surplus reaches a certain threshold (above 833Mt) and to free up allowances (100Mt) when the surplus goes below another threshold (400Mt). These triggering conditions are now being discussed within the Parliament and EU Council and the text is to be finalised by July 2015.

Volume-based rules are preferred over price-based rules, which could have taken the form of floor and ceiling prices keeping the European carbon price within an acceptable range. Quantitative triggers get a wider support because they would introduce less distortion in the functioning of the ETS, which aims at providing a carbon price signal that is not established by political leaders but by market forces (EC, 2014c). Defining the relevant **range of prices** could lead to controversial debates and reinforce the fears of carbon leakage but **it would also provide greater comfort for investors in low carbon technologies**. According to the Commission's impact assessment, the market stability reserve, as proposed in January, would bring back the surplus to a volume of 500 millions in 2030 (CE, 2014d). The Commission indicates that this mechanism should support the carbon price but acknowledges that the impact is difficult to model. In addition, there is still the possibility that the 900 millions of allowances frozen in 2014 get back into the market in 2019 and this could also mean a radical change.

The EU Council and the Parliament have therefore the crucial task to **reduce the grey areas around the future of the ETS**. To achieve this goal, they have to determine the practical details for the functioning of the market stability reserve by ensuring that they will **allow market players to build their anticipations on a continuous and stable rise of the**

carbon price.

Prepare for the Paris conference with less rigidity

The **Copenhagen** conference was a **blow to the EU's self-image** (Herrero and Knaepen, 2014). The European ambitions had been clearly laid down⁶. The aim was to include all countries in a **binding agreement** compelling industrialised countries to efforts similar to those of the EU (reducing emissions by 30% in 2020 compared to 1990 levels) and the most advanced developing countries to some mitigation efforts (reducing emissions by 15 to 30% in 2020). With such burden sharing, one could hope to limit the temperature rise to 2°C compared to pre-industrial levels. However, the European stance proved to be **too normative to gather support** (Bäckstrand and Elgström, 2013). Europe was even **sidelined** in the last steps of the negotiation, set aside from the strategic discussions between the United-States and emerging economies led by China (Müller Kraenner and Kremer, 2010).

Nonetheless, Copenhagen succeeded in bringing forward a new approach to climate negotiations. This new **“bottom up” approach** translated the following year into submissions of national emissions reduction plans to the United-Nations. **These voluntary pledges have however been considered as insufficient** to meet the 2°C trajectory (UNEP, 2011). **For 2015, a hybrid approach is now envisaged** because parties to the convention defined in 2011 in Durban a roadmap which should lead to *“a protocol, another legal instrument or an agreed outcome with legal force”*. The **legal constraint** comes up again but the process remains partly “bottom up” because the outcome of the conference should build upon **national contributions** that parties committed to submit by spring 2015.

The EU has been a driving force in the definition of this hybrid approach, more inclusive than the one it advocated for in 2009 but still ambitious. This said, as for domestic policy, the EU must take up the challenge in 2015, if it wants to contribute to a successful COP21. The remaining key question relates to the actual legal force that will be given to the various components of the Paris agreement. The **first-best option** for the EU would certainly be to achieve **binding national commitments** on emissions reduction but clinging to this position could mean being sidelined again because, although more countries are now ready for climate action, the international control of emissions remains a difficult point.

The idea of a **“procedural” agreement** finds its way in negotiation circles (C2ES, 2014) and it is probably **in the interests of the EU to support it**. The Paris agreement would **confirm the long term ambition**, which is to stick to the +2°C trajectory, and **introduce a new process** according to which parties would regularly submit their contributions, in terms of reduction targets and associated measures, and commit to common verification measures. The contributions for the first phase (2020-2025 or 2020-2030) would be annexes to the agreement and would not be binding as such. If this solution can guarantee a large participation to the agreement, then the EU must deploy all its efforts to give it full strength. It would mean in particular **clarifying the nature of these national contributions** to make them comparable, **ensuring that the review of contributions leads to driving up the national ambitions**, but also **reinforcing the verification tools** to enable proper measurement of the progress achieved. Here again, it is by **being more flexible, but without denying its ambitions**, that the EU can effectively contribute to building a dynamic

⁶ EC's Communication of 28 January 2009 and conclusions of the European Council of 29-30 October 2009

and credible agreement, which would lastingly engage the world in the shift towards the low carbon economy.

Conclusion

A shift of mindset is taking place in Brussels. Taking into account the changes that occurred since 2007, the EU is setting a new milestone towards the low carbon economy while adjusting its implementation strategy. In short, the European climate policy strives to become more efficient, **still ambitious but more flexible**. This reaffirmed long term commitment is a **strong signal for market players and for Europe's partners in the climate negotiations**. However, the road ahead is still long and bumpy. The EU will need to keep being ambitious when implementing the Council's guidance, in particular with regards to the ETS reform, and to demonstrate flexibility to reach an inclusive and credible agreement in December 2015. If next year's objectives are delivered effectively, the European climate policy can become a **significant achievement, valuable for the world and for its own citizens**.

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