

The post- EU elections roadmap: building bloc- wide support for Europe's environmental revolution

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An aerial photograph of a city, likely Brussels, showing a mix of urban buildings and green spaces. In the foreground, there is a large field of solar panels. The image is overlaid with a blue gradient on the left side.

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Europe finds itself at a crossroads on climate policy in the aftermath of its recent Parliamentary elections. With far-right parties gaining influence and energy costs squeezing citizens, public backing for ambitious climate action is at stake. At this critical juncture, Friends of Europe convened policymakers, advocates and representatives from academia and civil society organization to discuss ensuring Europe's transition to net zero is both fair and fast.

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Paula Pinho, from the European Commission

Paula Pinho from the European Commission outlined the challenge of cutting emissions while keeping costs down, with over 40 million Europeans struggling with energy poverty. As the European Commission Director in charge of the Just Transition, Consumers, Energy Security and Efficiency, Pinho remarked: “I have the privilege of bringing together three pillars, which are affordability, sustainability and security, all within the same department. It's a privilege, but it's also a challenge, because these objectives often do not converge. It's really difficult to 'square the circle'”.

Pinho shed light on the scale of the challenge, noting over 40 million Europeans currently struggle with energy poverty. With winter energy costs surging due to the Ukraine war, the EU has intervened to help citizens heat their homes. Yet long-term solutions are still needed. Pinho advocated legislative changes like reforming electricity markets to help renewable energy undercut fossil fuels on price. Substantial public financing will also be vital. From COVID recovery funds to new social climate investments, billions of euros are flowing into home retrofits and clean tech rollout. But as Europe accelerates its emissions cuts, Pinho stressed the need to carefully consider the social impacts and ensure vulnerable groups can afford the shift to a green economy.

Former energy commissioner **Andris Piebalgs** reflected on Europe's progress in transitioning to a green economy. He noted that while fossil fuels drove past development, climate change now poses an existential risk if left unaddressed.

Piebalgs outlined major achievements under previous Commission's mandates that may seem obvious today, like unbundling energy markets, but faced strong opposition when first implemented. However, he warned that Europe risks falling

behind if it fails to continue supporting low-carbon innovation. “On my agenda there have been a couple of difficult issues that later worked, like unbundling. Today you would speak with anybody; ‘It’s like ABC’. At the time they would say ‘It’s completely madness’. In politics, things evolve.”

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Andris Piebalgs, Former energy commissioner

The Latvian politician emphasised that meeting mid-century climate neutrality goals will require unprecedented state intervention. Policies must be carefully designed to aid those most in need, not just the wealthy. Piebalgs cautioned that poorly targeted measures could fuel a political backlash against climate action, as some portray it as only benefiting the rich. With climate impacts intensifying, Piebalgs argued the next phase must accelerate the energy transition further and faster. But, to succeed will demand smart policymaking that maintains public support through fair distribution of costs and opportunities across society.

This policy insight also considered the importance of including local perspectives. “I think it’s important for us to acknowledge that all politics are local. This also means that no policy can survive if it doesn’t work at a local level. It’s where the climate decisions become very concrete” remarked Frederiksberg City Councillor and European Young Leader (EYL40) **Anders Storgaard**. As the European Union works to implement new climate targets, Storgaard argued governments must make green options more affordable for ordinary people. Storgaard argued politicians must appeal to both progressive voters and more conservative citizens. He believes the key is showcasing economic opportunities from climate action. By making green companies easier to operate through measures like carbon pricing, politicians can attract support across the political spectrum.

The necessity to ensure a broad support for the green transition was echoed by **Ruth Mourik**, Founder and CEO at Duneworks. With climate change an unprecedented challenge, the path ahead remains uncertain and complex with leadership often lacking. Mourik argued involving stakeholders from all levels of society, from civil servants to citizens, can help navigate this uncharted territory. Their varied skills, knowledge and perspectives will better equip Europe to avoid unintended consequences as it transforms its economy at warp speed.

In addition, dissident views that may be difficult to hear must also be considered. By facilitating dialogue between all parties from the start, decisions can benefit from alternative ideas and better withstand opposition later on. Mourik pointed to examples where excluding certain voices slowed down otherwise good initiatives.

With the stakes rising as the climate crisis deepens, she concluded Europe can only accelerate its progress through open and collaborative decision-making that incorporates both community wisdom and new ways of thinking from nature itself.

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With public support in the balance, architect **Stephan Petermann** called on Europe’s next leaders to better tap into the power of culture in narrating the climate vision. As architects and designers are expert in navigating rationality and irrationality, Petermann advised the next President of the European Commission to take a more daring approach in collaborating with artists and cultural spheres. Petermann said creatives could help excite people about transitioning to net zero in a way policy papers cannot. In his past work in developing an energy roadmap, he found a “culture of energy” was missing, to complement infrastructure planning. Petermann believes cultural sectors eagerly want to partner with policymakers but are undervalued currently. He urged investing in their ability to accelerate change by connecting with people’s emotions and lived experiences, not just their rational minds.

As extreme weather worsens without action and geopolitics raises security concerns, the panel debated practical solutions for maintaining Europe’s climate leadership amid economic and political headwinds. With public backing crucial to success, this conversation aimed to chart a path to decisive climate progress that also protects citizens in a time of turmoil. Europe’s transition to a green economy faces difficult tests in the years ahead. As policymakers strive to cut emissions while protecting vulnerable groups, voices from across society will be crucial. From the local to European level, accelerating climate progress will demand ambitious policy, public funding and strong communication of the opportunities ahead. By maintaining an open and collaborative approach, Europe can navigate the challenges and build the widespread support needed to achieve its urgent mission to curb global warming.

Recommendations

- Implement carbon pricing reforms that incentivise renewables investment and help citizens transition at affordable costs. Raising carbon taxes on fossil fuels could fund home retrofits and clean technology rollout.
- Improve the inclusion of diverse stakeholders in the early stages of policy development. The integration of different perspectives can enable dialogue across society and help avoid unintended consequences in later stages.
- Strengthen energy governance coordination to ensure national climate plans deliver on EU emissions targets. Improved oversight can help member states mobilise citizens behind ambitious climate action.
- Launch a major cultural initiative celebrating European values of unity and environmental stewardship. Tapping into artists could maintain public enthusiasm as the costs of transition rise.
- Establish an independent funding body to foster grassroots climate solutions and cross-border collaboration. Empowering communities with modest budgets could spark innovative local projects.
- Conduct regular reviews of social impacts from climate policies and adjust course if inequality rises. Fair distribution of opportunities will be key to maintaining political consensus as decarbonisation accelerates.



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