



The politics of the EU eco-social policies

Paolo Graziano¹

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Abstract

In recent years, the debate over the need to address ecological and social concerns has grown substantially. Phenomena such as the *Gilets Jaunes* in France or the ecological versus social disputes in industrial sites (such as, for example, the ILVA steel plant in Taranto) have constituted a trade-off in terms of potentially conflicting policies, making the understanding of the various underlying preferences very important. Furthermore, growing environmental concerns have challenged more traditional views anchored on the predominance of social and employment concerns. The article, in line with the research questions raised in the introduction of the Symposium, intends to contribute to the above-mentioned debate addressing the following questions: did the European Union take an ‘eco-social’ path? If so, how and why? The article illustrates the growing intertwining of social and environmental policies at the EU level and tries to explain its genesis by focusing on the role of the various actors involved. The main argument is that the European Commission, and in particular the President of the Commission, developed an eco-social agenda in order to obtain further institutional (i.e. internal) and socio-political (i.e. external) legitimisation.

Keywords European green deal · Eco-social policies · Open method of coordination · Ursula von der Leyen · European Commission

Introduction

Social and environmental policies have not been among the first policies developed at the EU level. Beyond some early attempts, it is only during the 2000s that ‘Social Europe’ has become of some relevance, although—with the exception of the 2007–2013 period—it remained secondary with respect to other more important European Union policies (Leibfried and Pierson 1992; Copeland and Daly 2014; Graziano and Hartlapp 2019; Carella and Graziano 2022). Also on the

✉ Paolo Graziano
paolo.graziano@unipd.it

¹ University of Padua, Padua, Italy



environmental front, shared policy concerns did not come up in the early years of the development of the European Union but only after; since the 1970s the policy was introduced and proceeded by virtue of political actions (Environmental Action Programmes) but not was not accompanied by a clear political design (Weale et al. 2000). The consequences of this ‘reluctant policy route’ are that only in recent times, and after growing international concern (especially after the 1992 Rio Summit), has the policy become increasingly relevant for the European Union (Burns 2019; Burns et al. 2020; Lenschow et al. 2020; Jordan et al. 2021). In other words, until recent times, both social and environmental policies followed similar but parallel paths. The European Green Deal (EGD) can be seen as a watershed: only after its adoption as a Communication by the European Commission and the support provided by the European Council and the European Parliament, EU policies have been growingly seen in connection to a ‘just transition’ which considered environmental goals and specifically the social implications of decarbonization and other policies aimed at combating climate change. The article develops an explanation for this watershed, especially focusing on the need for legitimation of the Von der Leyen Commission.

Research design, methods and sources

This article focuses on a) the trajectories of EU social and environmental policies; b) the development of the ‘eco-social’ agenda; c) the explanation of the eco-social policy trajectory; d) a brief final discussion regarding the challenges the EU multilevel governance setting will face in order to make the ‘just transition’ real. The contribution broadly adopts and expands the post-functionalist approach (Hooghe and Marks 2009, 2019) by hypothesising that European policy outputs—in this specific case, the ‘eco-social’ policy package—are explained by (internal and external) legitimation goals of the Von der Leyen Commission which developed a distinctive eco-social identity in a context of high politicisation. Put differently, the research hypothesis—also building on the actor-centred approach (Marks 1996)—factors in legitimation of the European Commission, which has become particularly relevant in the European Union after the entry into force of the Lisbon Treaty (2009). Building on Smith (2014) and Nugent and Rhinard (2019), our assumption is that the increasingly ‘politicised’ European Commission is constantly in search of legitimation which is twofold: internal (i.e. with reference to either the European Parliament or the European Council, or both) and external (in terms of public support). Therefore, *we hypothesise that when overall legitimation is low, the European Commission will develop policy initiatives aimed at increasing both internal and external legitimation.*

Legitimation has been key for the understanding of the functioning of the European Union. Since the beginning of its development, the ‘democratic deficit’ of the European political system has been at the heart of scholarly debates (for example, see Featherstone 1994). However, although legitimation issues are part of the democratic deficit discourse, even beyond democratic deficit concerns, especially after the problematic years of the Constitutional attempts (Hurrelman, 2007), legitimation became central for the European integration process, especially for the European



Commission (Tsakatika 2005). More recently, one of the reasons why the *spitzenkandidat* system was included in the Treaty of Lisbon (ratified in 2009) was precisely to increase the legitimisation of the European Commission, without changing its election mode (Hamřík and Kaniok 2019). As a matter of fact, the first *spitzenkandidat*—Juncker—actually benefitted from the boost of legitimisation and tried to perform much more politically than other Presidents of the European Commission (Peterson 2017).

The negotiations following the results of the 2019 European elections did not allow the two leaders of the major European parties (Weber and Timmermans, of the European People’s Party and the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats, respectively) to gain sufficient support to become Presidential nominees, and therefore von der Leyen became a feasible compromise (Abels and Mushaben 2020; Politico, 2019a). However, as we shall discuss in one of the following sections, her internal and external legitimisation was particularly weak. Von der Leyen needed to find specific policy fields which could help her to gain greater institutional support (especially within the European Parliament) and public support (especially in civil society). This could be done by considering two of the most ‘legitimising’ policy areas at the end of the 2010s: environmental and social policies.

From a methodological standpoint, I will follow an exploratory case study approach (Gerring 2004) based on a qualitative method of policy analysis. The focus is on the 1972–2022 period and the sources are primary documentation such as policy documents (primarily European Commission Communications, Recommendations and Proposals—see ‘Official policy documents’ section), newspaper articles of Politico and The Guardian (see ‘Newspaper and thin tank articles’ section) and secondary literature (both journal articles and policy briefs and reports), particularly useful in order to trace the development of the EU social and employment and environmental policy.

To better understand the path-breaking initiative (the European Green Deal) adopted by the von der Leyen Commission, we shall now turn to both the environmental and social policies trajectories.

Parallel regulatory trajectories: at the roots of the eco-social policy agenda (1972–2004)

Until the early 1990s, both social and environmental policies were not at the heart of what today we refer to as the European Union. Despite some policy initiatives during the 1970s, social policy became increasingly relevant only during the Delors era (1985–1995)—although never as central as other policies. After the entry into force of the Single European Act (1987) and the approval of the Social Protocol (1989), the path for ‘more Social Europe’ become increasingly relevant, especially due to the leadership of Delors who was personally well equipped of internal and external legitimisation being Catholic, socialist and French (Ross and Jenson 2017). However, the opposition of the British government and the growing lack of support in the final years of Delors’ Presidency (1993–1995) did not allow the European Commission to leave a greater mark in terms of further institutionalisation of the policy. To be



sure, the Treaty of Maastricht (1993), the enlargement to Sweden (1995), the Treaty of Amsterdam (1999, which contained an Employment Title), the ‘competitiveness’ imperative (Radaelli 2003) and possibly the legacy of Delors’ greater attention to social policy, gave birth to the ‘golden age’ of EU social policy between 1993 and 2004 (Graziano and Hartlapp 2019), but this was short-lived and always of limited relevance with respect to economic and budgetary imperatives, even during the 2010s when the European semester was launched (Copeland and Daly 2018). During the Great Recession in Europe (2008–2009), when we could have expected greater attention paid to social issues, the European Union went rather towards the direction of austerity, and not solidarity under the form of new social and employment policies (Graziano and Harlapp 2019). Only in very recent times, through the launch of the European Pillar of Social Rights (2017), social and employment policies have reacquired a position that is not negligible in the European Union policy agenda (Carella and Graziano 2022).

Also, environmental protection was not considered a priority when the European Economic Community was launched. This was due to the limited problem pressure perceived by decision-makers at the national and EU level towards the end of the 1950s. However, after the Report of the Club of Rome (1972), environmental issues became increasingly relevant, especially at the European Union level where policies developed at such a point that “every member state has been deeply Europeanised by the EU since 1972, even the so-called environmental leader states (...) that originally encouraged the EU to adopt high standards. (...) ...the EU does not simply Europeanise policy objectives and standards: it also disseminates policy processes such as impact assessment and *ex post* evaluation (...), as well as, via its agencies such as EEA, the basic raw material of policy development: scientific knowledge, monitoring data and best practices” (Jordan et al. 2021: 360). Put differently, the intensity of environmental concern, especially after 1993 when the Treaty of Maastricht (1993) made the environment an official EU policy area, grew substantially: the Treaty of Amsterdam (1999) established the duty to ‘mainstream’ environmental policy and promote sustainable development, the Lisbon Treaty included ‘combating climate change’ as a specific goal and in 2019 the European Green Deal was launched. It must be noted that also in this case Delors and his Commission played a policy initiator role, since the European Single Act (1987) had already introduced an ‘Environment Title’ which gave new momentum to environmental policy in the EU.

In contrast to the more binding rules adopted by environmental policy, social policy—relying primarily on ‘soft law’ such as the Open Method of Coordination (OMC)—failed to become ‘mainstream’ and therefore held (and still holds) a less central status in EU policies. Environmental directives have been numerous and pervasive (more than 300, according to the European Environment Agency), whereas social policy and employment directives have been limited and often embedded in a ‘competitiveness’ imperative (Radaelli 2003). Furthermore, although Europeanisation has regarded also social and employment policy (Graziano 2011), given the ill-defined policy objectives over time, we could argue that still today there is no clear social and/or employment ‘policy model’ at the EU level, whereas EU environment policy has become an international point of reference in setting ambitious (and supported by citizens; (Jordan et al. 2021)) policy goals.



From parallel dismantling to asymmetrical relaunch (2004–2019)

Until the mid 2000s, social and employment policies and environment policies did not go hand in hand, neither nationally nor at the EU level. However, the enduring effects of the 2008–2009 economic crisis, multilevel societal challenges (from the *gilets jaunes* in France to the Fridays for Future social movement) and the appointment of a ‘weak’ President of the European Commission paved the way to eco-social policy intertwining.

The 2010s have been quite a dense decade: after the economic and financial crisis, which had social and political effects way beyond the beginning of the decade (Kriesi and Pappas 2015; Caiani and Graziano 2019), several austerity measures were adopted (Ladi and Tsarouhas 2014), harming ‘social Europe’ (Carella and Graziano 2022) and not specifically supporting environmental policies, which had gone through a period of ‘dismantling’ rather than expansion (Lenschow et al. 2020). In order to understand the difficulties experienced by both policies, we need to factor in the 2004 enlargement to Central-Eastern European countries which were, to put it mildly, not fans of more regulation (especially once accessed the European Union), be it in the social and employment or environmental policy fields (Graziano and Hartlapp 2019; Jordan et al. 2020). Especially under the Barroso Presidency (2004–2014), the European Commission was not capable or willing of playing the ‘engine of integration’ role played in other years and, due to the growing and combined opposition against policy expansion, for both social and employment and environmental policies the trend was not expansionary (for example, the decline of the OMC and the reduced attention paid to social and employment policies compared to dominant economic and financial imperatives, or limiting the ambition of the European Commission in the environmental policy field (Copeland and Daly 2018; Burns et al. 2020). At best, the strategies adopted for both policies were more inspired by a lack of regulatory ambition which led to partial dismantling (for example, eliminating the dedicated National Plans devoted to Employment, Social Assistance, Health Care and Pensions) and deconsolidation (i.e. in the case of environmental policy).

After ten years of the Barroso Commission, the Juncker Commission (2014–2019) changed the pace, although slowly and only with reference to social and employment policy: on the one hand, it managed to obtain support for the European Pillar of Social Rights, which—although not being path-breaking—gave new momentum to social Europe (Copeland 2022); on the other hand, it further watered down any environmental protection ambition, especially with the aim of avoiding conflicts with the UK and trying, unsuccessfully, to keep the European Union with 28 members (Gravey and Jordan 2020). Therefore, the relaunch of the policies was rather asymmetrical since it regarded social and employment policy but not environmental policy.



Eco-social policy intertwining? The European green deal (2019) and beyond

The new European Commission, and its President von der Leyen, started their mandate in troubled waters. As already mentioned, the nominated President was not a *Spitzenkandidat* and therefore lacked full procedural legitimation. For example, the nomination was not well received by the European Parliament, and von der Leyen obtained a paper-thin absolute majority in the parliamentary ‘confidence vote’ (383 votes, only 9 more than the minimum threshold and almost 40 votes less than the 422 obtained by Juncker for his appointment). Furthermore, the 2019 European elections registered very positive results for Eurosceptic political parties, making societal support even more relevant for the would-be European Commission.

In fact, between 2019 and 2022 the European Commission produced a number of relevant policy documents: although the notion of ‘eco-social’ policies has not directly been used, the policy initiatives substantiate the relaunch of both social and employment and environmental policies and their growing intertwining. The first Communication on the ‘European Green Deal’ builds on previous policy goals but for the first time focuses also on the ‘just and inclusive’ nature of environmental policies by underlining that “the transition must put people first, and pay attention to regions, industries and workers who will face the greatest challenges” (European Commission 2019a: 2) and that the “risk of energy poverty must be addressed for households that cannot afford key energy services to ensure a basic standard of living” (European Commission 2019a: 6).

Furthermore, in 2020 the European Commission issued another relevant Communication regarding “Sustainable Europe Investment Plan. European Green Deal Investment Plan” (European Commission 2020a). In this Communication, a *just transition mechanism* based on a Just Transition Fund (approved with a Council Regulation in June 2021) was created to support Member States via ‘territorial just transition plans’, a dedicated scheme for just transition regions under the InvestEU Fund and a public sector loan facility with the European Investment Bank Group.

Even more specifically, the 2020 Communication entitled “A strong social Europe for just transitions”, introducing the European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan, underlines that an “integral part of the Plan is a Just Transition Mechanism, including a dedicated Just Transition Fund, which will support regions expected to be more affected by the transition and thus help ensure that no one is left behind. It demonstrates the EU’s commitment to see that environmental and social sustainability go hand in hand” (European Commission 2020b: 5).

Finally, the 2021 “Proposal for a Council Recommendation on ensuring a fair transition towards climate neutrality” (approved by the Council of the European Union in June 2019) points out the importance of ‘intertwining’ social and employment and environmental policies by noting that “[f]airness and solidarity are defining principles of the European Green Deal. (...) Policy actions to support



people and their active participation are required for a successful green transition. The vision for a fair transition towards a strong, climate-neutral Social Europe reflects the 20 principles of the European Pillar of Social Rights, which were proclaimed at the Gothenburg Summit in November 2017, and comprise the ‘social rulebook’ for fair and well-functioning labour markets and welfare systems in the twenty-first century” (European Commission 2021: 1–2). The identification of a recommended ‘policy package’, i.e. “a comprehensive and coherent set of policy measures that integrates employment, skills and social policies with climate, energy, transport, environmental and other green transition policies, through a well-coordinated cross-sectoral approach based on one or several national strategies and/or action plans, and benefiting from coordination and governance mechanisms at Union and national level as appropriate”, makes the mark even more clearly by moving towards an OMC with reference to eco-social policies.

Taken together, these proposals—most of which translated recently in fully-fledged policies—do make the impression that a new ‘eco-social’ paradigm at the EU level is in the making by virtue of the growing intertwining of social and employment and environmental goals. To be sure, such intertwining regards mostly the social and employment consequences of environmental (i.e. ecological transition) policies and builds substantially on previous EU social policies; however, it may be seen as the first step of a new EU ‘eco-social’ policy paradigm.

Explaining eco-social policy intertwining: a legitimization quest?

How can we explain the adoption of the European Green Deal? By adopting a post-functional approach, our explanation is connected to increasing politicisation of EU policies and to the European Commission’s ‘eco-social’ policy identity building and quest for internal (or institutional) and external (or socio-political) legitimization over potentially conflictual issues (such as the ‘eco-social’ policies).

As briefly mentioned previously, the von der Leyen Commission’s launch was a rather difficult one in terms of internal legitimization as two main indicators show: a) she was not a *spitzenkandidat*; b) she was voted in by a bare majority in the European Parliament. First, although the Lisbon Treaty makes the appointment of a *spitzenkandidat* possible but not mandatory, her candidature was seen as a way to ignore the European Parliament electoral results, since the lead candidate of the European People’s Party (the winning party) was Manfred Weber. Furthermore, at the time of the nomination (and election), in Germany she was under investigation over allegations of mismanagement and misspending at the defence ministry during her tenure (Politico, 2019a). Her nomination—formally backed by the three mainstream parties (European People’s Party, the Progressive Alliance of Socialists & Democrats (S&D) and Renew Europe (CEPS, 2019)—was strongly criticised within the S&D group. Finally, in Germany her popularity was not very high and many doubts were voiced also in the press, and her candidature was defined as ‘inappropriate’ by the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* (The Guardian, 2019b). Broadly speaking, “[m]any in the newly composed EP felt they had been robbed by the European Council riding roughshod over the lead candidate procedure. By excluding the EP, this



‘backroom’ appointment denied the citizens of any say on this personnel decision. Furthermore, it ridiculed those who had engaged in the lead candidate campaigns by simply ignoring them” (Russack 2022: 5).

Second, as previously mentioned, the European Parliament majority who elected her as a President was particularly thin, since she obtained a majority of only 9 votes above the minimum required, with 327 votes against and 22 abstentions. Such a ‘thin’ majority made it particularly necessary for her and her Commission to ‘deliver’ the promises of a speech that was seen as very ambitious and difficult to implement (The Guardian, 2019a). Between July and November, she secured greater support in the European Parliament (the votes for the von der Leyen Commission on November 27 were 461), proving that more support could be obtained not only within the S&D (who were particularly divided in the June vote) but also in the (neo-)populist camp (obtaining, for example, several votes from representatives of the Italian Five Star Movement) and partially in the Green/European Free Alliance Group (Politico, 2019b). Therefore, for internal legitimation a greater emphasis was put—between June and November—on eco-social goals (see the difference between the two speeches given in June and in November at the plenary session of the European Parliament (von der Leyen 2019a; von der Leyen 2019b).

Furthermore, the Commission managed to obtain the support of the Council in its recommendations (12 December 2019): the “European Council takes note of the Commission Communication on the European Green Deal and asks the Council to take work forward (...). It recognises the need to put in place an enabling framework that benefits all Member States and encompasses adequate instruments, incentives, support and investments to ensure a cost-effective, just, as well as socially balanced and fair transition, taking into account different national circumstances in terms of starting points”. (Council of the European Union 2019: 1). On January 15, 2020, the EGD was backed up by the European Parliament via a Resolution voted by a large majority (482 MEPs—including the Green Party), showing how, focusing on the environmental issue, the von der Leyen Commission could expand its internal legitimation also with reference to the European Parliament.

With reference to the need for external legitimation and the capacity to address this need via an ‘eco-social’ agenda, we can focus on three main indicators. First, 2019 was the year of the European and global spread of the Friday For Future movement: after a period of intense mobilisation, the Climate Action Week (20–27 September, 2019) gathered over 7 million (young) people around the world, making the problem pressure of environmental issues highly visible; von der Leyen, in the ‘political guidelines for the next European Commission (2019a, b-2024) and introducing the EGD, stated that she had “been inspired by the passion, conviction and energy of the millions of young people making their voice heard on our streets and in our hearts. It is our generation duty to deliver for them” (von der Leyen 2019a: 5).

Second, von der Leyen had been appointed just a few months after the spread of the *gilets jaunes* movement in France, a working class-based movement which protested against environmental policies formulated by French President Macron (Collectif 2019). The weekly protests, which gathered hundreds of thousands of people in the streets, started in November 2018 and continued until April 2019, with some events still being held during the month of June 2019. Therefore, it is not surprising



that in the same speech given in front of the Parliament, von der Leyen stated “I believe what is good for our planet must be good for our people, our regions and our economy. We will ensure a just transition for all” (von der Leyen 2019a: 6). Furthermore, in the ‘guidelines’ there is a direct reference to the European Pillar of Social Rights, for which an Action plan is foreseen (von der Leyen 2019a: 9).

Third, Eurobarometer data showed how relevant both environmental and social issues were for European citizens (and voters). The Spring 2019 Standard Eurobarometer results, released on August 5, 2019 (European Commission 2019b), indicated that the environment had become the second most important concerns for the population of the European Union, whereas unemployment, health and social security issues were tied at the first place of EU citizens’ concerns, making an ‘eco-social’ European policy initiative a particularly salient—and highly consensual—political option.

Conclusion

After years of ‘dismantling’ employment and social and environmental policies, with the European Green Deal a new, still initial form of policy intertwining seems to be emerging. According to the European institutions, the transition is deemed to be ‘fair and just’ and in the near future a multilevel policy package should be adopted and implemented in order to guarantee a transition to a carbon-neutral European Union. With the recent approval of a series of documents (mostly recommendations) the European institutions have been increasingly focusing on eco-social targets. The motor of this growing ‘policy intertwining’ has been the European Commission which, under the von der Leyen Presidency, needed to formulate and adopt legitimising initiatives in order to overcome harsh initial criticism regarding the making of the European Commission. The EGD and the subsequent policies, orientated towards eco-social multilevel goals, have allowed the European Commission to increase its legitimation both internally (i.e. vis-à-vis other European institutions, especially the European Parliament) and externally (vis-à-vis public opinion and civil society organisations).

To be sure, the multilevel policy intertwining is still in its infancy, and there is no guarantee that the multilevel governance will allow the new policy paradigm to become mainstream: for example, Mandelli shows very convincingly that the ‘social’ dimension of the National Energy and Climate Plans 2021–2030 is present only in a limited number of cases (Mandelli 2022). This could determine an implementation gap in the future, but for the time being the von der Leyen European Commission has already reached her goal, i.e. to overcome the strong legitimation gap which accompanied its birth and becoming a ‘hero’ in eco-social terms (Domorenok and Graziano 2023). Such legitimation is largely independent from the success of the policy which depends primarily on the will (and capacity) of the Member States to comply: the decline of the social and employment OMC shows that, unless greater and more stringent guidance comes from (and is allowed to) the European Commission, the envisaged results may not be reached. Put differently, the adoption and implementation of EU policies—notwithstanding the remarkable



advancements in terms of the ‘eco-social’ paradigm—is still largely in the hands of the member states’ governments.

In order to better understand multilevel eco-social policymaking, in line with the introduction to this Symposium, future research should focus on the domestic politics of eco-social policies for two reasons: first, there already are different ‘worlds of eco-welfare states’ (Zimmerman and Graziano 2020) which are most likely connected to different worlds (and politics) of eco-social policies; second, governmental preferences may act as amplifiers of European eco-social goals (as in the case of the Spanish Just Transition Strategy or, to a more limited extent, the Italian plan for ecological transition) or as obstacles (as in the case of some Central-Eastern countries, where a procrastination of just transition strategies may become a structural implementation gap (see Mandelli 2022)). In this regard, the envisaged territorial just transition plans may be particularly interesting to follow in order to detect domestic facilitators and opponents to the full implementation of an eco-social Europe.

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Paolo Graziano is Professor of Political Science at the University of Padua, Research Associate at the European Social Observatory, Brussels, Visiting Research Fellow at the University of Surrey and Chercheur associé at Sciences Po, Paris. His work on Europeanization, European public policy, political consumerism and populist parties has been published in, among other places: *Journal of European Public Policy*, *Policy & Society Governance*, *European Journal for Political Research*, *West European Politics*, *Journal of Common Market Studies*, *Government & Opposition*, *International Political Science Review*, *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*.

