



# Revisiting EU Climate and Energy Diplomacy: A Starting Point for Green Deal Diplomacy?

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*One of the innovations of the new European Commission's proposal of a European Green Deal (EGD) is to build a "Green Deal Diplomacy". While this ambition has not yet materialized, the proposed new diplomacy does not emerge in an empty space, as the EU has already started to develop explicit climate and energy diplomacies since 2011 and 2015 respectively. As such, it will be essential for the EGD diplomacy to learn from past successes and missed opportunities of the previous attempts to formulate and implement EU external ambitions in policy areas related to the European Green Deal.*

EGD provides a comprehensive and ambitious strategy and action roadmap for the EU to reach climate neutrality in 2050, including concrete actions such as proposals for an EGD Investment Plan, a Just Transition Mechanism, a new Climate Law, a European Climate Pact, a European Industrial Strategy, a Circular Economy Action Plan, a Farm-to-Fork strategy and an EU Biodiversity Strategy. The EGD thereby touches upon a considerable number of policy areas and sectors, including energy, industry, construction, mobility/transport, trade, biodiversity, agriculture/food sector and environmental protection. With expectations set this high, EU policy-makers and observers have been speculating about whether the EGD ambitions will actually materialize into such a significant "man on the moon moment" for Europe's climate ambitions or whether the rhetoric ambitions will fail to deliver what they promise.<sup>1</sup>

## THE EUROPEAN GREEN DEAL AND ITS DIPLOMACY – WHAT WE KNOW ALREADY

On 1 December 2019, Ursula von der Leyen took over the office as new European Commission President for the mandate 2019 to 2024. As early as day 11 of her time in office, her Commission presented the new "European Green Deal" (EGD), which von der Leyen herself called the "man on the moon moment" for Europe. The

One element of the EGD that has received comparatively less attention is the ambition for the EU to be a "global leader" by paralleling internal ambitious transition efforts with a "stronger 'green deal diplomacy' focused on convincing and supporting others to take on their share of promoting more sustainable development".<sup>2</sup> So far, very little is known about the details of such a Green Deal Diplomacy and how it will relate to previously formulated EU

sectoral diplomacies, such as climate or energy diplomacy.

The EGD Communication spends approximately two and a half of the total 22 pages on this global dimension. Overall, the section remains rather broad in content; a clear focus on various tools, levels and internal/external coordination efforts is missing. As such, the section includes calls for intensified work between the High Representative/Vice-President (HR/VP), Commission and Member States “to mobilise all diplomatic channels both bilateral and multilateral” (mentioning levels such as the UN, G7, G20, WTO and partners in the Western Balkans and Neighbourhood, EU-China interactions, EU-Africa/African Union interactions explicitly). It equally calls for forging “green alliances” through “diplomatic and financial tools” with Africa, Latin America, the Caribbean, Asia and the Pacific. It calls for more integrated thinking about climate and interrelated policies such as environmental, security and defence issues, etc. It also mentions the EU’s role as a market power in setting global standards and as a tool to engage with trading partners. Furthermore, the EU’s role as a global donor of climate finance is stressed including calls to strengthen both public and private funds.

The Annex/Road Map circulated alongside the communication includes four similarly broad actions for 2019 and 2020: (1) “continue to lead international climate and biodiversity negotiations, further strengthening the international policy frameworks”, (2) “strengthen the EU’s Green Deal Diplomacy in cooperation with Member States”, (3) “bilateral efforts to induce partners to act and to ensure comparability of action and policies”, and (4) a “Green Agenda for the Western Balkans”. For obvious reasons, action point two is particularly interesting to reflect upon here, since a “strengthen[ing]” of a Green Deal Diplomacy will require a formulation of such a diplomacy together with EU Member States in the first place, likely to take place in the

Foreign Affairs Council (FAC) setting. So far, this ambition for 2020 has not materialized in public outcomes.

Furthermore, only one day after the presentation of the EGD, the new HR/VP Josep Borrell published a blog post on “The EU Green Deal – A Global Perspective”,<sup>3</sup> illustrating the key role that the European External Action Service (EEAS) envisages playing in the development of a Green Deal Diplomacy. While the blog post itself does not include concrete tools or actions, it acknowledges the “geopolitical” dimension of the climate change challenge and states the HR/VP’s ambition to “embark on this new phase of ‘Green Deal diplomacy’ (...) using all the means at [the EU’s] disposal – from trade policy and technical assistance, to capacity building and development cooperation, as well as our crisis management tools when needed”.

### GREEN DEAL DIPLOMACY: WHAT TO LEARN FROM PAST DIPLOMATIC EFFORTS?

While the European Commission’s new team has published a number of policy documents with highly ambitious language on what a Green Deal Diplomacy should achieve, it has remained substantially vague on concrete tools, coordination mechanisms and steps of implementation. Revisiting efforts on diplomatic ambitions on EU climate and energy diplomacy from 2011 to today can help understand the critical points for developing a new Green Deal Diplomacy. Built on an analysis of previous EU policy documents, secondary literature and extensive interview data,<sup>4</sup> I argue that whether a “man on the moon moment” for the EU’s global Green Deal ambitions will materialise depends on how the diplomacy will deal with the complexities of a comprehensive strategy like the European Green Deal. Key will be the five following factors: the internal policies to be included; the coordination of potentially conflicting policy components; the level of Member State support; the coordination among

EU actors; and the extent to which strategies will be tailored towards the diverse targets of EU diplomacy.

### **A) GREEN DEAL DIPLOMACY: WHAT'S IN THE NAME, AND WHAT IS NOT?**

As explained above, the European Green Deal aims to be a comprehensive strategy, integrating a number of diverse policy areas. Yet, which policy areas will be included in the external comprehensive strategy that could be the Green Deal Diplomacy – and which will not? The EGD sets out ambitions in the policy areas of climate, energy, economy, environment, biodiversity, agriculture, industry, mobility, social justice and more. For all of these, there is some level of EU external engagement already – be it the EU's role in multilateral climate and environmental negotiations or the EU's various trade and partnership agreements – and often policy area-specific actions are aligned, with for example the promotion of green growth models being part of climate diplomatic outreach. As such, clarifying how the EGD diplomacy brings various external activities together in one comprehensive strategy, thereby standing out from previous diplomatic attempts, will be essential.

The level of ambition of the comprehensive EGD can provide a point of reference for third countries to follow the EU's level of ambition more broadly – as this was for example stressed at the recent EU-Ukraine summit in October 2020.<sup>5</sup> Yet, referring to the EGD's comprehensive ambitions is not a diplomatic outreach strategy of its own, but rather can put the EGD at risk to become an empty shell for third countries to pick and choose which 'green' components to follow. For a strong, new Green Deal Diplomacy to emerge clear, consistent policy objectives and instruments relating to the specific components of the EGD will have to be formulated. The examples of previously formulated EU climate and energy diplomacy strategies in the FAC<sup>6</sup> illustrate how this is essential for the effectiveness of diplomatic outreach.

For climate diplomacy, having had regular and extensive conclusions on how to spread ambitious climate action towards various actors, emphasizing instruments and policy synergies (e.g. energy, human rights, trade, security, development) has provided a relatively clear framework of external engagement. For energy diplomacy, objectives are less clear, with actions mostly focusing on advancing internal coordination among Member States and EU institutions and building on existing energy partnership/dialogue formats. As such, clear choices on which concrete policy-area specific objectives and external instruments are to be included in the EGD diplomacy will be essential for it to develop into a meaningful, comprehensive outreach strategy, and not into a paper tiger of stated ambitions for a multitude of areas of external engagement.

### **B) SYNERGIES ONLY? INTERLINKED, YET DIFFERENT EGD POLICIES**

As outlined above, the Green Deal approaches the goal of reaching climate neutrality by 2050 in an integrated manner. This approach can, on the one hand, be a key strength of the Green Deal and its diplomacy, since it allows for synergetic, joined-up thinking – which also the EU Global Strategy (2016) calls for.<sup>7</sup> As experiences from EU climate and energy diplomacy show, there are often important synergies between policies and by extension diplomatic outreach objectives (e.g. promotion of renewable energies), which could easily be overlooked or not used to the fullest potential in separate diplomacy formulation and implementation processes. Previous FAC conclusions (2017-2020) have stressed these synergies repeatedly. As one interviewed EU diplomat said: "EU climate and energy policies cannot be separated, they are inextricably linked".<sup>8</sup> Designing these synergies more explicitly into a new, coherent EGD diplomatic strategy can provide a crucial step in advancing previous diplomatic attempts.

Yet, despite 'inextricable links' between policy areas, the challenges of such an integrated approach

become visible when the policy objectives of individual diplomacies conflict: Take, for example, the case of an energy transit or supply country to the EU. While climate objectives will surely play a role in political or sectoral dialogues, the energy objective of security of supply is likely to outweigh climate concerns in such direct interactions. Such distorted synergies can stem from disagreement on policy objectives among Member States, as well as from variation in objectives towards specific countries, as the above example illustrates. For this reason, a Green Deal Diplomacy needs to not only take close account of potential synergies between policy areas to be included, but also address competing objectives and potential incompatibilities between these policy areas.

### **C) SYNERGIES ONLY? INTERLINKED, YET DIFFERENT EGD POLICIES**

Closely related to the above points is the crucial question of whether EU Member States will show any appetite to formulate a meaningful diplomatic vision for Green Deal Diplomacy. The most recent indicator for this are the latest climate diplomacy conclusions by the FAC of 20 January 2020,<sup>9</sup> which seem not too promising in this aspect. The conclusions mention the EGD ambitions once, namely in the introductory paragraph in which the Council takes note of a number of policy developments, such as the IPCC Special Report. In this context, the FAC notes that “the European Commission presented its European Green Deal” (ibid., p. 2). Furthermore, climate change was addressed during one of the most recent European Council meetings (15-16 October 2020).<sup>10</sup> In its conclusions the objective of climate neutrality by 2050 and the role of “active European climate diplomacy” (p. 3) are mentioned, however the EGD and its potential diplomatic dimension are not explicitly referred to. The two conclusions on issues so closely related to an EGD diplomacy could have represented an opportunity for Member States to signal good-will towards this project at both Council levels. The fact that in both cases, however, EGD

diplomacy ambitions were left unmentioned hints at low Member States’ interest in the project so far.

The role of Member States’ support for EU diplomacies is particularly crucial, as many of the EGD policies are shared competences (Art. 4 TFEU), making the EGD diplomacy’s success highly dependent on whether Member States can agree on its design. When looking at the past formulation of EU climate and energy diplomatic ambitions, there have been significant differences in support for climate (“top-level political support”<sup>11</sup>) and energy (“constrained by Member States’ sovereignty concerns”<sup>12</sup>) diplomacy. Divergences in positions originate from differences in national energy/climate characteristics (e.g. energy markets, greenhouse gas emissions) as well as in climate ambitions: The Climate Change Performance Index (CCPI) ranks eleven EU countries as ‘high performers’ (e.g. Sweden), yet for example Poland and Bulgaria rank ‘very low’ in climate policy performance.<sup>13</sup> This is also reflected in varying national public interest in climate matters: While 48 percent of Eurobarometer respondents in Sweden consider climate change as one of the “most important issues facing the EU”, this share is only at 10 percent in Bulgaria.<sup>14</sup> As such, Member States’ support can be expected to vary significantly in the level of ambition and policy integration for an EGD diplomacy proposal.

The previous formulation of climate and energy diplomacy illustrates that creating a new term for diplomatic outreach in itself is not sufficient to translate into diplomatic action, but it requires Member States’ consensus in order to be meaningful. For an EGD diplomacy to be formulated and implemented, it will therefore be crucial to have Member States’ support not just for the various components on the internal dimensions of the Green Deal (e.g. debates about the proposed EU Climate Law<sup>15</sup>) but also support on the instruments and priorities of a potential Green Deal Diplomacy ‘toolbox’ across policy areas.

#### **D) INSTITUTIONAL COMPLEXITY: WHO WILL BE RESPONSIBLE FOR GREEN DEAL DIPLOMACY?**

A fundamental point for all EU policy initiatives lies in the risk of turf wars among EU institutions on the question of ‘who’ will be responsible for EU policies. This question will not only be at the heart of the process leading to the formulation of Green Deal Diplomacy but also its consequent implementation. Within the EU’s complex institutional set-up, a number of institutions will have to arrange various responsibilities ranging from who holds the pen in drafting, who wants to (or has to) give input in the process, who holds the relevant funds and who steers implementation. This will again depend on the concrete policies which will fill the Green Deal Diplomacy box; yet, on a working level, the usual suspects to steer such a diplomacy could be one or more of the Commission’s DGs (i.e. DG Climate Action and/or DG Energy), or the EEAS’ thematic structures (i.e. climate and energy diplomacy coordination units, Ambassadors at Large for Climate Diplomacy, Green Diplomacy Network). At the higher level, this question translates into whether Frans Timmermans, Executive Vice-President responsible for the EGD, or Josep Borrell, HR/VP, will be the main holder of the Green Deal’s diplomatic pen.

Past research on EU climate and energy diplomacy has shown<sup>16</sup> that responsibilities for implementing the two respective diplomacies have been quite widespread: in addition to the above mentioned ‘usual suspects’ steering climate/energy diplomacy (namely DG Climate Action, DG Energy and the EEAS), other Commission DGs such as DGs Environment, International Cooperation and Development (DEVCO), Research and Innovation, Trade, Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations, etc. were often involved as counterparts steering EU diplomatic outreach. This institutional diversity does not have to affect the efficiency of the EU’s outreach per se, as each service provides policy/region-specific expertise (and

instruments). Yet, if decentralization is too high, it can weaken the overall coherence of outreach. It will therefore be essential to centralize coordination (e.g. in a Green Deal Diplomacy coordinating team in the Commission or EEAS) holding responsibility to mainstream messages and to provide clear structures of coordination among all involved services for steering EGD diplomacy (e.g. regular inter-service meetings, use of platforms like the Green Diplomacy Network).

#### **E) GREEN DEAL DIPLOMACY TOWARDS WHOM? TAKING GEOGRAPHICAL DIFFERENTIATION SERIOUSLY?**

The EGD Communication formulates the ambition to develop “tailor-made geographic strategies” (p. 20). The idea of pursuing “tailor-made” strategies towards third countries is not new in itself, and was already previously mentioned in climate diplomacy conclusions in 2017 and 2020. To include this aspect into the newly developed diplomacy will however be a particular challenge due to the cross-cutting nature of policy areas to be included: Taking different local contexts of diplomatic partners into consideration is already complex enough in one single diplomacy area alone. For example, previous climate diplomacy conclusions often identified two groups of outreach partners: targeting G20 countries as the ones with high greenhouse gas emission responsibility on the one hand; and supporting developing countries as often highly climate vulnerable partners on the other. For energy diplomacy, outreach towards neighbourhood and transit/supply countries was particularly emphasized – which doesn’t necessarily align with climate diplomacy priorities.

These two examples illustrate possible dimensions of how a differentiated EU diplomacy towards specific (groups of) third countries can look. Other dimensions of differentiation could be the existence of partnership or trade agreements, the political system at stake, historical ties with the EU and/or individual Member States, specific environmental or social circumstances, etc. Stating the goal to create

“tailor-made geographic strategies” is therefore one thing, but there will need to be an in-depth reflection exercise on how such strategies can entail different components not just for different target regions but also for the different policy instruments included in an EGD diplomacy. This reflection process needs to include many EU actors across Commission DGs, EEAS Brussels headquarters and EU Delegations, relevant Council of the EU formations, its sub-structures and Member States’ actors across levels (e.g. development, foreign, trade ministries, embassies) as well as ideally local actors from various regional contexts, in order to not only take into account the EU’s vision of diplomatic differentiation but also the counterpart’s visions. The result of this process could be a diverse toolbox with country- or region-specific components, clearly outlining the target-specific diplomatic instruments and narratives at the EU’s disposal.

## CONCLUSIONS

For a European Green Deal Diplomacy to develop and materialize in a substantial manner, it will be essential to acknowledge that this new diplomatic effort does not start in a void of EU diplomatic outreach. Climate and to a lesser extent energy diplomacies have been formulated and implemented at the EU level since 2011. As such, a new EGD diplomacy should be built on a careful review process of best practices and missed opportunities of past EU (climate and energy) diplomacies.

An EGD diplomacy could build on the success story of EU climate diplomacy, as the latter has enjoyed Member States’ support so far and has been able to expand in scope over the past decade. Yet, if an EGD diplomacy wants to take an integrative approach seriously, simply adding a few items to climate diplomacy and relabelling it will not be enough. As the attempt to synergize with energy diplomacy has shown, integrated diplomacies only work in some settings (e.g. promoting renewable energy targets), but they can also run counter (e.g. energy security interests versus climate targets) – or

simply not assume shape, if Member States’ support is missing. Creating a new Green Deal diplomacy can however provide a welcome opportunity for the EU to revisit these past efforts and create a more effective, coherent diplomatic strategy and toolbox to influence third actors towards the green transformation that the EGD envisions.

Initiating the debate on how the EGD could translate into a coherent diplomacy is a pressing matter, considering the EGD’s implications for ongoing EU internal processes (e.g. MFF, EU Recovery Plan, Climate Law) and for the EU’s role in the international arena (e.g. postponed COP26 in 2021). To this end, the drafting process should start by developing a vision of what policies the EGD diplomacy will include and how it will impact the existing practice of EU diplomacy. There is a need to carefully consider the various internal dynamics in terms of EU competences at stake in the various EGD policy areas with relevant external dimensions, by extension the available instruments and various EU internal actors to be involved in the steering and implementation process. Furthermore, EGD diplomacy cannot be designed in a compartmentalized manner, as it was the practice over the past decade with diplomacies on climate action and energy being designed separately. This also means taking into account both synergies and potential incompatibilities between policies and diplomatic outreach in advance. Taking this argument one step further, it will not be enough to decide on one general ‘toolbox’ and priorities of EGD diplomacy, but the ambition of tailor-made strategies should take the true differences between outreach issues and outreach partners in terms of capacities, needs, and receptiveness seriously.

The drafting process of the EGD diplomacy proposal should take place in a balanced coordination exercise with shared ownership of the EEAS and HR/VP on the one hand, and the European Commission, meaning relevant expert Commissioners and DGs, and the Council of the EU (i.e. its policy-specific formations and relevant

Council working parties) on the other. Close coordination with and reflection processes involving Member States representatives on this original proposal will be a sine qua non in this process, since without a shared vision about the EU's outreach on the Green Deal ambitions, it is likely for the Commission's ideas to turn into a paper tiger. One should thereby keep in mind that EGD diplomacy does not need to entail exclusive EU-level activities, but could (or should) also include increased information sharing and tools to create synergies between existing instruments at national levels.

This process could ideally lead to EGD diplomacy conclusions to be passed not just in the Foreign Affairs Council, but also to be discussed and endorsed at the level of the European Council as well as in other relevant EU institutions such as the European Parliament. This process would mean maximum inclusion of the relevant European and EU-level actors, ideally leading to shared ownership and thereby effectiveness of the new diplomatic ambitions under the EGD. If these conditions are met, the new Green Deal Diplomacy ambitions could strengthen the EU's existing diplomatic

outreach on climate action and the energy transition. Whether they will end up being a true game-changer or “man on the moon moment” for EU diplomacy, will remain to be seen.

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## Endnotes

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