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Editorial

European Union Climate Governance and the European Green Deal in Turbulent Times

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Abstract

In December 2019, the European Commission published the European Green Deal (EGD), an overarching policy framework to achieve climate neutrality in Europe by 2050. This thematic issue aims to understand the origins, form, development, and scope of the EGD and its policy areas. It uses the concept of turbulence to explore and assess the emergence of the EGD and the policy and governance choices associated with it. Focusing on different levels of governance, different policy domains, and different stages of policymaking, each contribution raises pertinent questions about the necessity of identifying sources of turbulence and of understanding how to govern with such turbulence, rather than against it. Overall, the articles in this issue demonstrate that, while specifying contextual factors, researching the sources of and responses to turbulence provides useful insights into the development, direction, and potential durability or advancement of EU climate governance.

Keywords

climate change; European Green Deal; European Union; turbulent governance

Issue

This editorial is part of the issue “Climate Governance and the European Green Deal in Turbulent Times” edited by Claire Dupont (Ghent University, Belgium) and Diarmuid Torney (Dublin City University, Ireland).

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In December 2019, the European Commission, led by newly appointed President Ursula von der Leyen, published the European Green Deal (EGD): an overarching policy framework to achieve climate neutrality in Europe by 2050. The EGD can be regarded as a new venture in EU climate governance (Bloomfield & Steward, 2020; Dupont et al., 2020). As the EGD moves into its implementation phase from 2021 onwards, the emergence and development of the EGD deserve further scrutiny and research. Does the EGD represent a true shift in EU climate governance? How has the EGD emerged, given the broader turbulent governance context? Is the EGD itself a source of turbulence in the wider EU governance system? What can we learn from previous EU climate governance approaches for the implementation of the EGD?

This thematic issue aims to understand the origins, form, development, and scope of the EGD and its pol-

icy areas, especially given the general context for climate governance that can be described as turbulent. The articles contribute both empirical and conceptual insights on the development of the EGD. Although analysis of the EGD is in its early stages (Bloomfield & Steward, 2020; Dupont et al., 2020; Skjærseth, 2021), and necessarily preliminary as we await the agreement and implementation of the policies and legislation associated with the EGD at the time of writing, the thematic issue contributes to knowledge by building on past developments in EU climate governance across several areas of focus, and analysing these developments in light of the conceptual lens of turbulence.

While much research on the EU has focused on governance in times of crisis, and indeed during a conglomerate of crises (Falkner, 2016; von Homeyer et al., 2021), we consider whether “turbulence” proves a (more) useful

lens for analysing EU climate governance. Turbulence and crisis are not identical. While crisis occurs suddenly or unexpectedly, turbulence refers rather to the shifting ground upon which usual governance actions occur, leading to choices between governing with or against turbulence. The very puzzle inherent in the EGD is that it has emerged and developed in turbulent times: It was published during one major crisis for the EU (Brexit) and advanced towards implementation during another severe crisis (the Covid-19 pandemic), meaning that the prevailing context was turbulent.

Further, these crises added to the general lack of unity among member states on climate policy more broadly, with a persistent division between Poland and its allies and the rest of the EU member states on the degree and scope of climate policy ambition (Skovgaard, 2014), meaning that the internal, organisational context around climate governance was also turbulent. Crisis can certainly provide opportunity, but the EGD seems—at least on paper—to move far beyond what would have been considered a feasible governance option, even in 2018 (Kulovesi & Oberthür, 2020; Skjærseth, 2021). It may itself be a source of turbulence for other governance domains. Turbulence has not previously been applied to the EU governance context. The contributors to this thematic issue use the concept of turbulence to explore and assess the emergence of the EGD and the policy and governance choices associated with it.

In the first article, Mary Dobbs, Viviane Gravey, and Ludivine Petetin provide a detailed conceptual discussion of turbulence and its potential application in analysing EU climate and environmental governance (Dobbs et al., 2021). Building on the conceptualisation by Ansell et al. (2016), they discuss various types of turbulence, including horizontal, scalar, environmental, organisational, and policy turbulence. They ask whether the EGD is an effort to govern with or against turbulence, and whether the sources of turbulence are understood by EU policy actors. The authors lay out important questions about the role of turbulence in understanding governance choices, and how the EU deals with turbulence in climate governance. The rest of the articles in the thematic issue provide initial insights into these questions.

Marco Siddi's contribution analyses negotiations on the European Climate Law and on the 2030 target to reduce greenhouse gas emissions in the EU (Siddi, 2021). He examines the interactions of three types of turbulence: environmental, organisational, and scalar. The negotiations took place in a context of broader environmental turbulence that, Siddi argues, was intensified by the Covid-19 pandemic. Organisational turbulence manifested itself in diverging positions among EU institutions and inside those institutions, while turbulence of scale was present in several conflicts with some member states. Siddi finds that such interactions of turbulence did not prevent governance choices being made, but led to certain (types of) compromises in the negotiations.

His article highlights that turbulence remains a challenge to EU climate governance in general.

Continuing the analysis of turbulence in EU climate governance, Jana Gheuens and Sebastian Oberthür ask how much the EU has integrated a long-term view into its climate and energy policy and ambition (Gheuens & Oberthür, 2021). Overall, they find that the degree of myopia (or short-sightedness) in EU climate and energy policy has fluctuated in the past, and they lay out questions for future research on the temporal dimensions of governance strategies. Their article warns of future inconsistencies in governance approaches to climate change if myopic policy choices are pursued.

The contribution by Jeffrey Rosamond and Claire Dupont explores how the European Council and the Council of the EU responded to the emergence and development of the EGD (Rosamond & Dupont, 2021). Division among member states is recognised as a source of organisational turbulence in EU climate governance (Biedenkopf, 2021; Siddi, 2021; Skovgaard, 2014) and the EGD developed during a time of environmental turbulence. The authors analysed 424 Council and European Council conclusions between 2018 and 2020 and found that—on paper—these intergovernmental EU institutions managed to govern with the environmental and organisational turbulence towards the EGD.

Odysseas Christou investigates the evolution of the conceptualisation of energy security in EU policy between 1995 and 2020 (Christou, 2021). He focuses on the policy formulation phase and traces the evolution through an analysis of policy documents. He finds that the conceptualisation of energy security changed from a narrow definition based on energy supply characteristics to an expanded conception integrating other elements, in line with the convergence of energy and climate policy objectives. Christou argues that the EGD represents a culmination of this evolution, which sees the EU governing through turbulence as both a response to crisis and a source of long-term policy adaptation.

Jonas Schoenefeld's contribution focusses on policy monitoring, emphasising the political nature of monitoring choices, and underlining the need to understand better the effects of policy monitoring, especially in the context of the EGD (Schoenefeld, 2021). If the EGD is or becomes a source of policy turbulence, the manifestation of this may appear in monitoring effects. Schoenefeld notes that monitoring regimes for policy instruments within EU climate governance vary, and that the subjects of monitoring may not always be clearly defined. A better understanding of who monitors, what, why, when, and with what effect(s), Schoenefeld argues, can be key for the implementation of the EGD.

Diarmuid Torney's contribution studies the use of innovative forms of deliberative democracy in governing the response to climate change, which are a prominent feature of the EGD (Torney, 2021). He explores when and how such democratic innovations are likely to generate turbulence in the governance of climate transitions.

Using the cases of two recent and high-profile citizens' assemblies in Ireland and France on climate change, he finds that the institutional design of these processes but also the broader governance context shape how and in what ways such innovations contribute to turbulent climate governance.

Katja Biedenkopf considers the position of Poland on EU climate policy questions, which stands out as the EU member state that has most vehemently opposed numerous decisions to increase the EU's level of ambition (Biedenkopf, 2021). Her analysis identifies three distinct policy narratives in Polish climate policy: Poland is in a unique situation, Poland pursues an alternative pathway, and climate policy endangers competitiveness. Biedenkopf's findings confirm the dominance of the governing party's narratives, but contrary to previous studies, detects nascent polarisation on climate policy between the right-wing political parties, on the one hand, and the centre-right and centre-left parties, on the other.

Joseph Earsom and Tom Delreux focus on the international dimension of EU climate policy (Earsom & Delreux, 2021). They analyse the EU's role in the agreement of the Initial Strategy to reduce greenhouse gas emissions from international shipping at the International Maritime Organisation (IMO). While this agreement formed part of the goals of the EU, the authors question the extent to which the EU was itself responsible for its goal achievement. Employing process-tracing, they reveal the interactions with other events and actors earlier in the negotiations that the EU could build on towards goal achievement. Their insights speak to research on the role of the EU as an international (climate) actor, underline points of attention for the external role of the EU in the EGD, and highlight the organisational and scalar turbulence playing out within this international negotiation forum.

Taken together, the articles in this thematic issue provide a broad view of the usefulness of examining EU policy and governance through the lens of turbulence. Although the articles touch upon different levels of governance, different policy domains, and different stages of policymaking, each raise pertinent questions about the necessity of identifying sources of turbulence and of understanding how to govern with such turbulence, rather than against it. Overall, the issue demonstrates that, while specifying contextual factors, researching the sources of and responses to turbulence provides useful insights into the development, direction, and potential durability or advancement of EU climate governance.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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