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Europe's Green Deal plan unveiled

The goal of making the EU climate neutral by mid-century is likely to set off a political battle.

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European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen unveiled a list of policy initiatives and delivery timelines | Aris Oikonomou/AFP via Getty Images

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BY PAOLA TAMMA, ELINE SCHAART AND ANCA GURZU

European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen went into battle on Wednesday as she launched her [Green Deal](#), a three-decade effort to upend just about every policy area in the EU to make the bloc climate neutral by 2050.

“This is Europe’s man on the moon moment,” she said at the European Commission before presenting her flagship policy to the European Parliament. “Our goal is to reconcile the economy with our planet, to reconcile the way we produce, the way we consume with our planet and to make it work with our people.”

The policy is aimed at meeting the goals of the Paris climate agreement, and is a recognition of the growing importance of climate change for European industry, trade and politics — the power of green voters was demonstrated in this year’s European election.

“It is the people of Europe who asked us to conduct decisive action against climate change,” von der Leyen told the European Parliament. “It is for them that we are here today, it is for them that we built an ambitious green pact for Europe. It is here that we tell them, ‘We have heard you.’”

But the strategy that includes 50 specific policy measures won’t be easy to pass. It’s likely to exacerbate tensions between the greener western half of the Continent and the

coal-dependent east, between industry and NGOs, and between the EU and its trading partners — especially the U.S. under the leadership of climate-skeptic Donald Trump.

Von der Leyen put a positive spin on the effort, selling it as crucial to the bloc's economic and social prospects.

The Green Deal is “a new growth strategy that aims to transform the EU into a fair and prosperous society, with a modern, resource-efficient and competitive economy where there are no net emissions of greenhouse gases in 2050 and where economic growth is decoupled from resource use,” according to the communication.

Getting the full program adopted is likely to turn into a bruising political battle. Von der Leyen's speech was greeted positively by her own European People's Party as well as by the centrist Renew Europe bloc. “Renew Europe will be at your side,” said Pascal Canfin, a French MEP.

The Socialists and Democrats were also for it, but called for ensuring a socially fair transition, as did the far-left GUE/NGL group. The Greens, who didn't support von der Leyen's Commission at the time of its confirmation, said they'll consider each proposal on its merits. Navigating different national interests will be even trickier.

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The annex to the communication outlines the timelines for all the policy measures, including some coming as soon as January, such as a Just Transition Mechanism and a Sustainable Europe Investment Plan.

The flagship initiative is a climate law — to be presented by the Commission by March — which will commit the bloc to slash emissions to net zero by 2050, and a plan to increase the 2030 emissions reduction target to at least 50 percent and “towards” 55 percent from the current 40 percent goal. The precise goal for 2030 will be inserted after an impact assessment due to be completed in the summer.

“These policy reforms will help ensure effective carbon pricing throughout the economy,” said the communication.

The Just Transition Mechanism aims to help finance a green energy shift in coal dependent regions, and is crucial to gaining member country support for the 2050 target. EU leaders meeting later this week aim to adopt that goal, but the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland are balking unless they get financial assistance.

“I am hopeful that the Council might come to that agreement, but we'll have to wait and see,” Commission First Executive Vice President Frans Timmermans, in charge of the Green Deal, told reporters on Wednesday.



Frederick Florin/AFP via Getty Images

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On trade, the communication pledges to make respect of the Paris Agreement “an essential element for all future comprehensive trade agreements.” That text proved controversial — the precise language was finalized at the last minute, as shown by [a late draft obtained by POLITICO](#).

The stance is certain to create tensions with the U.S. if they start new trade talks with the EU, in the wake of Trump’s decision to pull out of the global climate pact.

The plan also calls for a carbon border mechanism on selected sectors — a tariff aimed at products made in countries with laxer climate policies — that will be designed to comply with World Trade Organization rules.

There are also measures spanning agriculture, transport, energy, chemicals, biodiversity, finance and more.

“We want to be the frontrunners in climate friendly industries, in green finance,” von der Leyen said.

The Commission admits that achieving such a structural reshaping of the economy to enable a green transition will not be easy. It will cost up to €260 billion of additional annual investments just to meet existing targets; the more ambitious ones will cost even more.

It also acknowledges that the shift will create winners and losers. “The ecological transition will reshape geopolitics, including global economic, trade and security interests. This will create challenges for a number of states and societies,” the communication said.

This article has been updated with comments from Frans Timmermans.

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