EU's Fight Against Climate Change:

An Example of Leading by Example?

by

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Abstract

The European Union is well known to be one of the most prominent international actors fighting against the climate crisis and, as the President of the European Council Charles Michel has said, it is trying to lead by example in order to reach the climate neutrality by 2050. However, is the EU really leading by example in the global fight against climate change? If so, through which means and behaviours, and how effectively?

The essay tries to answer to all these questions by starting from the very understanding of the concept of 'leading by example'. The definition of leading by example this essay comes up with is wider and more comprehensive than the one provided by scholars as Hermalin and Arce. This is why it will be important, given the aim of the essay, to keep an eye on the evolution of EU's narrative on the climate crisis in the first place and, just in a second moment, to focus on its concrete internal and external action.

Key-words

Climate change, Leading by Example, European Union

Introduction

Is climate change 'just' an environmental problem? Or is it an existential threat to humanity and biodiversity? Among the effects that climate change will have on the World ecosystems, it can be worthwhile to mention increasing drought and dryness, rising sea levels, shortage of freshwater and lands degradation. As soon as the Human Systems are considered, these changes will turn into the undermining of key economic sector and services, food insecurity and spread of poverty (IPCC 2019).

Among the different policy actors involved with the climate challenge, the European Union has shown to be one of the most conscious about the relevance of the problem at stake. As a matter of facts, 'since the United States' decision not to ratify the Kyoto Protocol […], the EU has emerged as the main actor among industrialised countries to push the process forward under the UN convention' (Fischer & Geden 2015: 2). EU's approach towards the climate issue changed a lot during the last three decades and in many occasions the EU claimed to be 'leading by example in areas such as cutting greenhouse gas emissions' (European Council 2020, par. 8). However, is it possible to assess the current state of art? Is the EU 'leading by example' in the global fight against climate change?

In order to provide a satisfactory answer to the research question, the essay will firstly focus on the strategy of 'leading by example', also by proposing a new definition of it. Secondly, it will focus on EU's efforts to build a new narrative on climate change. Thirdly, there will be a spotlight on EU's concrete internal and external actions to contrast climate change, and both strengths and shortcomings will be underlined. Finally, the conclusion of the essay will be drawn.

1. Leading by example

Since the end of the Second World War, the increasing level of interdependence among states made the issue of protecting international public goods more urgent. This prompted many scholars to focus on the study of collective action and leadership. Although in a first phase the study of leadership appeared to be strictly intertwined with the realist theory of hegemony (according to which just the strongest states in both military and economic

terms are able to coordinate the action of other nations and to guarantee the protection of the international public goods at stake), Charles P. Kindleberger, already in 1981, understood that there is no need of an hegemonic power to provide international public goods, since groups of smaller states can effectively serve as example through their policies (Kindleberger 1981). However, even once taken distance from the realist school, the theories of leadership continued to rely on the assumption of an objectivist ontology and they developed a functionalist perspective. Indeed, according to Benjamin E. Hermalin, the leader can act in two ways to convince his followers to behave in a certain manner: he can make a sacrifice through side-payments to his followers (the biggest the sacrifice, the most the followers will believe the return of that action to be), or he can 'lead by example', committing efforts first to signal information about the return of that particular conduct (Hermalin 1998). Finally, it was Daniel J. Arce (in De Oliveira et al. 2005: 58) in 2001 to provide the definition of 'leading by example' that is still dominant today: 'Arce suggested the name 'leadership by example' to describe a process whereby the cooperative solution to a voluntary provision game can be obtained through the leader's unilateral commitment to an intermediate level of provision, and matching behaviour there beyond'.

According to the essay, this definition only gives a partial view of a bigger picture and it presents serious shortcomings, as the inability to explain the phenomenon of free-riding (if the importance to protect some international public goods as the global climate was self-evident, there would be no renegade states in international climate regimes). The essay maintains that all social sciences, international relations included, should acknowledge that discourses do not merely describe, but they are constitutive of social reality. A core part of the efforts of the leading actor will be to develop an authoritative and coherent narrative over the issue at stake. Having said this, a more comprehensive definition of 'leading by example' is here provided.

The name 'leadership by example' describes the process whereby the collective protection of a public good can be obtained through the leader's identification of the good at stake, and through his efforts to persuade other players to address it by following his example; the process of persuasion will take place through the leader's construction of a narrative and through the leader's concrete actions.

Differently from the functionalist definition, that dealt with resolving voluntary provision games without explaining who chooses to play which game, in this brand-new

definition nothing as a self-evident provision game exists: the public good to be protected needs to be identified first.

Besides, once the collective good has been isolated, the leader will have to convince other actors to follow him. To do so, it is necessary for the leader not just to 'commit to an intermediate level of provision, and to match behaviour there beyond' (Arce's definition), but more broadly to '*persuade* other players to address the collective protection of the public good by following his example'.

Finally, the process of persuasion requires both the construction of a narrative and concrete actions to be implemented. It is important to observe that the leader's actions will trigger other states to follow, not merely by showing them that a certain way to implement determined policies is effective (old definition of 'leading by example') but also by persuading other actors that to pursue particular objectives in specific policy sectors is of primary importance. Evidently, the new definition of 'leadership by example' does not exclude, but actually enlarges, the objects of interest of the old definition.

Consequently, it will be possible to assess if the EU is actually 'leading by example' in the global fight against climate change, by firstly focusing on EU's construction of a narrative, and secondly by analysing its concrete internal and external actions.

2. Climate change: from environmental problem to existential threat

Over the years, the EU has produced an increasing number of documents related to climate change. Some of them need to be scanned in order to appreciate how did the EU narrative over climate change evolved.

Going back to 1998, it is possible to observe the 'Presidency conclusions' at the Vienna European Council. In this context the Council met in order to 'discuss the main issues and challenges facing the European Union'. At article 70 of the document, under chapter VI on 'Environment and sustainable development', there is a reference to climate change defined as 'one of the most challenging environmental problems for the next decades' (Vienna European Council 1998, art. 70). This definition was very far from describing the climatic issue as a priority for the EU agenda, and relegated climate change to the level of an 'environmental problem' (not even the most urgent one).

Although the 'European Security Strategy' of 2003 failed to address the climatic issue, in the Paper 'Climate Change and International Security' of 2008, Climate change is described 'as a threat multiplier which exacerbates existing trends, tensions and instability […] that threatens to overburden states and regions which are already fragile and conflict prone' (High Representative and the European Commission 2008, p. 2). On the same wavelength is the 'Report on the Implementation of the European Security Strategy, Providing Security in a Changing World' dated December 2008. In the first chapter entitled 'Global Challenges and Key Threats', the last short paragraph is dedicated to climate change, still described as a 'threat multiplier' which 'exacerbates conflict, especially in situations of poverty and population growth' (European Union 2008, p. 5). In this phase, although climate change is getting closer to the security realm, it is still considered as an issue that can mainly affect EU's fragile neighbours rather than directly undermining EU's security. The consequences of climate change on the EU would mostly be indirect and its action should be addressed in a framework of solidarity towards its neighbours and through development and adaptation policies.

In the following years, climate change remained in a singular position, stuck in a limbo between development and security. This emerges from the 'Council conclusions on EU Climate Diplomacy' of 2011, stating that 'Climate change is a global environmental and development challenge. Next to the most immediate effects, it also has important security implications' (Council of the EU 2009, p. 1). Similarly, in the Reflection Paper 'EU Climate Diplomacy for 2015 and beyond' is argued that 'Climate change remains a defining global challenge of our times which, if not vigorously and urgently controlled, will put at risk not only the environment but also world economic prosperity and development' (European Commission 2015, p. 1). Although climate change is not addressed neatly as a development nor as a security issue, the entry and consolidation of climate change in this middle position has had the positive effects of recognizing the complex and broad nature of this challenge. Besides, these documents acknowledge that the consequences of climate change can directly have an impact not just on fragile and poor states, but on the entire Globe.

The 'EU Global Strategy' (2016) replaces the 'European Security Strategy' of 2003. Differently from its predecessor, it makes a lot of references to climate change (quoted twelve times) and it lists it among the threats that can directly endanger EU, together with terrorism, hybrid threats, economic volatility, and energy insecurity.

Finally, a quantum leap is evident in the description of climate change that is provided by the Council of the EU in the 'Council Conclusions on Climate Diplomacy' of February 2019. In the annex of the document it is stated that 'Climate change is a direct and existential threat, which will spare no country. […] The EU […] recognises the severe implications that climate change poses to international security and stability' (Council of the EU 2019, p. 2). On the same direction goes the 'Draft Council conclusions on Climate Diplomacy' of January 2020, that in its annex frames climate change as 'an existential threat to humanity and biodiversity across all countries and regions [which] requires an urgent collective response' (Council of the European Union 2020, p. 2). In these final formulations, climate change finally assumes the relevance and urgency of an existential threat. It is repeated once again that no country will be spared by the effects of climate change and that an immediate and collective response need to be undertaken.

It can be stated that, albeit it took a long time, the EU has been able to 'securitize' the climatic issue and to elevate climate change from the status of environmental problem to that of existential threat for humanity. This process, slow but inexorable, allowed EU to develop an unprecedented and coherent narrative over the issue. Unfortunately, there is a main shortcoming that the EU encounters: given the very nature of the Union, still far from being labelled as a federation, there are some difficulties for the voice of the EU to be perceived as a very united and creditable one. The EU possess all the economic and technological resources required to be considered as a world leader in the promotion of climate change mitigation and adaptation policies, but its peculiar institutional and political nature undermines its credibility. Making EU a more solid actor in both political and institutional terms will be necessary to reinforce EU's ability to build a credible narrative within and outside its borders and to lead by example in the fight against climate change.

3. Internal and external actions

The great number of actions that the EU put in place in its fight against climate change can be divided into two macro categories, internal actions and external actions. Although treated separately for reasons of clarity, it should be kept in mind that the domestic and external action remain mutually supportive in order to achieve EU's climate policy objective. Indeed, if the EU wants to be more credible as a leading actor fighting against

climate change, 'it will be necessary for it to close the credibility gap between international promises and domestic implementation' (Oberthür & Kelly 2008: 39).

3.1. Internal actions

Domestic actions undertaken by the EU to fight climate change encompass a wide variety of policy lines. For reasons of time, and given the aim of this essay, it will not be possible to discuss each of these actions separately. What urges here is to underline that binding rules introduced by the EU in its fight against climate change are increasing both in number and in level of comprehensiveness.

EU's efforts to implement climate policies in 1990s were mainly unsuccessful (e.g. the European Commission proposal for a combined European CO2/energy tax failed, while the programs 'Specific Actions for Vigorous Energy Efficiency' and 'ALTENER' were weakened by the end of the '90s). It was after the adoption of the Kyoto Protocol in 1997, that EU's climate policies gained a new centrality (Fischer & Geden 2015).

The introduction of the EU Emission Trading Schemes (ETS) through the 2003 EU Emissions Trading Directive is a perfect example of how the EU decided to adopt an instrument developed in the international legal framework to ensure the respect of commitments made by states parties to an international environmental treaty (i.e. the ETS were firstly introduced by the Kyoto Protocol, in 1997). The ETS were developed to help EU member states to achieve their GHGs emissions reduction through a system that allows private companies all over the Union to sell or buy emission allowances. In this way the EU could show to the whole international community to be directly interested in assuring the respect of the Protocol. After the Directive 2003/87/EC, the matter of EU ETS was regulated by five directives more (the last of which is dated March 2018) that define the rules of the EU ETS until the period 2026-2030 (European Parliament and Council of the EU, 2018).

It was always in the context of the Kyoto Protocol that the EU firstly committed to a very high reduction of GHGs. In this occasion, indeed, the EU-15 agreed to limit GHGs emissions to 8 percent below its 1990 levels during the first commitment period from 2008 to 2012, going beyond the 5 percent reduction fixed, for annex I parties to the Protocol, at art. 3 of the Kyoto Protocol (European Commission, 2004).

In the list of measures taken to decrease the GHGs emission it is also relevant to mention the Decision No 406/2009/EC, and the Regulation (EU) 2018/842. The Regulation of 2018 in particular obliges EU member states to achieve EU's aim of reducing greenhouse gas emissions by 40 percent below 1990 levels by 2030 (European Parliament and Council of the EU, 2018). In this direction goes the very ambitious Commission's Proposal for the 'European Climate Law', amended in September 2020: it is one of the core elements of the European Green Deal, and it aims at creating a comprehensive European Climatic legal framework to allow the achievement of 55 percent emission reductions by 2030 (going beyond the objective fixed by Regulation 2018/842), and the 2050 climate-neutrality objective (European Commission, 2020).

From 1990 to 2017, EU GHGs emission dropped by 21.6 percent (Eurostat, 2019). Commitments made over time by EU are particularly ambitious and this, together with the development of new instruments to achieve its objectives, shows the leading behaviour of the Union. However, the lack of homogeneity (Eurostat, 2019) between different EU countries in terms of GHGs emission is an Achille's heel, and EU should try to work on it, not only to make its internal action more effective, but also to appear as a very unitary actor in the global arena. This will require both the establishment of uniform emission reduction targets, and the identification of an acceptable balance (acceptable for EU Member States) between the urgent green transition and the social equity aspects it will affect.

3.2. External actions

Also, EU external climate action is a very complex topic to be addressed. As a matter of facts, this policy area usually borders with that of energy policies, development policies and trade policies.

It was in 2011 that the Council of the EU published the 'Council conclusion on EU Climate Diplomacy', with the aim 'to address climate change at all political levels and to strengthen the EU voice and activities internationally' (Council of the European Union 2011, p. 1).

One of the most relevant innovations introduced by the European Council in the field of external action is the creation of the 'Green Diplomacy Network', chaired by the European External Action Service (EEAS) since January 2012. As stated on the official

website of the European Commission, 'the Network consists of officials dealing with international environment and sustainable development issues in the EU's Ministries of Foreign Affairs and their diplomatic missions including the EEAS and the EU Delegations' (European Commission 2019, p. 1).

Ever since the EU has been a particularly relevant actor in international climate change negotiations. As a matter, although it had already taken part to the UNFCCC (1992) and to the Kyoto Protocol (1997), its role started to become prominent in subsequent Conferences of Parties. Despite the failure of Copenhagen Climate Summit of 2009 (COP 15), 'the EU can be considered to have scored a relative success with the Paris Agreement [of 2015 (COP21) and] this success was made possible by a moderation of the EU's policy objectives pursued proactively through an EU bridge-building and coalition-building strategy' (Oberthür & Groen 2016: 1).

EU is carrying out his climate policies also in other international fora dealing with the climatic issue (IPCC, OECD, MEF, IEA, G8 and G20), and it is putting up a series of bilateral arrangements with many non-EU countries (e.g. US, Russia, China, Brazil). Although some of the EU external climate policies are proving to be successful (e.g. EU action to support the design and the implementation of emissions trading in China), three main criticalities remain.

Firstly, when it comes to the dialogue with neighbouring developing countries, EU's climate action is mainly focused on climate change mitigation, and it is usually pushed forward (mostly but not exclusively) through development cooperation policies. It could be argued that to work on climate change resilience trough the EU Development Policy leverage might actually downsize the relevance of the climatic issue, from a security issue, to a development one. This essay acknowledges that, given the nature of the issue at stake, the development leverage is of fundamental importance when implementing climate change mitigation policies. However, EU Development policies should just support, without ever substituting, specific climate change policies.

Another important issue related to EU's foreign climate policy, concerns its approach towards energy security. The 'Energy Union Strategy' of 2015 lists decarbonization among its main priorities (European Parliament, 2015), however EU continues investing capitals for the creation of infrastructures such as the Trans-Anatolian Natural Gas Pipeline (TANAP) and the Trans Adriatic Pipeline (TAP) and its oil dependency stands at 86.7

percent by 2017 (Eurostat, 2017). Evidently, it would be useful to understand if the priority of EU energy policies is to reduce insecurity by maintaining close ties with great oil and gas exporters, or to focus on the green reconversion of its energy consumption, so to limit the import of non-renewable sources of energy whose consumption is detrimental for global climate and environment.

Finally, the EU should try to resolve the tension arising from the fact of being contemporarily a supporter of the liberalist logic of market economy and a promoter of green trade policies. To strike a balance between the two extremes will be a necessity and could finally also turn into an opportunity for the emergence and spread of a new sustainable vision of global economy.

To face these criticalities will be fundamental for the EU to gain in terms of coherence and credibility, and to lead in the global fight against climate change.

4. Conclusions

This essay started by asking the following question: 'Is the EU leading by example in the global fight against climate change?'. Once having provided a more comprehensive definition of 'leading by example', it was clarified that EU made impressive progresses in changing its narrative on climate change and its approach towards it over the last three decades. Moreover, the EU showed to be willing to undertake (and to be able to honour) very challenging emission reduction targets, and it played an active role of mediator and promoter of aspirational policy objectives both in international fora and through bilateral agreements. Having said this, and considered that no other great power (nor any coordinated group of states) has been capable to reach such high achievements, this essay concludes that the EU is actually 'leading by example' in the global fight against climate change.

However, to be a leader doesn't mean necessarily to be totally effective. Indeed, a number of criticalities remain on the ground and need to be addressed if the EU wants its action to really pursue its stated objectives. The creation of a more united EU (both in institutional terms and in terms of homogeneity of climate policy implementations) the deployment of a more sustainable approach towards developing countries, the implementation of a 'very' green energy strategy and the adoption of a new approach

towards economy (further from purely liberalist principle of market economy) are complex and sensitive issues that need to be addressed (and over which additional research will be required) in order to make EU a stronger and more successful leader in the global fight against climate change.

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