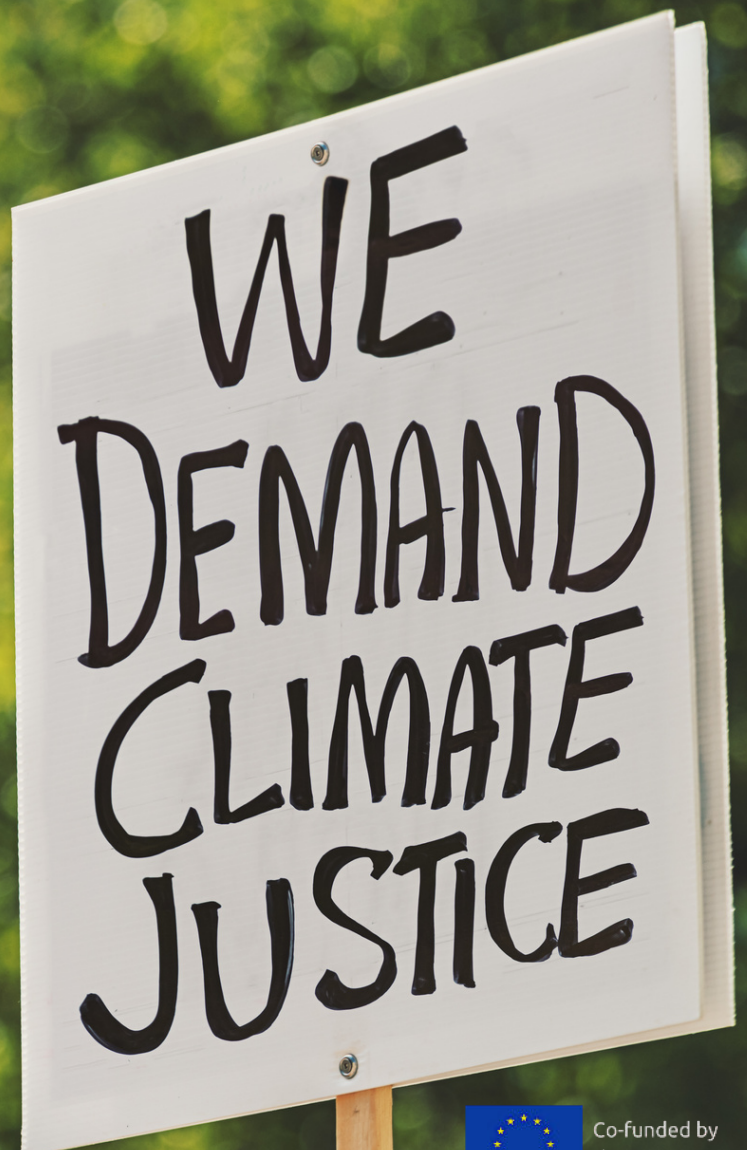


INNOVATE, INVOLVE, INFORM, IMPACT (4IS): SECURING GREEN STRATEGIC AUTONOMY THROUGH DEMOCRATIC AND TECHNOLOGICAL INNOVATION

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TEPSA BRIEFS
01/2024



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Co-funded by
the European Union

Abstract

The EU tackles climate challenges through initiatives such as the European Green Deal. This Brief explores democratic and technological innovations to realise European green strategic autonomy, proposing the creation of an EU-wide permanent Citizens' Assembly on Climate (EPCA-Climate). With support from AI-assisted tools for meaningful and innovative communication, the Assembly aims to ensure inclusivity, and empower citizens, paving the way for the EU's envisioned green strategic autonomy.

The world is grappling with the realities of anthropogenic climate change, and Europe stands as no exception to these challenges. The Yale School of the Environment has meticulously [outlined](#) the indicators marking the onset of the Anthropocene era within the continent: "the straightening of once-wild rivers, deforestation, damming, industrial pollution, wastewater discharges, and agriculture's usurpation of shorelines and wetlands has made Europe's rivers all the more susceptible to heat waves and low-water conditions, as well as floods."

In the face of the adverse impacts of climate change and environmental degradation, European Union (EU) leaders have taken proactive and bold measures by introducing visionary initiatives, notably the REPowerEU Plan and the NextGenerationEU recovery instrument. For instance, the latter has allocated approximately 40% of its fiscal

stimulus towards climate-related endeavours. This allocation [corresponds to roughly 0.3%](#) of the EU's annual GDP. Additionally, central to the NextGenerationEU strategy is the European Green Deal, a pivotal framework aspiring to establish Europe as the world's "[first climate-neutral continent](#)." The Deal aims to transform the EU into a modern, resource-efficient, and competitive economy, ensuring no net emissions of greenhouse gases by 2050, among other pledges. Last but not least, to align the EU with its ambitious climate objectives, the European Commission [introduced](#) the much-anticipated Fit for 55 package in July 2021, comprising thirteen comprehensive legislative proposals spanning various domains. Furthermore, external events such as Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine and the ensuing significant surge in energy and food expenses have acted as catalysts in expediting the EU's climate policy commitments.

Apart from being a focus in Brussels, climate change has garnered unprecedented attention across the EU. The April 2021 Special Eurobarometer [reveals](#) that a remarkable 93% of EU respondents view climate change as a grave concern. Fast forward two years, and 77% of respondents still [hold the same apprehension](#). Notably, this marks the first instance where climate change has taken the top spot, surpassing all other global challenges on the list. Despite the EU's existing commitments and the alignment of public attitudes with strategies like climate adaptation and a green transition, it is imperative for the EU to take more comprehensive and audacious steps in reshaping its political culture and reinforcing its core values in favour of 'green strategic autonomy'. This means that the EU should be independent from other countries while engaging with partners towards climate transition and when upholding green norms at home and worldwide, leaving no one behind. Green strategic autonomy also involves the EU's unwavering dedication to democratic green values both within its borders and on the global

stage.

An integral component of the EU's pursuit of green strategic autonomy involves harmonising climate and social policies. This is particularly crucial because the EU's climate initiatives have a direct bearing on both citizens and the viability of small and medium-sized enterprises, which [form the cornerstone of many citizens' livelihoods](#). Against the backdrop of the EU's multifaceted challenges and heightened societal vulnerabilities, achieving a seamless integration between climate and social priorities might seem like a distant goal.

Given this context, the introduction of democratic innovation via an EU-wide Permanent Citizens' Assembly on Climate (EPCA-Climate) gains prominence as a potential conduit between the two policies, ultimately paving the way for the realisation of an authentic green strategic autonomy. The meaningful engagement of [randomly selected citizens](#), with respect to the key socio-demographic characteristics such as gender, age, education background, and geographic location, in shaping the EU's climate policies could yield substantial results, particularly if their perspectives are drawn from a diverse cross-section of European society. These insights could then be efficiently communicated to the broader EU populace, leveraging responsible and innovative AI-assisted tools to ensure transparent dissemination of their decisions.

INNOVATE: Why does green strategic autonomy need democratic innovation?

The often-overlooked concept of green strategic autonomy [alludes to](#) the imperative of decarbonising the economy and effecting a

shift toward carbon-neutral energy systems across power generation, heating, and transportation. As Russia's aggression has subtly linked ecological sustainability to Europe's aspiration for strategic autonomy, challenges like the United States' overblown Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) and China's stranglehold on rare earth elements have compelled the EU to emphasise the ecological dimension of its longstanding discourse on open strategic autonomy. As external pressures from both allies and adversaries underscore the relevance of infusing the idea of green strategic autonomy into the EU's political ethos, it becomes increasingly important for the Union to counterbalance these pressures by incorporating environmental consciousness into its foundational principles, even in the face of internal opposition from illiberal factions.

Not all political establishments within the EU are embracing its climate policies wholeheartedly. A comprehensive 2019 study [underscores](#) that far-right parties are associating social injustices with the EU's climate adaptation and green transition efforts. Recent indications also point to politicians in certain countries, where commitment to democratic liberal norms is waning, [exploiting public fear](#), particularly among the working class, regarding the societal implications of the EU's Green Deal.

Despite the influence of these illiberal perspectives on public opinion, concerns about climate change and the perceived sluggishness of both the EU and its Member States transcend such viewpoints. Everyday Europeans from diverse backgrounds share legitimate preoccupations about climate change, as well as the perceived lack of progress by the EU and its Member States.

For instance, a recent survey highlights that merely 3 out of 10 Europeans [believe](#) the EU is taking sufficient action to combat climate

change. Furthermore, the July 2023 Eurobarometer [underscores](#) substantial discontent among EU respondents with their respective national governments' efforts to address climate change, averaging at 67% dissatisfaction.

EU leaders assert that they have not taken external pressures, combined with the anti-climate rhetoric propagated by European populists and the growing climate consciousness among the public, lightly. Rather, the EU has consistently heightened its climate commitments and strategies. In response to the potential dominance of China over critical raw materials and to facilitate the green transition, the [European Chips Act](#) has been enacted. Furthermore, the [Green Deal Industrial Plan](#) has been adopted as a strategic approach to position Europe at the forefront of the global net-zero industrial era. The latter initiative embodies President Von der Leyen's call for a "[European IRA](#)". The Commission president and her team have been striving to stimulate increased public investments and accelerate the transition towards renewable energy, among other proactive measures, while also responding to the United States' IRA.

Addressing domestic challenges, the most recent addition to the EU's efforts is the Social Climate Fund within the Fit for 55 package. This fund is explicitly designed to [assist](#) vulnerable households and small enterprises. Although these measures have encountered various political, social, budgetary, and legislative limitations, it is fair to assert that effectively addressing the trifecta of challenges (namely, external pressures, scepticism from illiberal climate factions, and disregard for public concerns) would invigorate and secure the establishment of the imperative green strategic autonomy. While a one-size-fits-all remedy is impractical, fostering a meaningful participatory democracy accompanied by innovative agenda-setting and

communication strategies would gradually materialise the EU's aspiration for green strategic autonomy.

In pursuit of this objective, a truly grassroots citizen engagement emerges as a potent approach to counter the influence of illiberal climate sceptic elements. It also serves as a mechanism to bridge the divide between the EU's climate objectives and public apprehensions. To achieve this, the EU, with a special focus on its Commission, can harness the remarkable level of public interest in climate issues, empowering individuals to play a meaningful role. This, in turn, sets the stage for a governance model driven by the citizens themselves. One actionable strategy involves the establishment of a dedicated and enduring citizens' assembly with a climate-centric mandate, EPCA-Climate, spanning the entire EU.

INVOLVE: What would EPCA-Climate hold for a green strategic autonomy?

Citizen engagement should form the cornerstone of the EU's climate policies, serving as a fundamental pillar for the realisation of green strategic autonomy. The genuine concerns voiced by citizens must be harmonised with the commitments made by the EU. The EU's successful experimentation with reconciling these elements through the Conference on the Future of Europe (CoFE), spanning various policy domains, including the climate agenda, underscores its potential. However, to avoid the co-optation of climate concerns by illiberal voices for the purpose of discrediting the EU and its efforts, the EPCA-Climate should be made permanent, rather than ephemeral like the CoFE.

Furthermore, the external challenges the EU currently grapples with have pushed it into

crisis mode, potentially eroding its connection with the voices and desires of its citizens. This scenario inadvertently [provides more leeway](#) for technocrats to operate in a top-down manner. Embracing such a shift towards technocracy may carry severe repercussions for both trust in EU institutions and the democratic underpinnings of the EU.

To prevent further alienation of citizens from the EU and counteract the rise of illiberal politics, fostering participatory democracy and promoting active civic engagement in the EU's climate policymaking emerge as paramount imperatives. Leveraging the heightened attention citizens are directing towards climate change, the EU stands to gain by establishing an enduring citizen-driven platform—a citizens' assembly—dedicated to shaping the climate agenda. By instilling in citizens the perception that their voices are genuinely heard and their involvement is highly valued in the decision-making processes, as exemplified by initiatives like CoFE and experiences in [Ireland](#), the EU significantly enhances its prospects of securing enduring support for its climate adaptation and energy transition commitments, thus transcending the constraints of electoral cycles. The findings of the 2023 Special Eurobarometer survey [shed light](#) on this trend, revealing that a substantial 63% of respondents acknowledge a personal responsibility to act for green transition.

The deeper the bottom-up approach integrates with the EU's climate commitments and instruments, the greater the assurance of their effectiveness and long-term viability. The establishment of the EPCA-Climate citizens' assembly initiated by the EU, serving as a manifestation of participatory democracy, holds the potential to infuse novel viewpoints and insights into EU climate endeavours, thereby bolstering their credibility. For a green strategic autonomy to endure, it is imperative to prioritise social

justice and inclusivity. The engagement of citizens in the decision-making processes related to the EU's climate policies presents a promising avenue; nonetheless, there exists a potential downside. This risk materialises if the assembly's citizen members fail to adeptly disseminate pertinent information to the wider public or, equally critical, if they do not actively seek input from the populace.

INFORM: How can EPCA-Climate ensure its inclusivity and effectiveness?

While the terms of reference and procedural rules of the EPCA-Climate define the scope of its deliverables, ensuring its inclusivity is paramount. The EU's commitment to green strategic autonomy must harmonise climate commitments with social justice, ensuring an equitable transition for all. Treating the "EU public as a stakeholder" necessitates the establishment of an enduring citizens' assembly focused on climate concerns. This assembly should be consistently nourished with public feedback and requisitions. To materialise this concept, both the European Commission and the EPCA-Climate should collaborate to create an innovative communication platform. This platform would constantly serve to capture diverse climate-related sentiments, questions, and appeals from the public, in their native languages. Subsequently, these inputs would be meticulously validated and transformed into actionable agenda items.

Given that climate change stands as the foremost concern among the EU population, a well-operating and dependable EPCA-Climate should anticipate a daily influx of millions of messages. The Assembly stands to leverage artificial intelligence (AI) in order to capitalise on this extensive civic engagement spanning the EU. While [AI's widespread use](#) is broadly

subject to securitisation and demonisation throughout the Union, the use of responsible AI tools, driven by value-based algorithms, can effectively demonstrate its favourable outcomes. This, in turn, can empower the Assembly's members with a public demand-oriented agenda, culminating in the establishment of an all-encompassing EPCA-Climate.

The success of EPCA-Climate hinges on the utilisation of data and information sourced from the EU populace, complemented by the backing of technocrats and experts. To ensure effective dissemination of their achievements, EPCA-Climate ought to revamp its communication strategies and tools. Despite the array of social media platforms at their disposal, EU institutions presently connect directly with merely a limited segment of the population, primarily those who are well-educated and adept with technology.

The innovative communication strategy, built upon insights from behavioural studies, [aims to facilitate](#) tailored and context-sensitive communication with the EU populace. This becomes especially critical for resolutions grounded in the EPCA-Climate framework. While the Assembly strives to ensure its comprehensive nature, the true efficacy of its outcomes hinges on engaging every individual according to their distinct climate perspectives, worries, and needs. In this vein, the conventional approach of mass communication must give way to an adaptable mode of interaction, thereby enabling the messages of EPCA-Climate to genuinely enlighten and engage the entire EU population.

Given the intricate nature of the Assembly's deliverables, establishing adaptable communication with the entire EU population appears to be a daunting task. However, AI tools offer a promising solution to aid the EPCA-Climate in effectively reaching out to the public. For instance, an AI-assisted tool

has the capability to analyse a range of variables. These variables include geolocation, population density, forest cover, soil quality, and water accessibility, all on an individual level. This data could be complemented by certain personal indicators such as age, gender, educational background, social status, and political affiliation in accordance with the prevailing regulations outlined in General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). By integrating these factors, the AI-powered tool can skilfully convey the climate message and ensure comprehensive awareness for every European resident.

IMPACT: What should be done next?

The EPCA-Climate and AI-assisted communication tools remain conspicuously absent from the EU landscape. The latter's validity is further mired by the absence of AI regulations, rendering it not only unregulated but also operationally unviable. However, the commitment made by European Commission President von der Leyen in September 2022 to seamlessly integrate the accomplishments of the CoFE into the regular fabric of European "[democratic life](#)" suggests that the propositions within this concise account could transition into reality sooner than anticipated.

Although the notion of green strategic autonomy finds no place in the EU encyclopaedia, the indications embedded within climate commitments and measures insinuate a rapid trajectory towards an environmentally self-sufficient EU. This trajectory could be successfully navigated by intertwining the climate agenda and participatory democracy in a mutually reinforcing manner. In this pursuit, the democratic innovation presented by EPCA-Climate emerges as one of the most plausible and comprehensive pathways to expedite the attainment of the much-coveted green

strategic autonomy for the EU.

The exigency for the active inclusion of public stakeholders and the promotion of civic engagement at the EU level can galvanise its leaders to harness the potential of AI for effecting the climate transition. In the absence of reliable AI-assisted tools for efficacious communication and information dissemination, the EU Commission has the opportunity to leverage the years 2022 and 2023-2024, respectively designated as the '[Year of Youth](#)' and the '[Year of Skills](#),' to inspire and support the ingenious young generation in crafting responsible AI tools. Such an endeavour would not only showcase the EU's global innovation prowess in nascent technologies but also underscore its commitment to the principles of democracy.

The realisation of the EU's green strategic autonomy through robust democratic innovation would serve as a foundational precedent for extending public co-governance to other sectors and policies. Ultimately, this visionary aspiration could pave the way for the emergence of a '[demoicratic](#)' EU: "a union of diverse peoples harmoniously governing together, while preserving their individual identities."

Authors' Note: We express our gratitude to Prof. Kalypso Nicolaïdis, Prof. Emma Lees, and Dr. Peter Martin Vis, of the European University Institute (EUI) for their comments on the initial draft of this Brief. However, the opinions expressed herein solely reflect the viewpoints of the authors and not those of the reviewers.

All the opinions expressed in this publication are the sole view of the authors, and do not represent the position of the Trans European Policy Studies Association (TEPSA) or of its Members.

Editing and formatting: Allegra Wirmer (TEPSA)

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