

## **Uncertain Times: The Future of Transatlantic Relations from the Perspective of NGOs and Think-tank's in Central Europe and Hungary**

Debate: Energy and climate policy: A green future amidst competing interests

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Public awareness of climate change has increased in the last decades. Subsequently, climate policy went through a long developing process. This paper will reveal the connection between the supranational level (UN, EU) and national level, including the case of Hungary (which is one of the member states of the Visegrad Group)–. Finally, this study introduces some examples which can support the goals of the European Green Deal. These examples point out that although significant progress has happened in this field, the next decades will be crucial. At the same time, it is an extraordinarily complex and complicated challenge that these green economic transitions provide benefits for every stakeholder and citizen of the EU.

### **Increasing global awareness and international climate policy**

Since the beginning of the industrial revolution, the planet's average surface temperature has increased by 1,5 C°. The increasing number of extreme weather events, droughts, lethal heat waves, and heavy storms also drew attention to the issues related to the crisis of the environment (IPCC 2019). As a result, in the previous decades, the attitude of the public and policymakers has been changed due to the ongoingly more considerable public pressure on decision-makers and vast amounts of scientific evidence related to climate change (e.g., UN IPCC reports).

Since the 1970s, the climate policy went through a long developing process. In the following years, several climate agreements have been ratified by the majority of the international community. The UNFCCC in Rio de Janeiro (1992) and Kyoto Protocol (1997) are the most well-known. The milestone among these agreements was the Paris Agreement in 2015 which achieved two main goals: reducing Greenhouse Gas (GHG) emissions and increased adaptation to the harmful effects of climate change via international cooperation.

## **The aspects of European Union's Climate Policy**

Although the European Union's significance has decreased in the previous period, it is still a global actor related to climate policy. Due to the large market, significant economic weight, and well-developed legislative institute system European Union is one of the most important actors in the fight against climate change. For example, companies who want to operate on EU markets should meet strict environmental standards and regulations. This global role gives enormous opportunity, and at the same time, a considerable responsibility for the member states of the European Union related to the problem of climate change (Eurostat 2020, European Commission 2020a).

One of the first and most successful initiatives was the EU Emission Trading System set up in 2005. The role of this mechanism to involve the EU's economic and governmental agents to reduce their carbon emission via a "cap-and-trade" structure in a flexible way. The companies and other actors can trade with each other these units on a free market while the cap of the total units constantly decreases, which leads to increased carbon dioxide prices. As a result, EU ETS encourages polluters to invest in greener technologies and solutions (European Commission 2021, EU ETS Handbook 2015).

From the first Climate and Energy Package in 2008, the requirements and targets have become more ambitious. In the history of European climate policy's European Green Deal would be the most ambitious climate plan which targeted the zero-emission green economy for 2050. At the same time, this transition should not harm the well-being of the community and the people level of individuals. The EGD is an extraordinary enterprise that humankind has not done before. One-third of the NextGen Fund, 600 billion € will allocate to achieve a net-zero economy by 2050. The EGD is based on several legislative foundations, including European Climate Law which is the main contributor of carbon neutrality goals. At the same time, European Climate Pact engages citizens and all parts of society in climate action. The 2030 Climate Action Plan designates the first milestone for 2030 to reduce GHG emissions by 55% compared to 1990. Last but not least, Climate Adaptation Strategy encourages society's resilience to the impacts of climate change. Just Transitional Mechanism is one of the main tools that can help green economic transition (European Commission a 2019).

The Cohesion Policy of 2021-2027 programing period also dedicates more attention to climate policy. Among the five main goals of this period: more innovative, greener, and more connected Europe and the development of social involvement and bringing Europe closer to

their citizens. From the aspect of climate policy, the new budget aims are significantly motivated by climate policy aims (European Commission 2020b).

### **Climate policy in Hungary**

According to the publicly available data of NAGIS (National Adaptation Geoinformatics System) and other NCCS-2, the Carpathian basin and Hungary are vulnerable to climate change's harmful effects due to the basin-like location. More frequent extreme weather events and shifting hydrological conditions are living evidence of climate change's negative consequences. Also remarkable is that, in numerous Hungarian regions, periods of water abundance and water scarcity can emerge in the same year. The heatwaves, storms, and other extreme weather events show that climate change is an already existing and crucial phenomenon in East-Central Europe (NAGIS, NCCS-2). These examples highlighted the significance of climate policy in these uncertain times.

As an EU member, the Hungarian climate policy and strategy making follow the logic of the European structure of climate policy documents. The actual strategic document, "Second National Climate Change Strategy for the period between 2018 and 2030 and providing an outlook until 2050" (NCCS-2), was accepted by the Hungarian Parliament in 2018. This document is divided into three main parts: mitigation (Hungarian Decarbonization Roadmap), adaptation (National Adaptation Strategy), and awareness-raising and partnership (Horizontal elements). Until 2030 the NCCS-2 will contain four national action plans, which will be published and updated every three years<sup>1</sup>. This document contains concrete actions and names the financial sources of these measures related to mitigation, adaptation, and awareness-raising. The efficiency of these actions will be monitored during the programming period (NCCS-2 2018).

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<sup>1</sup> The 1st Climate Change Action Plan - CCAP is valid, and the 2nd Climate Change Adaptation Action Plan will be accepted in the second part of 2021 (NCCS2).

## **Actions based on climate policy goals in the case of Hungary**

Due to the increasing public awareness and pressure on the government<sup>2</sup>, the Hungarian Prime minister also announced the Climate and Environmental Protection Action Plan in 2020, which focuses on seven points, including the transformation of the Mátrai Power Plant, which is the largest lignite-fired power plant in Hungary. Including the LIFE IP NORTH-HU Trans project and EU's Just Transitional Mechanism, the power plant will shut down in 2030<sup>3</sup>. The integrated projects will support the phase-out of fossil fuels, decrease energy poverty in the Northern Hungary region, and the recultivation of lignite mines. At the same time, a new photovoltaics (PV) solar park will build which will operate at a 16 MW capacity. The transition of the Mátrai Power Plant would be an opportunity for excluded social groups (e.g., Roma people in small villages) to gain benefits from green transition (European Commission 2019b).

CEPA also plans to increase the share of solar energy, especially solar power and PV, by 2030<sup>4</sup>. Clean transportation solutions such as supporting electro mobilization (e-bikes and electric cars) by subsidiaries. Furthermore, National Green Bus Program dedicated those settlements which size reach 25 000 habitats will gain electrically driven buses as a part of this program. These actions combine with railway investments (e.g., planned Budapest-Krakow-Prague-Bratislava railway line) also can help to achieve cleaner transportation in the future (CEPA 2020, (NCCS-2).

At the same time, around 1 million trees will be planted according to the document bound to family policy. This tree plantation program will support the national forestry target, which wants to increase the share of the forests from 20% to 27% by 2030. The LULUCF (Land-use, Land-use change, and forestry) would increase Hungary's carbon dioxide absorption capabilities, which is one of the key elements to reach the 2050 goals of the European Green Deal (CEPA 2020).

These examples might be giving a more sophisticated picture of an East-Central European state's climate policy and concrete actions. Although good climate governance is an

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<sup>2</sup> At the end of 2019, more than 200 000 citizens send back a questionnaire related to National Clean Development Strategy 2005, which any platform has not promoted. This gives a great example of public awareness of climate change (Euronews 2019).

<sup>3</sup> According to the high CO<sub>2</sub> prices, this deadline shifted to 2025.

<sup>4</sup> The government gives an essential role for nuclear energy in energy transition, a controversial and heated topic in Hungary.

ideal stage and the current situation is far from it but essential to investigate the details of the interconnections between the European Union's and the region's climate policies and actions which might be able to give a deeper understanding, and separate the issues of climate policies from the questions of actual politics.

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