Ahead of the May 2019 European elections, EURACTIV takes an in-depth look into the campaign commitments made by the lead candidates of the main political parties.
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Despite his Christian convictions, the lead candidate for the European People’s Party (EPP) has remained remarkably silent on important environmental issues such as climate change, before changing gear suddenly towards the end of his campaign.

“Yes, absolutely. Europe must move towards net-zero emissions by 2050”.

Those words, articulated in a written interview published today on EURACTIV, were a long time coming for Manfred Weber. For most of the European election campaign, the German candidate preferred keeping his opinions to himself when it comes to the environment.

“He was mostly busy keeping the grand coalition together in the European Parliament,” says Pieter de Pous, a veteran Brussels activist who moved to Berlin over a year ago to become a senior advisor at E3G, a climate change think tank.

Even though Weber has little chance of becoming the next president of the European Commission, his views on the environment still matter hugely because he represents the largest political family in Europe – including the CDU party of German Chancellor Angela Merkel.

To be fair, environmental policy was never a unique selling point for the EPP’s predominantly conservative electorate. When the party held an internal vote last year to select their Spitzenkandidat for the European elections, its green inclinations were represented by underdog Alexander Stubb, a young and dynamic former prime minister of Finland who

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championed net-zero emissions goals by 2045.

After losing the EPP primary, Stubb gave his support to Weber but did not actively participate in the election campaign. Weber, for his part, did not bring up the climate topic until he was eventually forced into action by domestic politics, observers say.

“He did it because of pressure, coming from Germany in particular,” de Pous told EURACTIV, saying the school strike movement in Germany had exposed the environmental weaknesses of Weber’s CSU party in Bavaria.

In a regional vote last October, the Green Party became the second strongest political force in the traditionally conservative Bavaria, where Weber’s CSU had ruled almost single-handedly since 1957.

“That put a stop to their current approach of just kicking the can down the road and postponing tough choices,” de Pous says. “They need to face the tough choices now,” he added referring to the German climate commission set up by Chancellor Merkel earlier this year to draft a new climate protection law.

According to de Pous, the youth climate strikes in Germany also largely explain Merkel’s sudden about-turn on climate policy. In a surprise move last week, the German Chancellor gave her backing to the EU’s proposed carbon neutrality target for 2050. She had until then refused to commit to any date in particular.

Another game-changer, de Pous says, came in February when a petition to “save the bees” registered a record 1.75 million signatures in Bavaria. The CSU government in Bavaria was compelled to follow up on the historical petition and immediately adopted a bill to translate it into law.

That made the CSU realise that the environment “is a topic they couldn’t ignore any longer,” de Pous says, pointing out that Weber’s party had “never really given much attention to it until now”.

**A CHRISTIAN FAITH IN ENVIRONMENTALISM**

The CSU’s belated interest in the environment could make Weber look like a novice on green topics. But he can, in fact, claim some expertise on the matter.

In his EURACTIV interview, Weber says he “became aware of questions related to ecology from an early age,” when he was a member of the youth organisation of the Catholic Church. As a young student in mechanical engineering, he specialised in environmental technology and later founded a consultancy firm specialised in this field after his studies.

“Environmental issues were one of my areas of expertise also in the Junge Union, the Youth organisation of the CSU,” Weber told EURACTIV, stressing that this was not common at the time.

Weber says he was “deeply impressed” by the second encyclical of Pope Francis, Laudato Si, which calls on humans to take greater care of the planet and urges “swift and unified global action” on climate change.

According to Weber, Christians “have a duty to help preserve our environment and all living beings on our planet. This is at the heart of my concept of Christian Democracy: organising, in a democratic manner and by integrating all members of society, a sustainable future for our planet.”

Although his chances of becoming Commission president are slim, Weber is still likely to be offered a key position in the EU executive or in the European Parliament.


Such scrutiny will probably intensify after the elections. In fact, it has already begun.

The Institute for European Environmental Policy (IEEP), a think tank, recently produced an analysis of the election manifestos of major European parties. And although both Weber’s 12-point plan and the EPP manifesto make the implementation of the Paris Agreement a priority, the IEEP says they fall short on climate policy.

“Their proposals are unlikely to get us where we need to be in terms of emissions,” says IEEP director Céline Charveriat. “What we have right now from the EPP is not sufficient,” she told EURACTIV.

Because he is an engineer by training, Weber seems to have big faith in research and technology, Charveriat said. In his EURACTIV interview, Weber indeed calls for “more money dedicated to future-oriented research,” saying that “only new innovations and clean technologies” will address the climate crisis.

But while Charveriat agrees innovation is critical, she says relying solely on it is unlikely to be sufficient to address Europe’s ambition gap on climate change. “Other parties have made concrete proposals saying Europe needs to look beyond the ETS and look into a reform of taxation, for instance,” Charveriat said.

“And there, the EPP manifesto solely mentions the ETS which hasn’t delivered a carbon price that is high enough to actually spur the action that is needed.”

Youth climate strikers are probably the most sceptical about Weber’s commitment to environmental

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policies. “In his speeches, Mr Weber backs the goals set in the Paris climate agreement and advocates for climate neutrality in the EU by 2050,” says Carla Reemtsma, a young climate activist from Fridays for Future Germany.

“But as soon as concrete measures need to be taken, he refuses to ‘walk the talk’ and does not act appropriately in view of the situation we are facing,” she told EURACTIV Germany.

In Reemtsma’s firing line is Weber’s commitment to push clean technologies “that do not yet exist” such as low-emission airplanes. This criticism is echoed by the IEEP’s Céline Charveriat, who says those “are nowhere near ready and will not tackle the sharp increase in the volume of global flying”.

Another concern relates to Weber’s “rhetoric” which according to Reemtsma challenges climate protection measures on social justice grounds.

“This doesn’t seem to imply that he will translate his fine words into actions,” Reemtsma said.

Probably more worrying for environmentalists is Weber’s campaign promise to drastically reduce the number of EU regulations by cutting 10% of EU laws across every policy area. “He says he wants to cut down 1,000 European laws, but he doesn’t say which ones,” says Pieter de Pous.

When similar exercises were conducted in the past, environmental policies were usually the first to get the axe. And the CSU has always been at the forefront of EU initiatives to “cut red tape,” which became an old refrain in Brussels under the Barroso Commission.

In fact, the 10% figure is directly lifted from the work of one of Weber’s closest allies, Edmund Stoiber, former minister-president of Bavaria. In 2007, the Commission of José Manuel Barroso launched a high-level group, whose aim was to eliminate 25% of the administrative burdens on businesses resulting from EU regulations or the transposition of EU laws at national level.

The group, chaired by Stoiber, published its final report in October 2014, just before the Juncker Commission was sworn in. Its conclusions were somewhat counter-intuitive. It showed that 32% of administrative costs were not related to EU laws as such but to the way they were being implemented at the national level, often going beyond EU requirements (so-called “gold-plating”).
Manfred Weber: ‘Environmental issues are one of my areas of expertise’

By Frédéric Simon | EURACTIV.com

The lead candidate for the centre-right in this week’s European elections says “Europe must move towards net-zero emissions by 2050,” voicing his belief in innovation and new technologies to drive the decarbonisation agenda if he becomes the next president of the European Commission.

Manfred Weber is a German politician from Bavaria’s conservative Christian Social Union (CSU) and the leader of the European People’s Party (EPP) group in the European Parliament. On 8 November, Weber was elected to be the EPP’s lead candidate in the race to become the next president of the European Commission. Weber responded in writing to questions sent by EURACTIV on 12 April. The replies were sent back on 17 May.

INTERVIEW HIGHLIGHTS:

• Weber says he became aware of environmental issues at an early
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age
• Says “Europe must move towards net-zero emissions by 2050”
• Wants “more money” for investment in research and clean technologies
• Calls for “Marshall Plan” to bring clean tech to Africa
• EPP approach on environmental policy is “to merge environmental protection, entrepreneurship, and the creation of global standards”
• Says Europe must manage the green transition “in a socially sustainable way”
• Rejects new CO2 tax proposed by EU socialists
• Recognises agriculture’s potential to address climate crisis
• But says “only economically viable farms” are in a position to contribute to sustainability goals
• Wants more transparency on pesticide approvals

You began your political engagement with the youth organisation of the Catholic Church. Did that raise your awareness about questions related to the ecology?

Yes indeed, I became aware of questions related to ecology from an early age on. During my studies in mechanical engineering, I specialised in environmental technology (Technischer Umweltschutz). I founded a consultancy firm specialised in this field after my studies.

Environmental issues were one of my areas of expertise also in the Junge Union, the Youth organisation of the CSU. This was not something very common at that time! When I joined the Bavarian Parliament, I also chose to specialise on environmental policy and was a member of the Environmental Committee of the Bavarian parliament.

A few years ago, Pope Francis published an encyclical, Laudato Si, calling on humans to take greater responsibility to curb global warming. What was your reaction to this publication?

I was deeply impressed by the encyclical. Christians have a duty to help preserve our environment and all living beings on our planet. This is at the heart of my concept of Christian Democracy: organising, in a democratic manner and by integrating all members of society, a sustainable future for our planet.

The IPCC issued a report last year warning about the consequences of global warming beyond 1.5°C, saying unprecedented action needs to be taken in every sector of the economy to address this challenge. What do you think should be the response at global and EU level? Is Europe doing its fair share under the Paris Agreement?

We are absolutely committed to the target in Europe. But we must also understand that we can do a lot more in addition to fulfilling our own commitments!

By investing in developing sustainable low-carbon technologies we can develop the technologies which will help us and the rest of the world make the transition to a sustainable future.

We are world leaders in clean technologies but we must keep pushing because the Socialists’ CO2-tax is not going to solve climate change, only new innovations and clean technologies will do that. We face a big challenge but I believe in Europeans and our innovation potential.

The UN says climate change will lead to unprecedented human displacements and expose humanity to increasing levels of insecurity. How serious do you think is the security threat? And how should Europe respond to it?

There is no doubt that climate change is now felt all over the world, and particularly so in the poorer countries. Africa, for example, is a key priority for Europe, not only but also because of climate change.

That is also why we want to have a real Marshall Plan for Africa to help them as partners to create jobs, prosperity and security. We will need to take a look at the problem from a holistic perspective, and we must engage with Africa and other partners from the European level. No single Member State can do that on his own.

This is a textbook case for why we need Europe!

The European Commission has made the case for Europe to move towards net-zero emissions by 2050, in line with the IPCC report and the Paris Agreement. Do you subscribe to that goal?

Yes absolutely. Europe must move towards net-zero emissions by 2050. But we must understand that we can do more than just cut emissions. By developing new sustainable low-carbon innovations we can multiply our impact and help the whole world make the transition.

Europe is considered a leader in clean technologies. But China is catching up fast and even overtaking Europe on technologies like solar power or electric vehicles. Some now even say China is the “absolute winner” of the clean energy transition. So what should Europe do to stay ahead in the global race for clean technologies?

Well, I am not so pessimistic. The EPP approach is to merge environmental protection, entrepreneurship, and the creation of global standards.
of global standards. We will only be successful if all three go together. I want more money dedicated to future-oriented research.

Secondly, this research needs to be put into practice much more quickly with the help of a modern framework for our economy and a deepened single market. If we do that, we will be such a big economic player in the world that we will effectively set global standards for new technologies.

This example shows why the populists – the far-left and the far-right – are wrong. They want to go back to purely national markets. If we were to do that, China and others would dictate to us new technological standards.

We can do better than that, and we must do better than that. I want Europe to be ambitious. A global leader in the economy, including in environmental technology.

The G20 and the G7 countries have pledged to stop subsidising fossil fuels by 2025. But little progress has been achieved since the pledge was first made ten years ago (in 2009). Do you support a firm cut-off date to end fossil fuel subsidies?

My priority is to include also international flights into the European emissions trading system (ETS). I believe in innovation, modern technology or price incentives. They are the better way to reach our climate protection goals than taxes and bans.

Germany pledged to phase out coal by 2038, which many scientists consider as being too late. And countries like Poland do not yet have a clear date to phase out coal. Should Europe act more vigorously to phase out coal?

We are moving in the right direction but we simply have to acknowledge that this cannot be done overnight. We have set ambitious targets for each member state to achieve, and I believe they are achievable.

We have to re-fashion our economy together with the people, not against them; together with the member states not against them. We must manage the transition in a socially sustainable way and help affected people get new skills and jobs.

We absolutely cannot leave anyone behind and by doing this in a socially sustainable way we will have less resistance and manage the transition faster.

The concept of a just transition to a low-carbon economy was highlighted by the “Yellow Vests” protests in France. Have policymakers neglected the social dimension of the energy transition? What do you think should be done about it at EU level?

The social aspects of the fight against climate change have to be addressed. We cannot brush them aside.

This is why the creation of a Just Energy Transition Fund is part of a solution, to help support those regions and those people most affected by the technological transition.

Fighting climate change, restructuring our economy, and balancing social interests have to be seen together. It’s a triangle we have to balance, simply going for one side will not be enough and it will also not produce the effects desired.

Supporting people through the transition will make the transition quicker and reduce fears people have about technological change.

The European Commission has tried limiting the environmental impact of farming policy with the “green pillar” of the Common Agricultural Policy. Are you happy with the way discussions are going there as part of the CAP reform proposal?

We believe that maintaining a productive agricultural sector in Europe, and making a real contribution to environmental protection, and fighting climate change are by no means mutually exclusive goals.

We recognise the potential of our agricultural sector to be part of the solution to protect our environment and climate, and we successfully amended the CAP proposals towards a more incentive-based approach to achieve this.

We must remember that only economically viable farms are in position to produce in a sustainable and innovative way.

Farming is the single biggest user of water, ahead of industries like energy. What measures would you recommend to improve the water efficiency of the farming sector?

We are committed in general to helping farmers reduce their dependency on inputs and increase the efficiency of use like water.

We believe that we can achieve this by boosting innovations and by developing and transitioning to precision farming. It is in everyone’s interest that we find the methods which allow us to reduce water use.

We are pushing to increase the budget for agricultural research in the new Horizon programme to help create future sustainable innovations.

Agriculture – including the use of pesticides – is one of the main suspects behind the dramatic decline in biodiversity observed over the past years. What should Europe do about this? How would you reinvigorate the global biodiversity agenda beyond 2020?

Biodiversity is an issue, and it is a European issue. With one million species threatened with extinction, it
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is also the future of our own species and the foundation of our lives which is at stake.

Europe has already taken up this challenge. As a Christian-Democrat I believe we have a duty to safeguard and protect the species we are sharing our planet Earth with.

We Europeans should lead that fight to preserve biodiversity in the world, just like we are leading the fight against climate change. That is very clear. We must make sure our agricultural policy responds to it; also in the interests of the farmers.

But securing a future for farmers and creating sustainable environmental policies are not contradictions. They can go hand in hand.

**Do you support the decision to renew the licence of glyphosate for five years, adopted in 2017? What lessons do you draw from the glyphosate controversy?**

This is a very important and big issue for many of our citizens and farmers. We must be sure to listen to all sides on this question and it warrants very careful consideration.

We supported our citizens asking for more transparency and we think that we must further increase transparency and restore citizens' trust in a thorough science-based approach.

We must evaluate together what policy steps are necessary, prudent and appropriate to take. I think the next Commission and Parliament must learn from the last term to make sure that people's trust is not shaken by lack of transparency.

**Meat has come under the spotlight in recent years because of the vast amounts of water and fodder that are needed to feed the cattle. What should be done in your view to reduce the environmental impact of meat?**

We have a long and rich tradition of producing high-quality beef in Europe and we are very proud of our cattle farmers. It is clear that the whole agricultural sector must do their share in combatting climate change. We are convinced that this will require investing in agricultural research and innovations.

**Millions of young people have taken to the streets in Europe to protest against inaction on climate change. What lessons do you draw from these protests?**

I appreciate the fact that people, especially young people, students, get involved. We are in such a period of transition, economic, technological, environmental, that we have to have this debate. And we need to debate it vigorously and openly. Europe has given life to the Paris Agreement. We need to build on this, but we have to have an overall debate with all in society!

People want more transparent and inclusive politics. We must bring Europe back to the people and deliver tangible solutions and answers to young peoples’ concerns about the future of our planet. We must leave it to them in a better state than how we got it. I believe this the responsibility of each generation to their children's generation.

To safeguard our planet’s future, we believe that we must perform a well-managed transformation in Europe and globally. This will entail continuing to be committed to the global accords of Paris and Katowice to limit global warming but we must also recognise the need to build on these accords because alone they are not enough.

We must invest in developing new, sustainable and low-carbon solutions in a socially responsible way. We are convinced that Europe can be the one who invents and develops the sustainable and low-carbon technologies which will make the whole world transform to low-carbon mobility and production in a socially sustainable fashion.

**The “gilets jaunes” in France have highlighted a disconnect between the political elite and ordinary people when it comes to environmental policies. What are your suggestions to address this?**

We have to get our message out and meet people where they are. This means, increasingly — and particularly for young people — communicating on digital platforms in clear, compelling and creative ways. Europe truly is at a crossroads; young people more than anyone have a stake in our common future. We must bring Europe back to the people. This is why I became a candidate.

**Policymaking at EU level is still perceived as complicated and difficult to understand for ordinary citizens. Do you believe transparency should be improved (e.g.: on trilogues)? Or do you believe policymakers need a certain degree of privacy to forge good compromises (e.g.: in the European Council)?**

That is precisely why the Spitzenkandidaten system is crucial. Not because of the candidates. But so that the people of Europe know before the election what their electoral choices mean for Europe's executive, the Commission.

We have already done a lot to substantially improve transparency and the European Parliament is the most transparent EU institution, and certainly much more transparent than many national institutions. But of course, we as EPP are always open to exploring ways to improve.
Frans Timmermans, the Socialists’ leading candidate in the EU elections, has promised to champion a sustainable Europe if he is anointed to lead the next European Commission. But how sustainable are the Dutchman’s green credentials?

The current First Vice-President of the European Commission has set his sights on Jean-Claude Juncker’s soon-to-be-vacated presidential chair, after getting the nod to be the Socialists’ Spitzenkandidat in November.

Over the course of the election campaign, Timmermans has fronted a green agenda in order to try and win over voters, even jokingly (or mistakenly?) urging people to “go vote Green” during a TV debate on 29 April.

In reaction to the laughter his remarks created in the audience, the Dutchman clarified immediately that “Green is not the sole property of the Green Party” and that the two political factions were “not in competition here”.

“This is not a beauty contest. It’s about your future,” Timmermans said.

In a recent ranking of the green credentials of the European Parliament’s political groups, his Socialists and Democrats (S&D) scored 61.3% and was classed as a “defender” along with the leftist GUE/NGL (66.5%) and the Greens/EFA (84.9%).

The centre-right European People’s Party (EPP), for contrast, was classed as a “dinosaur” and only scored 14.3%, after MEP voting behaviour in the 2014-2019 term was collated.

PRESIDENTIAL SHIFT

Perhaps most significantly, Timmermans has pledged to be

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“personally responsible for the Sustainable Developments Goals (SDGs) and for climate change” if he secures the top Commission job.

That would mean a marked increase in the political commitment granted to climate change, which is currently handled by Spanish Commissioner Miguel Arias Cañete (Commission President Juncker has at times been criticised for not paying enough attention to the issue).

At a recent EU summit in Romania, Juncker insisted that current climate targets are a priority over a draft plan by his own executive that would see Europe strive for carbon neutrality by 2050.

Environmental groups have welcomed Timmermans’ promise to take responsibility, explaining that although it still needs a dedicated Commissioner, the challenge will need an integrated approach that encapsulates numerous policy areas, including energy, transport, regional policy, trade and employment.

“Since climate change (and the environment in general) is increasingly recognised as an emergency which affects every conceivable policy area, it needs to become a flagship political commitment right at the very top,” European Environmental Bureau (EEB) Sec-Gen Jeremy Wates told EURACTIV.

However, campaigners also note that Timmermans has steered clear of saying whether he backs an increase in the EU’s overall 2030 emissions reduction target of 40%, although he has firmly supported plans to go carbon neutral by 2050.

Increasing the 2030 target is currently a no-go zone for EU capitals. Some like Germany think the bloc should stick to the agreed 40% goal while others like the Netherlands want a significant boost. The European Parliament earlier this year voted to bump it to 55%.

Timmermans has for the last five years been responsible for the EU’s commitment to the UN’s 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

But, despite a concerted effort, a lack of progress has blotted his copybook. Climate Action Network Europe told EURACTIV that “more has to be done to make all the Commission’s work compatible with the SDGs and the Paris Agreement”. According to the NGO, a lack of support from Juncker may have again limited Timmermans’ achievements.

The EEB’s Jeremy Wates explained that “there is a widespread misconception in Europe that the SDGs relate to the global south, so the EU has not been pursuing them with the kind of vigour they deserve”.

If Timmermans were to follow through on his pledge to base the Commission’s work around the SDG framework, it would “be a step in the right direction,” he added.

THE NITTY-GRITTY

Beyond the overarching promises made by the Socialist candidate, he has also to a certain extent delved into the detail of how climate change could be prioritised.

Among those policy finer points is the currently in-vogue idea of setting up a pan-European kerosene tax, in what would be a major change of approach to how the aviation sector is managed. Jet fuel is currently exempt from taxation.

Timmermans also backs a wider carbon tax, in contrast to his EPP rival Manfred Weber, but has not elaborated on how either levies would be implemented. His homeland, the Netherlands, recently said it would start taxing air travel itself in 2021 if an EU-wide solution is not agreed.

The Commission recently registered an official petition, lodged under the Citizens’ Initiative scheme, that urges policy- and lawmakers to focus on a kerosene tax. If it gets over a million signatures from enough member states within a year the EU
executive will be obligated to respond. Policies based on Citizens’ Initiatives have already started to see the light of day. In early 2018, Timmermans unveiled an update to the bloc’s drinking water rules, which was prompted by a petition that gathered 1.6 million signatures.

“Citizens have made their voice loud and clear through the European Citizens’ Initiative, calling for action to have a guaranteed access to safe drinking water. We have heard and heeded their call and carried out a thorough analysis,” the Dutchman said at the time.

**BETTER REGULATION 2.0?**

Timmermans’ responsibilities in helming the Commission’s Better Regulation drive have already linked him closely with several of the EU’s landmark environmental laws, most notably January 2018’s Plastics Strategy.

Like the drinking water directive revision, which aims to cut red-tape and bureaucracy, new EU rules on plastic have the fingerprints of Better Regulation principles all over them.

A directive meant to bring single-use plastic consumption to heel, recently given the final green light by the Council, was drafted, negotiated and finalised in record time. EU officials say that Timmermans’ personal involvement was a big factor in bringing it over the finish line.

In a recent video interview with EURACTIV, the Spitzenkandidat said that “connecting people’s idealism with very concrete measures [such as the single-use plastic directive] is the way forward for the Commission”.

**SHAKY START**

But his drive to streamline how the EU executive does its business has not met with universal acclaim, especially not at the beginning of his mandate.

Proposed measures on the circular economy and air quality found themselves in the firing line when Juncker’s Commission started its mandate in late 2014. The files were eventually revised but the amount of time the process took was heavily criticised.

Timmermans also faced criticism when he labelled a proposed deal on curbing plastic bag use “overregulation” and was forced to backtrack when the Council and Parliament made it clear that they did not want to scrap the legislation completely.

His shaky start aside, the Dutchman has gradually won over many of the EU’s top green champions and his team actively sought the input of NGOs during the drafting of the S&D manifesto.

Greenpeace EU’s Ariadna Rodrigo said that Timmermans “seems to have evolved greatly on environmental issues over the last five years”.

“He’s making all the right noises on climate and environment now, but given that he wanted to scrap air quality and waste-management laws five years ago, it remains to be seen if he will follow through if he gets the chance,” she warned.

Whether Timmermans will indeed even get the chance to sit in the big chair remains to be seen, as his drive to build what he calls a “progressive majority” of Socialists, Liberals, Greens and leftists, still risks falling short in numbers to drive out the centre-right EPP.

Even if the numbers do add up after the end-of-week EU elections, the final say will remain with member state leaders in the European Council, who are only obligated to “take note of the European Parliament result”.

*Frans Timmermans was contacted by EURACTIV but, at time of publishing, had not responded to questions.*
Margrethe Vestager, a competitive approach to environmental policy

By Dave Keating | EURACTIV.com

EU Competition Commissioner Margrethe Vestager, a Liberal candidate to be the next Commission President, believes the key to improving Europe’s environment and fighting climate change will be implementing the laws already on the books.

During her time as the EU’s competition watchdog over the past five years, Margrethe Vestager has shown she’s not afraid to take on powerful corporate and government interests. Some decisions have angered Silicon Valley and Washington, while others have angered Paris and Berlin.

Now voters want to know – would she show the same determination in fighting for the main issues they care about?

Vestager is running as a Liberal lead candidate for European Commission President at a time when environment and climate change issues are coming to the fore. Following the high-profile student strikes for climate and extinction rebellion protests, voters in this month’s European election are citing climate change as among their top concerns. And they are growing increasingly frustrated with government inaction.

IMPLEMENTATION, “A BIG TASK FOR THE NEXT COMMISSION”

In an interview with EURACTIV, Vestager said she’s ready to take the fight to national governments in the EU to make sure the bloc’s already-passed environment and climate legislation is being implemented.

“Fighting climate change is a given, it’s not something where you can choose whether you want to do it or not,” she said. “It will happen, and we can figure out how to deal with it.”
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“There’s going a big task for the next Commission to work with member states to take action in real life to implement what we have decided already. There’s a number of areas where existing legislation could easily be pushed and be useful for some of the things we want to do.”

She cites as an example the current Commission’s work to redesign the European energy market design, to make it more efficient and less emissions-intensive.

“This may sound technical and remote from climate change, but it’s one of the keystones for enabling the transition into renewable energies,” she said. “The next commission will have to put this into practice, because this is very complex legislation. The Commission was very ambitious, and Parliament and Council agreed to this.

“But it will take a big effort to put that into practice and harness the benefits.”

FREE MARKET ENVIRONMENTALISM

This focus on market solutions is not surprising for Vestager’s liberal ALDE political family, who she is representing in the European election.

Known for combining socially-liberal attitudes with business-friendly free-market legislation, the Liberals have been far more in the vanguard of fighting climate change than centre-right Christian Democrats represented in the European Peoples Party.

A recent ranking by Climate Action Network Europe of the European political groups’ action on climate change put ALDE far ahead of the EPP, with a 38% score versus 10% respectively.

Part of this may be geographic, as Liberal parties are far more common in Northern Europe where surveys show people are far more concerned about climate change than in the South.

Vestager’s native Denmark, for instance, has been one of the leading countries fighting climate change – having installed an enormous wind power capacity in the North Sea. However her own Radikale Venstre in Denmark scores similarly to ALDE in general in the CAN ranking – the middle of the board.

CLIMATE TARGETS “CAN RELEASE A LOT OF INVESTMENT”

At EU level, CAN deems the centre-left Party of European Socialists, the Greens and the far-left GUE groups to be far more ambitious than ALDE on climate issues. This is partly due to the group’s more conservative members from Central Europe such as the German FDP and Czech ANO, who have been sceptical of climate targets and prefer market-only solutions.

For her part, Vestager said the market alone cannot solve the climate crisis. Some, such as the European Conservatives and Reformists lead Commission President candidate Jan Zahradil, have accused the EU of being target-obsessed when it comes to climate change. He opposes the Commission’s proposed target of reducing EU emissions to net zero by 2050.

Vestager wholeheartedly supports the EU’s objective to reach “climate neutrality” by 2050 – though it remains to be seen whether national leaders will approve or reject the plan at next month’s European Council summit.

“I stand by the net-zero target for 2050,” she said. “Setting this target can release a lot of investment into innovation and development. That’s why it’s important that we do set the targets, and we do it in common. Setting targets is part of creating the market.”

In its election manifesto, ALDE says it wants to see the EU’s emissions reduction target for 2030 raised from 40% to 55%.

Vestager noted that markets aren’t perfect, pointing to the problems of the EU’s Emissions Trading System which needed EU intervention to raise the low price of carbon. “Because of the financial crisis there are still too many allowances floating around for the system to be effective,” she said.

“But there are things happening in parallel – you see more and more businesses, without politicians leading the way or beating them with a stick or showing a carrot, they’re saying climate change is our business model because it becomes more and more obvious that there is a real straightforward business logic to fighting climate change.”

AGRICULTURE: GREEN THE CAP AND PROTECT CONSUMERS

Vestager said she supports the Commission’s moves to tie agricultural subsidies under the Common Agricultural Policy – perhaps all the more so because the CAP, which many accuse of being wasteful and protectionist, remains intensely controversial in Northern European countries like Denmark.

“‘You have to work in a matrix, where climate change and environmental issues is something that is relevant for everything else that you do. And agricultural policy and the support and subsidies should be used in that respect as well.’

Vestager also feels strongly about the use of pesticides in agriculture – an area where Commission decisions have been very controversial. The Commission’s decision to authorise the weedkiller glyphosate for five further years, for instance, has drawn howls of protest.

But Vestager, who was part of taking that decision, said she stands by it.

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“We discussed it intensively before we took it, and it was for good reason that it was a short extension, because we want to have more independent research, especially into cocktail effects. We want to see how does it work in the real use. We discussed the scientific approach intensively, in order to use these next years in order to get transparent results that can be discussed in a different way.”

“I don’t think we will have a pesticide-free European agriculture any time soon, but I do hope that we can get less and less toxic pesticides and that we can work to have a coherent plan for how to minimise use so that you only do what is absolutely necessary.”

“Even decades after pesticides are forbidden, you still find the residue in drinking water. It’s important that you can trust your drinking water. Europe has very advanced economies, but the basics still apply – clean air, clean water, food that you can trust that you can eat.”

PASSIONATE ABOUT FACTS

Vestager said that the yellow vest protests in France show that the public needs to be brought along with these types of environment and climate targets and restrictions. But she is concerned that an increasing mistrust of science is making getting this public support difficult.

“We need to be passionate about facts,” she said. “Sometimes people say it’s just a fact, and you cannot communicate facts. Yes, you can, if you’re passionate about it.”

“I am passionate about people getting their children vaccinated, because you see the horrible effects if it doesn’t happen. I think we can put a lot of passion into things that are scientifically proven. The strange thing about trust is that it’s not just created with numbers and statistics, it’s communicated by people who for real do believe this is real science.”

José Manuel Barroso, Juncker’s predecessor as Commission President, tried to overcome this lack of trust in EU agencies like the European Food Safety Authority by appointing a “Chief Scientific Advisor” to evaluate and communicate the science being produced for and by the Commission. However the position was not popular with NGOs and it was scrapped by Juncker.

Vestager said she would be open to re-establishing the position. “I haven’t thought about it, but that sounds like a good idea.”

In fact, she said, she would like to see an increase in environmental positions in the Commission in general, and would consider establishing multiple environment commissioners for different areas such as biodiversity, air pollution or chemicals. She says she views the “project teams” of multiple commissioners working together on similar areas, set up by Juncker during this Commission, to be a success she would want to emulate.

COMPETITION WORK

The Competition Commissioner said that her work during this term has frequently intersected with environment issues. For instance, she pointed to rulings she has had to make on member state decisions to auction renewables subsidies.

The Commission’s state aid rulings have helped renewable technologies compete with one another, which has enabled a faster transition to renewable energy, she said. Her decisions on capacity mechanisms, which ensure backup power to the grid in the event of renewable sources going down, have also involved environmental calculations.

The area of pesticides and chemicals has been a particular environmental topic she has dealt with during this term. “We had three gigantic agrochemical mergers in Spring last year – Syngenta-ChemChina, Bayer-Monsanto, and Dow-Dupont.”

One of the things she says was “obvious” in the Dow-Dupont merger was the research and innovation aspect, with only five global R&D organisations when it comes to seeds and pesticides.

“What we saw was that if the merger just went straight through, they would combine their R&D operations and cut their budget. So you would end up with less competition in innovation, in pesticides, and there would be a risk that already existing molecules would not be sufficiently maintained if the innovation capacity was being reduced.”

“So we ended up only clearing the merger after they agreed to sell one of their R&D organisations to a third party who didn’t have one already. So we still today have the five global R&D organisations in order to push for innovation in this area.”

CLEANTECH BOOST

Vestager said that this focus on R&D would be a general theme for her Commission presidency. She shares concerns about Europe losing the lead in cleantech to Asia, and pointed to the Commission’s commitment to invest up to €100 billion in research over the next seven years as a way to put Europe back in the lead.

“But first and foremost it’s important that we use the technologies we have already,” she said. “It’s not just wind turbines and solar panels, we also need investment in hydro. Using modern efficient pumps makes an enormous difference compared to old school technology.

“We shouldn’t just sit and wait for a technological fix to be achieved. There’s a lot of things we can do with the technology we have already.”
Margrethe Vestager, one of the seven lead candidates for the Liberals in next month’s EU elections, views Juncker’s “project teams” as a success and would consider establishing multiple environment commissioners for different areas such as climate change, biodiversity, air pollution or chemicals.

Margrethe Vestager is the European Commissioner for Competition, who previously served as Denmark’s deputy prime minister under Prime Minister Helle Thorning Schmidt. Before becoming a commissioner she was the leader of the Danish Social Liberal Party (Radikale Venstre). She is now one of the seven lead candidates for the Alliance of Liberals

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and Democrats (ALDE) for the 2019 EU elections. Vestager spoke to EURACTIV’s Dave Keating.

INTERVIEW HIGHLIGHTS:

- Vestager supports EU’s proposed net-zero emission target for 2050
- Wants the Commission to be passionate about science and facts
- Supports proposed €100bn EU budget for research and innovation in 2021-2027
- Supports glyphosate renewal decision but wants more research on pesticide impacts
- Would keep DG CLIMA as a dedicated department dealing with climate change

There have been two big protest movements taking place right now, on one hand the student strikes for climate and extinction rebellion, and on the other the yellow vests in France. What would you say is the biggest lesson to draw from this surge in protests?

Well I think the first point is to say fighting climate change is a given, it’s not something where you can choose whether you want to do it or not. It will happen, and we can figure out how to deal with it.

Part of that challenge is to protect ourselves from the climate change that is happening already. It’s a very small silver lining that you can now grow wine in Denmark. But that cannot make up for the tsunamis and the droughts. I think we’ve now lost the first mammal because of climate change.

There’s a lot of investment taking place in just being able to manage more water, more droughts and more people on a global scale who have to move because conditions deteriorate.

The second thing is of course to make sure climate change doesn’t get any worse.

And in that it’s very important that we take it from the soundbite level to something specific when we say it has to be done in an inclusive way. Because if people cannot mirror themselves and their future life in the way things are dealt with, you get a revolt against what you want to do in order to fight climate change and reduce our CO2 footprint.

This means that we’ll have to deal with it in a way that’s specific, where municipalities and member states will play a main role, because they can have different discussions with people on how to proceed.

Does that necessarily mean shifting more of the burden towards companies and less on individual taxpayers?

On that it will have to be different. I’ve seen in my own work how you can do a number of things, for instance raising the burden for high energy users. But all member state do not have the same preferences. You may achieve the same result although you have a different approach.

But here no matter what we do individually and in smaller communities, we need a systemic approach.

One of the things we did in this mandate was to finalise the new electricity market design. This may sound technical and remote from climate change, but it’s one of the keystones for enabling the transition to renewable energies. Because if you don’t have an energy system that can cope with shifting power levels, you will not be successful.

The next commission will have to put this into practice, because this is very complex legislation. The commission was very ambitious, and the EU Parliament and Council agreed to this. But it will take a big effort to put that into practice and harness the benefits.

That reform is creating the market conditions for companies to be incentivised to lower their emissions. What about target setting? Right now member states are debating the Commission’s proposal to lower EU emissions to net zero by 2050, and they will take a decision in June. Do you support the 2050 target?

I stand by the net zero target for 2050. I think it’s important that it’s a net effect, because there will still be a CO2 gross effect, so the important thing is to be able to net it out.

Setting this target can release a lot of investment into innovation and development. That’s why it’s important that we do set the target and we do it in common.

Some have accused the Commission of being too focused on targets and not enough on setting good market conditions. Do you think the approach thus far has been too target-focused?

But setting targets is part of creating the market. Just to make the Emissions Trading System work has been quite challenging, because of the financial crisis there are still too many allowances floating around for the system to be effective.

But there are things happening in parallel because you see more and more businesses, without politicians leading the way or beating them with a stick or showing a carrot, they’re saying climate change is our business model because it becomes more and more obvious that there is a real straightforward business logic to fighting climate change.

That comes because things were also happening in the previous mandate. But there’s a completely different awareness now than there was five years ago. Part of that comes from the NGOs, Greta Thunberg, the start of the yellow vests, and the Extinction Rebellion protests that we saw in a number of European cities a
couple weeks ago.

Things are changing. People see that global warming isn’t warmer nicer weather, it’s wilder weather. It’s conditions that we’ll have to fight to control.

Regarding the tools to fight climate change, although Europe took an early lead on clean technologies like electric vehicles and solar panels, it has now been eclipsed by Asian economies. What would you do as Commission President to get Europe back in the lead?

First and foremost it’s important that we use the technologies we have already. It’s not just wind turbines and solar panels, we also need investment in hydro. Using modern efficient pumps makes an enormous difference compared to old school technology. We shouldn’t just sit and wait for a technological fix to be achieved. There’s a lot of things we can do with the technology we have already.

That being said, I think it’s only appropriate what’s been launched by my colleague Carlos Moedas with Horizon Europe – that is to say, an investment in research programs up to 100 billion euros over the next seven years. And a lot of that will be climate change and environment related. Also the environment needs to be factored in the entire execution of our common budget.

Let’s move on to environmental issues, and in particular agriculture. Right now there’s an effort to add a green pillar to the EU’s Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), following on from the work done in the previous CAP reform to tie payments to environmental stewardship. Do you view the CAP as something that can help Europe fight environmental degradation and climate change?

I definitely think it is part and parcel, because you have to work in a matrix where climate change and environmental issues is something that is relevant for everything else that you do. And agricultural policy and the support and subsidies should be used in that respect as well.

In this mandate we’ve pushed for agricultural support to slightly change its logic, I think that’s part of leading the way. If you look at forestation, this is an important industry when it comes to nature and resource management. It both serves climate change and biodiversity.

So there are a lot of things to be gained if you have a sufficiently broad perspective and never let any of these agendas be hijacked by just one interest. We need to bring people on board in order for nobody to be scared away. It’s important that we get people on board, otherwise we cannot get the results at the speed we need to.

Within agriculture, pesticides have been a big focus at EU level. What is your general take on pesticides and whether the EU has the balance right in terms of the approval process? And specifically on glyphosate, perhaps the most controversial substance, do you support the 2017 decision for a five-year renewal? Would you be open to continued extensions when it comes around the next time?

I was part of taking the glyphosate decision, so yes I support it.

We discussed it intensively before we took it, and it was for good reason that it was a short extension, because we want to have more independent research, especially into cocktail effects.

The interesting thing is how does it work in the real use. We discussed the scientific approach intensively, in order to use these next years in order to get transparent results that can be discussed in a different way.

I don’t think we will have a pesticide-free European agriculture any time soon, but I do hope that we can get less and less toxic pesticides and that we can work to have a coherent plan for how to minimise use so that you only do what is absolutely necessary. At the same time we need to enable the transition into organic farming in between.

One of the very striking things is how careful you should be. Because even decades after pesticides are forbidden, you still find the residue in drinking water. It’s important that you can trust your drinking water. Europe has very advanced economies, but the basics still apply – clean air, clean water, food that you can trust that you can eat.

On that subject of trust, it seems like there has been increasing distrust in some of the EU agencies that are evaluating food-related products, particularly the European Food Safety Authority. Former Commission President José Manuel Barroso tried to deal with this by appointing a Chief Scientific Advisor. The jury’s out about how well that went, but would you be open to establishing a position like that, someone who’s job it is to communicate science to people?

Well I haven’t thought about it, but that sounds like a good idea.

Because we need to be passionate about facts. Sometimes people say it’s just a fact, and you cannot communicate facts. Yes, you can, if you’re passionate about it.

I am passionate about people getting their children vaccinated, because you see the horrible effects if it doesn’t happen. I think we can put a lot of passion into things that are scientifically proven. The strange thing about trust is that it’s not just created with numbers and statistics, it’s communicated by people who for real do believe this is real science. It’s not made to persuade you, it’s made because we want to know what we’re doing.
How do you think your time as competition commissioner has influenced you thinking about environment and climate issues? Were there moments in the past term where those issues intersected, where larger environmental issues would effect a decision?

It’s come up on a number of instances. For instance, we’ve been working a lot in the state aid area to help member states to auction renewable energy subsidies. The company says we would like to establish so many gigawatts of renewable energy, and then tender that out. We say if you have similar cost curve, you can have different renewable technologies compete against one another. And that then to a very large degree has lowered the amount of subsidies that people were asking for. The cheaper you can transition into renewable energy the faster you can do it.

We’ve also been working with capacity mechanisms. Member states say yes we want to transition into renewables, but citizens still expect that they can all cook their duck at Christmas time, that there’s always electricity in the grid. So we need to work with them to ensure you get the backup function if things go wrong.

We also had three gigantic agrochemical mergers in Spring last year – Syngenta-ChemChina, Bayer-Monsanto, and Dow-Dupont.

One of the things that was obvious in the Dow-Dupont merger was that at the beginning there were only five global R&D organisations when it comes to seeds and pesticides. What we saw was that if the merger just went straight through, they would combine their R&D operations and cut their budget. So you would end up with less competition in innovation, in pesticides, and there would be a risk that already existing molecules would not be sufficiently maintained if the innovation capacity was being reduced.

We saw that there is a very high demand for innovation in pesticides, in order to have less toxic pesticides and to have better knowledge on how they can be used in order to minimise the side effects. So we ended up only clearing the merger after they agreed to sell one of their R&D organisations to a third party who didn’t have one already. So we still today have the five global R&D organisations in order to push for innovation in this area.

And that I find to be extremely important. Because, you have the debate about prohibiting neonicotinoids – which are damaging to bees – which I fully support. But then you would want to know, for the part of agriculture that’s still depending on pesticides, you need to have a push for less toxic molecules and less toxic ways of using pesticides.

A few questions on the next Commission’s composition. The environment and fisheries portfolios are currently combined for one commissioner, would you continue having just one person dealing with those? How well do you think it has worked having two people dealing with energy and climate change, a vice-president and a commissioner?

If anything I think we should have more commissioners working on climate and environmental portfolios. Not only do we need to work with creating new legislation, we also need to make best use of the legislation we have already.

Because you’re working with something where speed is of the essence. You should be sure that you really need legislation, and keep in mind that it may only be passed five years from now, because first you have to prepare, do a consultation, impact assessment, legislative procedure, and transposition into national legislation.

There’s going a big task for the next Commission to work with member states to take action in real life to implement what we have decided already. There’s a number of areas where existing legislation could easily be pushed and be useful for some of the things we want to do.

There ought to be an environment cluster. One of the things that has been successful in this mandate is that we had the project groups. They were not 100% successful, you could still find silo thinking and turf wars of course as in most organisations. But it’s a way of pushing for that not to be the case.

And this is one of the things I find that has worked well, that the vice presidents have had the responsibility to coordinate, to manage the work in a broader scope. But you also have very dedicated commissioners in very specific portfolios. There’s a lot of work to do to inspire member states, to work together and inspire one another.

When you think about biodiversity, you may have precious landscapes that are cross-border.

I feel that there is a renewed momentum obviously when it comes to climate change, but also for environment. Biodiversity is also coming higher on the agenda.

How well has it worked having a dedicated Commission department for climate change, given that it was only spun out of the environment department not so long ago. It’s the smallest DG, would you keep it?

My inclination is to keep DG CLIMA as a dedicated DG. I really like what the previous climate commissioner, Connie Hedegaard, did, and what Miguel Arias Cañete has achieved is amazing in a somewhat challenging environment.
The next European Commission will have to reopen the Emissions Trading Scheme directive if it is serious about reaching carbon neutrality by 2050, argues Bas Eickhout, warning the next Commission chief will need to find a broader majority in the European Parliament than his predecessor.

Bas Eickhout is a Dutch Member of the European Parliament. Together with his German colleague Ska Keller, he is co-leading the Greens' campaign for the European elections. He spoke to EURACTIV's energy and environment editor, Frédéric Simon.

INTERVIEW HIGHLIGHTS:

- Supports transformation of EIB as "EU climate bank"
- Backs EU corporate tax and minimum wage
- Says EU competition rules “need to become more geopolitical” after failed Siemens-Alstom merger
- Supports carbon tariff at EU border as part of “Green New Deal” for industry
- Says open to talks on “progressive alliance” in new European Parliament
- Warns next EU Commission President will need a broader majority than Juncker

All the major political parties have voiced their support for the European Commission’s proposed net-zero carbon objective for 2050. Even the EPP has now joined, with Manfred Weber and Angela Merkel recently backing it as well. So what makes the Greens stand out from the other parties?

It’s about how to get there, the policies needed to achieve this target. It’s great of course that Weber is
now backing this target but that was already the case a few months ago when we voted the resolution in the European Parliament.

In the EU Council of Ministers, however, it’s a different story. We know that not all countries are on board yet. And that’s worrying because we absolutely need to adjust our policies and reopen EU directives because we are not on track with the Paris Agreement objectives.

**What directives need to be reopened in your view?**

The main one is the emissions trading system (ETS), which is still giving a lot of allowances for free. And that continues to undermine the carbon price and Europe’s efforts to meet the Paris target.

One of the first things that we need to do in negotiations over the new Commission mandate is to reopen the ETS directive.

**The ETS has already been reformed last year. Do you think there’s appetite to reopen it so soon?**

This is the interesting question, of course. If all the different parties are now genuinely backing net-zero carbon emissions by 2050, then the next step is to reform the ETS. There is no way around it.

If they refuse to change policies in place for 2030, then we are also making the 2050 climate neutrality objective more difficult to reach. Because that would imply a very abrupt reduction in carbon emissions after 2030. And that would mean back-loading all the negative impacts on future generation.

So whether or not there is political appetite to reopen the ETS – this is not really the point. The point is, once you sign up to Paris, you sign up to climate neutrality. And that means putting policies in place to go in that direction.

**What other priorities will you push if you become the next President of the European Commission, or as a group leader in the next European Parliament?**

Carbon pricing is really fundamental. But on top of that, there are things we can do right away. The coming 10 years will be crucial in turning around our addiction to fossil fuels. That means phasing out coal but also stopping all investments in fossil fuels, including gas infrastructure.

We also need to improve investments in renewables and strengthen cross border electricity connections, with backing from the European budget.

Then, a fundamental step we need to take is on aviation, which is still totally under-priced. Domestic flights are part of the ETS but still with a big majority of free allowances. And we have no policy in place yet for intercontinental flights. There, we really need to make sure kerosene is being taxed, and use the revenues for long-range train links, because cross-border connections are awful.

A third priority is the reform of the Common Agriculture Policy (CAP). This will be one of the first votes in the new Parliament and a key test of how serious other parties are about climate action. If MEPs support what the Parliament’s Agriculture Committee has voted, this will mean a weakening of climate targets, and renationalisation of the way “greening” subsidies are distributed to farmers.

If other parties support this, then we will know for sure that their election pledges on climate change were just campaign rhetoric. So agriculture is really going to be one of those key first voting moments for the new Parliament.

**Some like Nathalie Loiseau in France**

Finance will be extremely important to get away from fossil fuels. But, to be very honest, I’m getting a bit tired with the plans that Macron is launching because they involve creating new institutions, which is always long and complicated.

We already have a European Investment Bank. And clearly, the EIB must become a climate bank, not investing in fossil fuels anymore. They do have an emission performance standard as a threshold for financing new energy infrastructure projects. That mainly rules out coal, but there are still a lot of investments going into gas infrastructure, which should be eliminated as well.

So I don’t see the point of creating another EU institution. What’s much more important in my view is to update the EIB policy so that it really becomes the EU climate bank.

**The Greens are sometimes criticised for being “red on the inside” with support for new taxes. Would you support a budget neutral system when it comes to climate policy? Or would you support new taxes? After all, you did mention the kerosene tax...**

As European Greens, our main focus is to shift the burden of taxation on the polluter. Pretending that the consumer won’t notice anything – I don’t think any politician can uphold that.

What we want as Greens is a transition for our whole economy. But it needs to be done in a socially just way. And that means a fundamental shift in our taxation system. Even as we transition to a greener economy,
some people will continue to have more purchasing power than others. So we believe it’s the richer people, the big companies, who will have to pay more, not the ones on low incomes.

That has always been our re-distributional program, which needs to go hand in hand with our green program. Otherwise, you will also undermine support for the green transition. We saw that with the ‘Gilets Jaunes’.

**Taxation is not an EU competence, the unanimity of member states is required to get anything approved there and some countries will always place their veto. So how can the European level bring added value here?**

It’s true that this will be very difficult to do under the current treaty. However, if countries are serious about tackling the climate crisis, they can do it. All the heads of states have shown during the eurozone crisis that a lot of things can be done as soon as it’s perceived as an urgent problem.

Look at how we saved the banks! This is our biggest complaint, in fact. We are dealing here with a very urgent climate crisis. And making this a socially just transition is really crucial. From our perspective, this is also why there is a rise in populism, why people are so disappointed with Europe.

Of course, we are dependent on the member states. But the Commissioner can push an agenda, we saw that during the euro crisis. And if we don’t have all the countries on board right away, then there is always the possibility of going ahead with a vanguard group of countries and let the others join afterwards.

The same applies to the introduction of a minimum wage across Europe, which is also part of our social agenda.

**You’re talking about a so-called “enhanced cooperation” procedure allowing a smaller group of countries to forge ahead in some areas without the others. In which areas do you think such a mechanism would be useful?**

Certainly on taxation. And also on a minimum wage across Europe. On taxation, countries could, for example, agree not to lower their profit tax below a certain level – say 20% or 80% – and stop the race to the bottom on tax.

If some countries do it, then others will be challenged to join as well. That’s how the new Commission can put items on the agenda. It has been way too silent on the socially just transition.

**You mentioned phasing out fossil fuels earlier. Should independence from fossil fuels be listed as one of Europe’s strategic objectives?**

If we are really serious about the energy transition, this is what we have to do. Again, every country might not immediately want to be part of it.

But look, we are importing around €260 billion every year on fossil fuels. That’s the price we are paying to regimes in Russia and the Middle East. That’s a key vulnerability for our economy. And it’s a polluting one. And it’s not even delivering a tremendous amount of jobs.

Which investor will put their money into future energy infrastructure if they don’t have a clear idea of where Europe is going? If every country is free to decide on its own, investors will be reluctant to put their money over in Europe.

The EIB can help of course but most investments will have to come from private capital. And private investors are reluctant because they have no idea where Europe is going. Here also, Europe needs to deliver more so that investments can start flowing in and deliver a new energy system.

You said in an earlier interview that you want to see a “Green New Deal” as part of an industrial policy that puts climate change at the centre. Now, let’s imagine for a moment that the Greens win the elections and that you become the next president of the European Commission. **How do you persuade member states to follow your plans?**

Well, funnily enough, the member states are slowly changing. The green transition is becoming more and more part of the debate also at the national level.

Europe’s geopolitical position with regards to China is also becoming more of a debate. And that’s very much linked to new clean technologies, like low-carbon mobility. Look at the huge debate around the failed merger of Siemens and Alstom in Germany and France!

So I think there is finally a realisation among member states that the liberal agenda – with privatisation, competition, and laisser-faire – has reached its limits.

**Would you have given the go-ahead to the Siemens-Alstom merger?**

I think it was difficult for the Commission to approve this merger because it had to follow the rules that are currently in place. For me, this shows that we need to take a hard look at those rules, taking the global perspective into account.

Europe does not function in isolation in the world. And I think competition rules need to be updated for such situations because the current rules are only aimed at one thing – preventing a newly-merged company from having a dominant position on the European market.

And that means Europe will need to become more geopolitical in its decisions about competition policy. We live in a world where everyone is
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doing that already – the Chinese, the Americans, the Russians.

For example, some governments in Europe are concerned that China is buying up harbours in Greece. But it was the same governments who forced Greece to prioritise those harbours during the euro crisis. And now that China jumps in and buys it, suddenly, people are concerned... It makes no sense.

**In a way, you're saying 'Europe First'…**

Well, I don't like the slogan for a number of reasons. But I definitely believe that we have to be more clever with our European rules.

Take the reform of the ETS: you can stop free allowances but at the same time put in place a border adjustment mechanism to equalise the carbon content of imported products. This way, you can combine your trade policies with environmental policies. Because then you are also giving an incentive for producers outside Europe to lower the CO2 content of their products in order to enter the European market.

**How would you convince those who are concerned that a carbon tariff would trigger a trade war? Germany is highly dependent on exports and has been traditionally reluctant because of that…**

If you are serious about a Climate Neutral economy, then it also means that your industry needs to become climate neutral. And that is quite a transition they have to go through.

That’s why you need a carbon price – because it incentivises low-carbon innovation. That also means ETS revenues should go much more towards helping industries invest in breakthrough technologies.

But while we are in the transition, we also need to make sure that we are not undermining it by letting cheaper and more polluting products enter the European market. It’s an overarching policy that you need to put in place in order to achieve that.

That’s how we can convince Europe’s industry. Because yes, we are asking a lot from them but we can also give them back, with help on investments and leadership in new technologies that will spur a new industrial revolution in Europe, and beyond.

So yes, a carbon tariff might lead to tariff wars. But if you don’t do it, our own transition will be just paperwork.

And what we would like to do as European Greens is put the transition into practice.

**Let’s return to farming policies. There is mounting evidence that agriculture — including the use of pesticides — is one of the main culprits behind the dramatic fall in biodiversity observed over the past decades. What should Europe do to address this?**

First of all, we need a Paris-like moment for biodiversity. In a way, the IPBES is the equivalent of the IPCC for climate change. So the scientific research base is now clearly laid down.

The message is clearer and clearer.

What we need now is the policy equivalent, a kind of Paris moment for biodiversity on the international scene like we had in 2015 for climate change. And in 2020, the Convention on Biological Diversity will hold a big conference in China.

We all know that the Paris Agreement was possible because of the deal that the US and China passed the year before, between President Obama and Xi Jinping. And we think the CBD summit in China is the moment to do that. But this time, Europe should be the one doing a deal with China.

**What kind of policies could follow from that?**

The CAP reform is the biggest homework that Europe has to do in order to protect biodiversity. We also have the Natura 2000 network of protected areas for which implementation should be improved.

But the big step is with our own agriculture support – going for real serious greening, and also stopping money going to the big agri-business companies. Currently, 80% of payments under the CAP’s first pillar are going to just 20% of farmers. These figures need to be reversed.

**Should Europe ban pesticides immediately? Or do you believe some kind of transition has to be arranged to soften the impact on farmers? Because a lot of them are simply dependent on these products…**

The worst pesticides need to be abandoned – that’s what we said also on glyphosate. Unfortunately, we should have done that earlier so that is certainly something we will put forward after the elections.

But you’re absolutely right, if we were to ban all pesticides immediately, that wouldn’t be realistic. For that, you need to transition. And here, the second pillar of the CAP can help. Support schemes really need to go to greening and also to help farmers transition from the current production system.

And that is not only because pesticides are bad for our health, it’s also because climate change will require an agriculture that is more resilient to climate extremes.

Monocultures, for example, are not resilient at all. And that’s a problem: we have built a very large scale agricultural system, with a lot of monocultures that are very vulnerable, that need pesticides. That makes the soil lose its nutrients so farmers have to put in fertilisers, which is also an oil product.

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You know, we have based our entire agricultural production model on that. And that needs to be reverted. We need to move towards “nature inclusive agriculture”. For example, think of agroforestry combinations, which are more climate resilient, and bring more diversity in the production system.

But that needs time and assistance. And this is where CAP money can help us move the agricultural system towards a new model.

Is the money available sufficient to do this? Is it possible with the EU’s current budget proposal for 2021-2027?

Not with the European budget only – that is clear. That’s also why I’m talking about the CAP’s second pillar because it is co-financed by the member states.

Let’s move to politics now. How do you see alliances building up in the next Parliament? The Greens are expected to have a slightly bigger group in the next Parliament. Macron wants to build a “progressive alliance” ranging from left to right. Are you open to talks about a shared programme for a kind of pro-European ‘Grand Coalition’?

For us Greens, the most important is that any coalition is as progressive as possible.

That’s Macron’s proposal then?

Not really. Because in the end, he’s just talking. Macron is good in words but if you listen to what he says, it’s the “Grand Grand coalition”, with the EPP, the S&D and the Liberals. And maybe he wants the Greens on board as well because that makes him feel more comfortable. But that’s it.

Whereas, from our perspective, if we can make GUE part of that progressive coalition, then we would really have much more progressive policies.

So it’s a matter of where you start your negotiations. Macron starts from the centre and tries to build a coalition around him. He thinks of himself as the Sun King in a way… But I start from the left, because I think that’s what Europe needs.

Like I said, if you are really serious about the green transition, it needs to be socially just. This is why Europe needs a left-wing coalition. Of course, it’s unlikely that we will get a majority, so we will have to talk with the Liberals and Macron.

And then there is the big question: what will the EPP do? They need to sort out their strategy. I heard this week that Berlusconi wants to work with the far-right. That’s also what Orban wants. And both are in the EPP. So if that’s their take, it will be without us, very clearly.

But I don’t think the EPP will get a majority with the far-right either. So the EPP needs to decide whether they want to start working with the left. That’s really the key decision that the EPP needs to make. And for now, they are totally divided.

Assuming the EPP does become more hard-line conservative, that will probably raise the pressure on the Greens to form this broad alliance from left to centre that Macron wants, correct?

Yes, absolutely. And that’s why I took the liberty of talking about GUE. Because I have the feeling that Macron is not thinking about that part of the political spectrum in Parliament. And I think we have to forge an alliance that is as progressive as possible.

How does that work? Will you sit down with other party leaders to agree on the main points of a program that you’re ready to sign up to, in broad strokes?

After the elections, we will first look at who has become the biggest political group. That’s democracy: the biggest group has the right to start negotiating first.

And that looks like it’s going to be the EPP. So the EPP will probably invite parties with which they want to form a coalition. This is when we will put our demands on the table.

And what you will see is that, for the first time, there will be a more negotiated program for the new Commission. Five years ago, Juncker had his 10-point plan but that was very general and he became Commission President quite easily because he was supported by the EPP and the Socialists.

This time, it won’t be that easy because both the EPP and the Socialists are both expected to have smaller groups. This means that the next Commission President will have to discuss and negotiate a program with a broader coalition that gives him, or her, a majority. And on the basis of that program, we will decide whether we are going to be part of it or not.

And to be very honest, being together with the EPP is not our first choice – our preference is to have a coalition that is as progressive and left-leaning as possible. That said, if the EPP are the biggest, we will, of course, talk to them. And that means Manfred Weber will need to shift his policies substantially.
The lead candidate for the European Conservatives at next month’s EU elections has made climate policy and other environmental issues one of his key election themes. But can he square up his green agenda with his passion for national sovereignty? EURACTIV tried to find out.

“Conservatives are natural conservationists.”

The phrase was put at the top of the website of the Blue-Green summit, a one-day environmental policy seminar organised earlier this month by the Alliance of Conservatives and Reformists in Europe (ACRE), a party running for the May EU elections.

“Environmentalism, and the world we live in, are altogether too important to be left to the left,” says the Alliance of Conservatives and Reformists in Europe (ACRE). © Communautés Européennes

Jan Zahradil, champion of ‘common sense’ EU environmentalism

By Frédéric Simon | EURACTIV.com

The Conservatives’ conversion to environmentalism may look surprising to some. But it goes back at least a decade, when David Cameron, the former UK prime minister, promised to have the “greenest government ever”.

Cameron made the environment one of his core campaign issues, using climate policy to detoxify the Tory image as “the nasty party”. The same strategy was applied to ACRE when the pan-European party launched in 2009, under Tory leadership.

It was a winning recipe for the British Conservatives, although some

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later criticised Cameron for raising the bar too high and then disappointing green-minded voters.

So can the European Conservatives pull it off again at the next European election?

Political awareness, at least, is certainly there. Environmental issues “rank second in terms of what people are thinking when they go out to vote in the upcoming European elections,” said Richard Milsom, chief executive of ACRE.

“This has been obvious for some time” with the youth climate marches that have taken place across Europe over the past months, he said in his opening speech for the Blue-Green summit in Brussels.

“There is no doubt that something has to be done,” Milsom emphasised, adding that the Conservatives “have always led the charge” on environmental policy by spearheading key reforms at EU level, such as the recent overhaul of the EU’s carbon market, led by Ian Duncan, a Scottish Tory MEP.

But can the European Conservatives live up to expectations? To find out, EURACTIV sat down with Jan Zahradil, the ACRE’s lead candidate for the EU elections.

THE NATION-STATE AT THE CENTRE

Zahradil has sat in the European Parliament ever since his Czech Republic joined the EU in 2004. He is a staunch defender of the sovereignty of nations, which is at the core of the ACRE’s values.

This translates into what Zahradil calls “a common sense approach to environmental protection,” a principle that also applies to climate policy. In practice, this means Europe should refrain from imposing any kind of “artificial dates or deadlines” on EU member countries, or other world nations for that matter.

“Europe is leading by example” on climate change and should encourage others to follow, Zahradil said. After all, Europe represents only about 10% of overall CO2 emissions so acting alone won’t have much impact, he argued.

“We have very limited leverage on the US, China or India,” Zahradil told EURACTIV. “We can lead by example, we can try to persuade them that they should follow us, but we can’t force them”.

CLIMATE CHANGE: NO TARGETS, NO DEADLINES

Asked whether he supports the European Commission’s proposal to aim for climate neutrality by 2050, Zahradil’s answer was definite.

“No, I disagree. I think that aiming for a zero-carbon economy by 2050 goes far beyond our commitments made in the Paris Agreement”.

“If we go too far, too fast and too insensitively, it will undermine the very fundamentals of Europe’s economies,” he explained, saying “it could lead to a situation where industry will simply outsource production” outside of Europe, leading to “unemployment and social unrest in Europe”.

Should the EU aim for carbon neutrality at a later date, then? “No. I think setting artificial dates or deadlines doesn’t serve to anything good. So let’s stick with the Paris Agreement.”

For him, the lesson from the ‘Yellow Vest’ protests in France was “very clear”: environmental policy has to have a social policy component. Otherwise, “good intentions” like the French carbon tax, risk backfiring and create social unrest.

“This is probably what happened to Mr Macron who was led by his environmental ambitions. He wanted to show France as an environmentally advanced country that cares about the future and that is able to act very swiftly. And very quickly, he created problems for himself and for big parts of the population in his country.”

The social dimension of environmental policy is the main reason why Europe should tone down its ambition on climate change and refuse any deadlines for 2050, Zahradil argued.

“This could have a devastating impact on our way of life, on our social consensus and stability. It could lead to a situation where industry will simply outsource production to other countries that would lead to unemployment and social unrest in Europe,” he argued.

Does that mean Zahradil opposes the school climate strikes? His answer is ambiguous.

“Basically, it’s a good thing that youngsters are getting involved,” he said. “We have to communicate and engage with them. We should certainly not dismiss them and say they’re too young. That would be very unwise.”

But he added that Europe should not yield to the demands of Greta Thunberg, the young climate activists who called on Europe to cut CO2 emission at least 50% by 2030, and aim for 80% instead, double its current commitment under the Paris Agreement.

“We should be able to explain to them that if things are done too insensitively, it could trigger an internal war with other age groups in society,” Zahradil said in reference to the ‘Yellow Vests’ in France. “It could threaten the social consensus and destabilise society”.

“I know some of them wouldn’t listen and would say This is bullshit, we’ve heard that a thousand times. You don’t care because you’re sixty years old, etc. I hear this. But the fact that someone is sixty doesn’t make that person less valuable than someone who is twenty,” Zahradil said.

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MORE FUNDING FOR RESEARCH AND INNOVATION

One area where Zahradil believes the EU can make a difference is innovation and research. Programmes to boost the development of clean technologies can be a springboard for European companies to export green solutions across the world, he argued.

“I would agree to reshuffle budget priorities so that more funds are offered to support science, research and new technologies so that we don’t fall behind other countries,” he said when asked about China’s massive investments into electric vehicles and solar panel manufacturing.

That sits well with the European Commission’s plans to boost EU funding for innovation and research. Under the Commission proposals, the overall size of the pie is set to grow dramatically, despite Brexit, to a €100 billion pot for 2021-2027 from €78 billion in the current seven-year period, which included the UK as a full member.

Asked if he would support the Commission’s proposed budget for the Horizon Europe programme, Zahradil replied: “Yes. Basically, yes.”

AGRICULTURE: PRIORITISE SMALL-SCALE FARMING

The Czech MEP might also surprise environmentalists with his views on agriculture. The Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), which still makes up around 40% of the EU budget, “has to be used in a smart way, in an environmentally-friendly way,” he told EURACTIV.

Zahradil witnessed first-hand the damages wrought by intensive agriculture. In the Czech Republic, he recalled, all former communist cooperatives were privatised and transformed into big agricultural enterprises. “And they are focused purely on production, which is not good for the land, the soil and the environment.”

According to him, “environmental aspects should be taken much more into account” when setting criteria for CAP funding. This means capping EU subsidies that encourage industrial farming, he suggested.

“And frankly speaking, small farms, organic farming and family farming are much better able to provide this careful type of agriculture than the big industrial farms,” he said.

Zahradil, who holds a degree from the University of Chemistry and Technology in Prague, is convinced that the use of chemicals in agriculture must be reduced. But again, limits and deadlines should not be set by the EU, for example, when it comes to pesticides.

“I don’t think the EU should ban them. I don’t think that we should put any upper limit on them. What I would rather see is to encourage farmers to use them less or not to use them at all.”

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It’s a good thing that youngsters are getting involved” in climate policy, says Jan Zahradil, the lead candidate for the European Conservatives in next month’s EU elections. But going too far, too fast “could trigger an internal war with other age groups in society,” like the Yellow Vests in France, he warned.

Jan Zahradil is a Czech Conservative MEP who has sat in the European Parliament ever since his country joined the European Union in 2004. He is the lead candidate for the Alliance of Conservatives and Reformists in Europe (ACRE) for the 2019 EU elections. Zahradil spoke to EURACTIV’s energy and environment editor, Frédéric Simon.

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**INTERVIEW HIGHLIGHTS:**

- Zahradil rejects EU’s proposed net-zero emission target, whether by 2050 or a later date
- Decision to phase-out coal or fossil fuels should be left to individual countries
- Supports proposed €100bn EU budget for research and innovation in 2021-2027
- Supports small-scale and organic agriculture over big industrial farms

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**The IPCC issued a report last year warning about the consequences of global warming beyond 1.5°C, saying unprecedented action needs to happen fast in every sector of the economy to address this global challenge. What do you think should be the response at global and EU level? Is Europe doing its fair share under the Paris Agreement?**

Like you said, it’s a problem that should be tackled on a global level. I believe that Europe has taken this issue seriously. European countries have made their commitments, they have signed the Paris climate agreement. And I think that is a good sign. Europe is leading by example.

However, Europe represents about 10% of overall CO2 emissions. So I think that we should encourage others to follow because if they don’t, whatever we do will have very little impact.

**Isn’t that a bit of a wait-and-see attitude?**

No, we have to encourage them. But we have no leverage on them – nor China or India. We have to believe that they will show their responsibility. We have to negotiate with them of course. But if you just take the EU, I think we’re doing pretty well.

**So we shouldn’t do more unless other countries move as well?**

We should encourage them. But we have very limited leverage on the US, or China or India. We can lead by example, we can try to persuade them that they should follow us, but we can’t force them.

**The UN says climate change will lead to unprecedented human displacements and expose humanity to increasing levels of insecurity. How should Europe respond to this threat?**

I think that climate change is probably not the only reason for human displacement. But currently, it is not even the main reason. The main reason for massive migration now is local conflicts, national conflicts, religious conflicts, rather than the impact of climate change. Maybe in the future it will be different but now, I believe it is not the main cause for big shifts in populations.

I believe that European politicians are first and foremost responsible for the situation in Europe. They are responsible for the security of European citizens. And when it comes to mass migration, I’m more in favour of a restrictive approach. I think that we should send a clear signal that the number of migrants Europe can accept and absorb is limited. It cannot be millions of people because that will burn our welfare systems, change the very social fabric of our societies and change our demography.

In the long term, of course, external policies might help to diminish the impacts of climate change. We can help countries in Africa and Asia to develop cleaner, green technologies. But when it comes to absorbing big chunks of people, I’m rather in favour of a restrictive approach.

**Do you have another date in mind? Should it be 2060 or 2070?**

No. I think setting artificial dates or deadlines doesn’t serve to anything good. So let’s stick with the Paris Agreement.

**Europe is considered a leader in clean technologies. But China is catching up fast and even overtaking Europe on technologies like solar power or electric vehicles. Some even say China is the “absolute winner” of the clean energy transition. What should Europe do to stay ahead in this global race?**

First, I believe it’s good news that China is progressing on environmentally-friendly technologies. It’s a big polluter still and it probably hasn’t reached its peak,
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their carbon footprint is still on the rise and will reach its peak probably by 2040. So it’s good news, we should encourage them.

On our side, I think we’re still far ahead of China when it comes to quality of life or living standards. However, the Commission has one or two devices to influence the situation. One is the budget. And I would agree to reshuffle budget priorities so that more funds are offered to support science, research and new technologies so that we don’t fall behind other countries.

That’s the Horizon Europe programme. Are you in favour of the proposed €100bn budget that the Commission put on the table for 2021-2027? That was a big increase compared to the previous budget. Do you support that?

Yes. Basically, yes.

Should independence from fossil fuels be listed as one of Europe’s strategic objective? By when?

I would disagree with any cap or limit on a European level. Because I believe that the energy mix should stay under the jurisdiction of individual member states. I know that Germany has already announced that they will phase out coal by 2038.

But other countries will not do that. My country, the Czech Republic, is quite hesitant because we still have some supplies of brown and black coal. And I think it cannot be done artificially by some kind of European directive.

What I believe is that cleaning technologies – filters to separate particles from the air – you can dramatically reduce pollution from coal. We did it I remember over the last 25 years. Some of our industrial installations were heavily polluted in the beginning of the 90s after forty years of communism.

And since we started to introduce these new cleaning technologies, we reduced dramatically – by several dozen times – the pollution of the air. So I think that if coal is still used as a fuel – and I don’t believe some countries will accept a very quick phase-out – we can substantially reduce air pollution by introducing some technologies.

But the phase-out of coal in itself – do you believe this is a desirable objective?

It should be decided on an individual basis by each and every country.

The G20 and the G7 countries have pledged to stop subsidising fossil fuels by 2025. But little progress has been achieved since the pledge was first made ten years ago (in 2009). Do you support a firm cut-off date to end fossil fuel subsidies?

Again, if it’s socially sustainable. I would agree with stopping subsidies but only if it does not increase living expenses of certain social groups. For instance, pensioners or low-income people. Because if we do that from one day to another, it might cause social problems – for example for people to heat their houses.

So it has to be done very carefully, step by step, and taking the social dimension into account.

The concept of a just transition to a low-carbon economy was highlighted last year by the “Yellow Vests” protests in France. Have policymakers neglected the social dimension of the energy transition? What do you think should be done about it at EU level?

The lesson is very simple and very clear – environmental policy also has to be socially sustainable. Good intentions to have a clean environment as quickly as possible can lead to a situation where politicians create socially unsustainable situations.

And this is probably what happened to Mr Macron who was led by his environmental ambitions. He wanted to show France as an environmentally advanced country that cares about the future and that is able to act very swiftly. And very quickly, he created problems for himself and for big parts of the population in his country. And the result was the Yellow Vest protests which lasted months.

So everything we do, we always have to take social aspects into account.

How would you have done it? Was the tax itself a bad idea or would you have exempted the poor for example?

Look, taxation is not a European Union jurisdiction, it’s not a competence of the EU. There is some harmonisation of VAT but consumption tax, income tax... The European Commission has nothing to do with that.

Moving on to a different topic – agriculture. The European Commission has tried limiting the environmental impact of farming policy with the “green pillar” of the Common Agricultural Policy. Are you happy with the way discussions are going there as part of the CAP reform proposal?

We need to take the environmental impact of agriculture into account. Yes, the CAP budget is a very strong instrument, representing more than 40% of the EU’s annual budget. So yes, it has to be used in a smart way, in an environmentally-friendly way.

We are in favour of capping direct payments. For instance, in the Czech Republic, all former communist cooperatives were privatised and transformed into those big agricultural complexes. And they are...
focused purely on production, which is not good for the land, the soil and the environment.

So what I would say is that those environmental aspects should be taken much more into account in setting criteria for CAP funding.

And frankly speaking, small farms organic farming and family farming are much better able to provide this careful type of agriculture than the big industrial farms.

This is actually what the Commission's proposed reform is about. Does that mean you support the Commission's CAP reform proposal?

Yes, although I would focus more on criteria like land and water supply preservation. So not just production-oriented goals but also conservation-oriented goals.

Farming is the single biggest user of water, ahead of industries like energy. What measures would you recommend to improve the water efficiency of the farming sector?

Water should be an important criterion for funding under the CAP. There are various ways to fund some new sensible irrigation systems, reforestation of parts of the land that were artificially deforested.

You can encourage a decrease in the use of chemical pesticides and herbicides, and encourage farmers to use bio-degradable types instead. So there are a lot of small things you can do, which combined together can have a great impact. And all of that should be somehow put under the criteria for CAP funding.

The Water Framework Directive – do you think it’s working? Should it be reformed in your view?

No, I don’t think it should be reformed. I think it should rather be implemented.

But the targets on water quality are very tough and, according to some Conservatives in Europe, even impossible to meet.

Again, it should be done gradually. As I said before, all methods to purify polluted waters are already there. We’ve known them for 150 years.

We know how to deal with non-organic and organic pollution. So when it comes to small farming or family farming, we can encourage them to build some small waste treatment plants. They can be funded from the CAP budget to decrease the pollution of underground waters. All of that should be put as a pre-condition for CAP funding in the future.

So you wouldn’t reopen the WFD, you would leave it as it is…?

For the moment yes.

There is mounting evidence that agriculture – including the use of pesticides – is one of the main culprits behind the dramatic fall in bees and birds populations observed over the past years. What should Europe do to address this? Should the EU ban the use of certain pesticides?

I don’t think the EU should ban them. I don’t think we should put any upper limit on them. What I would rather see is to encourage farmers to use them less or not to use them at all.

Again, the CAP budget could be a good incentive to encourage that, if we put that in the criteria for CAP funding. So I would use those kinds of incentives rather than just bans or limits.

Do you think Europe should do something specifically to address the loss of biodiversity?

No, I don’t think the EU should do that. First of all, changes in biodiversity are a part of natural cycles, to some extent.

Except here the fall is dramatic and quite probably linked to human activity…

Yes, that’s true. But again, as always: we can do something gradually, we can improve the situation by improving ways and methods of farming and change CAP criteria to support small-scale family farming and organic farming instead of industrial farming. That’s what we can do with the European budget. The rest stays with conservation agencies of national governments.

Would you support a global pact on biodiversity similar to what the Paris Agreement did for climate change? Would that sound appealing to you?

I don’t know. It sounds nice at first look, but what matters is the content so I’m not sure at this moment.

Meat has come under the spotlight because of the vast amounts of water, chemical pesticides and fertilisers that are needed to grow fodder for cattle. Do you think something should be done at EU level to reduce the environmental impact of meat?

Rather not. I’m a bit sceptical, this would be going too far for me. It sounds to me like we would be directly trying to influence the lifestyle of individual people. And that is something that might have a damaging impact. If people get the feeling that the EU is trying to interfere in a what they consider a personal matter like how much they eat, what they eat, how much they travel, how many hours per day they should watch TV, or whatever else…

These are very personal decisions...
and if the EU goes this way, it could provoke very anti-European feelings. People would say, ‘Stop it. Don’t tell me what I should have on my table for my lunch or dinner’.

Let’s turn to democracy issues now. Hundreds of thousands of young people have taken to the streets over the past months to protest against inaction on climate change. What are the lessons that you draw from these protests?

Basically, it’s a good thing that youngsters are getting involved. Young people are catchy. Sometimes they can be radical or revolutionary. It’s their role, we have seen that many times in the past. We have to communicate and engage with them. We should certainly not dismiss them and say they’re too young. That would be very unwise.

But we should also explain to them that if we go too far and too fast, we will also endanger other groups in society. And the Yellow Vest protests are a very good example. Because if you compare students and the Yellow Vests, in many respect they promote very contradictory agendas. Youngsters are radically environmental while the Yellow Vests are radically – I wouldn’t say anti-environmental – but they are against measures that would probably be welcomed by Friday marchers.

So we should be able to explain to them that if things are done too insensitively, it could trigger an internal war with other age groups in society. It could threaten the social consensus and destabilise society.

I know some of them wouldn’t listen and say ‘This is bullshit, we’ve heard that a thousand times. You don’t care because you’re sixty years old’, etc. I hear this. But the fact that someone is sixty years old doesn’t make that person less valuable than someone who is twenty.

You mentioned the need to engage with young people. Do you think there are ways to do that at the European level? The EU is a multi-layered organisation where nation-states and regions also play a role. So how would you structure this dialogue at European level?

In Europe, we have a very colourful fabric of NGOs. There could be conferences, round-tables, and so on. I don’t think everything should be organised at the European level. If some NGO organises a round-table with Friday marchers and invites me, I’d be happy to come.
The lead candidate for the European Left at the May EU elections devoted much of his professional life to defending the rights of steelworkers in his native Belgium. He now brings his fight to the European level, adding shades of green to his political spectrum.

A metallurgist by profession, Nico Cué is “one of the most influential trade unionists in Belgium and Europe,” according to Le Soir, the leading French-speaking daily newspaper in Belgium.

His CV is typical of a trade union leader. He started working at 20 at the Herstal steel factory near the city of Liège in Belgium and moved up the ranks of unionism to become secretary general of Belgium’s steelworker confederation in 1997.

The 62-year-old is currently busy travelling across the continent to campaign for the European Left, a pan-European party that brings together communist and leftist parties from around Europe.

As the lead candidate for the European Left – together with Slovenian MP Violeta Tomić – Cué is in the running to become the next President of the European Commission after the May election.

So where does he stand on big environmental issues like climate change? EURACTIV spoke to Cué over the phone on the campaign trail, just as he was crossing airport checks.

“First, I want to tip my hat to the young people who have given a formidable boost to climate policy,” the Belgian trade unionist said from the outset, referring to the school climate strikes led by Swedish activist Greta Thunberg.

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And although he supports the European Commission’s proposal to aim for net-zero emissions by 2050, reaching that goal will require “rethinking the entire production apparatus,” a far-reaching process that requires reviewing policies in almost every area, he says.

“I don’t have a problem with a decarbonised society. The problem is how we are going to get there,” Cué cautions. Merely setting up a carbon market like the EU has done isn’t enough to reach climate objectives, he believes, because it risks driving sensitive industries like steelmaking out of Europe.

According to him, a more holistic approach is needed, combining environmental, social and trade policies. That means elevating the European response to a new level, similar to what was done with Airbus in the aerospace sector, or the Galileo satellite navigation system.

“If we want to quit fossil fuels, we have to put everyone around the table to set up a European project financed by the European Central Bank (EC) or the European Investment Bank (EIB),” Cué says. That also implies “reviewing competition rules in a number of strategic areas” as well as trade relations with major economies like the United States, China and Japan, he points out.

And in industries where deep transformations are underway, social policies have to be embedded in the change process. “We’re talking about millions of jobs that risk being put in jeopardy,” he says, referring to the car industry’s transition to electric mobility.

What European politicians need to realise, he says, is that the transition to a green economy also brings major political risks if social policies aren’t included in the process.

“If we don’t do that, we will run into big difficulties,” Cué warns, saying populist leaders like US President Donald Trump or Italy’s Matteo Salvini will inevitably rise to power in countries where environmental policies are implemented without taking account of people’s everyday realities.

“What I’m afraid is that we are fighting the climate battle by increasing taxes on products,” he says. “And here, it is always the weakest people who pay the bill.”

For Cué, the ‘Yellow Vests’ protests in France have become a case study of climate policies gone wrong. The “just transition” cannot only be about pushing electric vehicles down the throats of people who are already in precarious situations, living in the outskirts of cities where there is no public transport, banks or post offices, Cué says.

“These people who are already struggling because their salary is low, telling them to buy an electric car – that’s not possible … I understand the anger of people,” Cué says.

For him, the green transition also means rethinking the way everyday products are manufactured, by ensuring consumer goods are either “100% recyclable” or designed to last longer by “putting an end to programmed obsolescence”.

Manufacturing supply chains should also be reconsidered, he contends. “It is not normal that consumer goods travel tens of thousands of kilometres, going through tax havens to benefit from transfer pricing, to mask the real cost of products,” he says.

“It is by tackling this type of international tax problems that the root causes of the loss of value – whether environmental or social – will be addressed,” he says.
The European Parliament must only accept a Commission President with a strong agenda on climate, environment and sustainability, according to Ester Asin, Director of the WWF European Policy Office.

When Jean-Claude Juncker was elected by the European Parliament in 2014 for the top position at the European Commission, little space was made to debate his ten priorities – the political guidelines – which were only made public on the morning of his confirmation.

His nomination was then swiftly accepted in plenary statements issued by all main political group leaders. Little did they know that, once the blank cheque was signed, President Juncker would start shredding draft...
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legislation in the area of resource efficiency and soil protection, shelving improved energy efficiency rules for appliances, and reducing the role of the environment commissioner to a part time occupation by combining it with another portfolio. In the first years of President Juncker’s mandate, the environment was clearly not a big thing.

What went wrong at the time? When it came to appointing the top jobs, horsetrading based on political affiliations was favoured over discussions on substance – an unhealthy side effect of the Spitzenkandidaten process, which political groups in the Parliament were not able to mitigate. And although individual Commissioners eventually stepped up their actions over time on sustainable finance, oceans protection, climate action or sustainable development, time was wasted. Many national governments slacked on implementing essential laws guaranteeing Europeans’ prosperity, safety and health and investors did not receive the needed signals to increase investments into sustainable economies.

This mistake must not be repeated. 2019 has brought new momentum, especially in light of the broad public support during the campaign for strong action on climate change and nature loss. The political priorities for the coming five years should not be determined unilaterally by the President of the European Commission, they should reflect the concerns of Europeans, debated and agreed by their democratically elected representatives. Any Commission President-designate (be it a Spitzenkandidat or not) must seek to negotiate on substance and MEPs must only accept a President who has a clear and ambitious agenda on climate, environment and sustainability.

During the campaign, WWF interviewed lead candidates from all main European parties. Their statements highlight resounding agreement on the importance of tackling climate change and restoring nature. All main parties for instance agreed to work towards net zero emissions by 2050 at the latest. It would therefore be only appropriate for the incoming Commission President to make proposals to increase the 2030 emissions reductions target to 65% and lead Europe to end all financial support to fossil fuel infrastructure. This transition will have to be just and fair, and take into considerations the needs of the people from affected regions.

Similarly, lead candidates indicated their concern and commitment to tackling nature loss, many exclaiming the need for a “Paris moment for biodiversity”. Europe is on course for missing its biodiversity targets for the second time. If it is serious about halting and reversing the loss of nature by 2030 on land and at sea for good, the incoming Commission must step-up enforcement on the implementation of the EU nature laws and present a plan for large-scale nature restoration and connectivity across Europe. This would not only bring back Europe’s iconic species, but also support climate mitigation and stabilisation.

But tackling nature loss in Europe is not enough – we also have a responsibility to reduce the ecological footprint of our consumption abroad: if all people around the globe lived like Europeans, we would need 2.8 planets. All Spitzenkandidaten agreed that we cannot continue like this. The next Commission must present an EU footprint action plan tackling the impacts of our consumption and our dependence on resources from non-EU countries, and this must cover measures to fully address global deforestation and conversion of natural ecosystems.

Building momentum around these issues can only be achieved if sustainability becomes a central pillar of the next Commission and if a European Vice-President for Climate Action and Natural Resources is appointed. This person should take ownership of the to-be-adopted Environmental Action Programme towards 2030 and transform it into a true European Sustainability Pact guiding the EU’s green agenda, agreed by Member States, Parliament and Commission. And the Commission President must personally oversee the adoption of an overarching and high-level implementation strategy for the UN Sustainable Development Goals at EU level as called for by the European Council in 2018.

The Parliament has a key role to play in approving the next Commission President, and it must take this responsibility seriously. There is a clear mandate from voters to put Europe firmly on the path of sustainability and climate action. MEPs must thus use the coming days and weeks to secure strong environmental commitments from the Commission President-designate before giving their approval. There is simply no time for yet another detour.
PROMOTED CONTENT / VIDEOS

WWF interviews with Spitzenkandidaten

By WWF

Ahead of the EU elections WWF asked lead candidates about their vision for a sustainable Europe. Watch all our videos on eurac.tv/9Qey.

MANFRED WEBER IS THE LEAD CANDIDATE FOR THE EUROPEAN PEOPLE’S PARTY.

FRANS TIMMERMANS IS THE LEAD CANDIDATE FOR THE PARTY OF EUROPEAN SOCIALISTS.

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MARGRETHE VESTAGER is the lead candidate for the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe Party.

BAS EICKHOUT is the lead candidate for the European Green Party.

NICO CUÉ is the lead candidate for the European Left Party.
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