

How to cite this paper:

Luise, G. (2024). The Historical-Institutional Evolution and the Political Dynamics of the European Union's Environmental Policy. *Perspective Politice*. Vol. XVII, no. 1-2. Pages 95-105.

<https://doi.org/10.25019/perspol/24.17.7>

Received: April 2024

Accepted: September 2024

Published: December 2024

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Article

The Historical-Institutional Evolution and the Political Dynamics of the European Union's Environmental Policy

Abstract: *The European Union's environmental policy has been shaped and refined over the years through a series of complex and non-linear processes that have seen institutional, national and regulatory dynamics intertwine.*

Despite the lack of provision for environmental issues in the founding treaties and the initial need to find an economic justification for any Community initiative, already in the 1950s and 1960s the Community, beginning to recognise the importance of environmental issues, intervened, mainly through the instrument of directives, in an attempt to define a single environmental policy and harmonise the different policies of individual states to prevent them from altering the functioning of the common market.

To be able, however, to speak of a real environmental policy in the European sphere one would have to wait until the 1970s, when the Community, infected by the new international orientations, undertook a change of course in environmental matters.

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It was, in this regard, the United Nations Conference on the Environment in Stockholm in 1972, the first world forum for warning of the seriousness of environmental problems, that marked the beginning of an international environmental policy and led the European Council of Heads of State and Government in Paris in 1972 to declare for the first time the need for a common environmental policy, thus giving rise to the first Environmental

Action Plan that introduced the principle of prevention and insisted on the need to rationalise the use of natural resources.

From the 1970s to the present day, also due to various environmental disasters that have struck Europe and the world, attention to environmental issues has grown considerably, giving rise, both at national and European level, to numerous movements and political parties that have based their programmes on the protection, preservation and re-evaluation of the environment, triggering a rethinking of priorities also within the European Commission.

The aim of the work therefore appears to be to trace the historical-institutional evolution, through a careful reconstruction of the political dynamics and the directives issued by the European Commission, of the process that led to the definition of the European Union's environmental policy, emphasising how Europe has gone from considering these issues in a marginal way to playing an ever-increasing role as a policy maker capable of massively influencing the political agendas of the various Member States in the context of environmental policies.

Keywords: *environmental policies; European Union; historical-institutional evolution*

1. Introduction

Over the years, the European Union's environmental policy has not followed a linear process and it would be reductive to consider it a mere spillover effect of other policies or the exclusive result of intergovernmental interests and negotiations. Instead, it is a policy that has emerged from complex processes, making discontinuous and sometimes confused progress, in which institutional, national and regulatory dynamics are intertwined. Although the importance of environmental protection has always been recognised on a global and European level, during the first years of cooperation, the Six founding states did not consider it appropriate to include specific references in the Treaties to environmental protection and the actions that the European Communities should take to ensure the protection of the various ecosystems. The reason for this choice is to be found in the desire to concentrate efforts and commitment, at least in an initial phase, on the achievement of economic objectives useful for the creation and functioning of the common market.

However, the lack of provision for environmental issues in the founding treaties and the need to find an economic justification for any Community initiative did not prevent the adoption of some initial environmental protection measures. This was due to the incipient perception in the Community of the need to harmonise environmental policy as a preventive measure to prevent member states' environmental policies from distorting the functioning of the common market. For example, Art. 2b of the EEC Treaty promoted the improvement of the standard of living of EU citizens and Art. 36 enshrined the possibility of restricting the movement of goods in favour of the protection of human, animal and plant life and health. What the various articles established, however, must always be read bearing in mind that all the actions introduced in those years by Europe were aimed at achieving the common market.

Furthermore, on the subject of the environment, it is impossible not to mention Article 100, which allowed the Council of Ministers, on the proposal of the European Commission and after consulting the European Parliament (EP) and the Economic and Social Committee, to establish directives suitable for approximating national laws, and Article 235, which made possible Community legislative interventions concerning actions not envisaged by the original Community goals, but necessary to achieve them. From the combination of these two articles it was, therefore, possible to intervene as early as the 1950s and 1960s on environmental issues (Brutti, 2005).

One can, therefore, understand how the vagueness of environmental issues in the Treaties did not prevent the adoption of measures concerning the environment by the Communities.

Between the end of the 1950s and the mid-1960s, the first two directives on the environment were, in fact, adopted. These were Directive 221/59 (Council of the European Union, 2013), which had the Euratom Treaty as its legal basis, and aimed to control and identify common standards with regard to ionising radiation that posed a risk to the health of workers and

the general public; to initiate monitoring of the quality of air, water and soil; and to inform the Commission of plans for the disposal of radioactive waste.

And Directive 548/67 (Council of the European Union, 1967), with legal basis in the EEC Treaty, on the approximation of laws, regulations and administrative provisions relating to the classification, packaging and labelling of dangerous substances. The Dangerous Substances Directive (DSP) was the first harmonisation text in the chemicals sector with the aim of protecting people and the environment (Fois, 2005).

2. The Development of European Environmental Policy

However, it would take until the 1970s for there to be a real environmental policy at European level, when, following increasing environmental disasters, an ecological conscience and the desire to intervene to put a stop to environmental disasters, including through stringent regulation, began to take hold. It should be recalled that the Hague Summit of Heads of State and Government in December 1969 fostered a revival of a climate favourable to the development of European integration and the beginning of action aimed directly at reducing atmospheric pollution produced by emissions from motor vehicles. This took place through Directive 220 of 1970 (Council of the European Union, 1970) aimed at the approximation of Member States' legislation on the subject, the European Commission decided to implement a legislative harmonisation of existing environmental standards and, in February 1971, set up an internal working group on the environment chaired by Spinelli (Brutti, 2005).

Fundamental impetus, however, was given by the World Conference on the Human Environment convened by the United Nations from 5 to 16 June 1972 in Stockholm. This marked the beginning of an international environmental policy and led to the European Council of Heads of State and Government in Paris in 1972 at which the need for a common environmental policy was declared for the first time.

The 1970s opened with the Stockholm Conference on the Environment, convened by the United Nations, which gave impetus to the development of a European environmental policy. In the same year, in fact, at the Paris European Summit, the heads of state and government, under pressure from the German delegation and with the agreement of the three countries about to join it (Denmark, the United Kingdom and Ireland), decided to initiate joint environmental action and adopt an Environmental Action Programme, the first of seven. The adoption of these documents will in history be the basis on which all environmental protection actions at European level will be developed.

Attention to environmental issues not only by citizens, but also by institutions was decidedly growing during these years, so much so that in 1973 a Service for the Environment and Consumer Protection was set up within the European Commission's Directorate General for Industrial Policy (DGIII) and the EP's Environment Committee (Scichilone, 2008).

Specifically, from a direct intervention point of view, the Council in the 1970s adopted directive number 220 of 1970 (Council of the European Union, 1970) which concerned the attempt to harmonise the different environmental laws of the individual states; directive number 442 of 1975 (Council of the European Union, 1975a) which concerned the management, organisation and disposal of waste directive number 716 of 1975 (Council of the European Union, 1975b) on the regulation of sulphur levels in fuels used for the operation of motor vehicles; di-

rective number 409 of 1979 (Council of the European Union, 1979) to preserve and protect wild birds, the first to deal specifically with natural habitats and fauna (Fois, 2005).

As the years went by, the interdependence of phenomena with an environmental impact and not limited to the competence of individual Member States became increasingly evident in European legislation. Moreover, in the early 1980s there was the first institutional change: the Directorate General for the Environment, Consumer Protection and Nuclear Safety was created in 1981. This was an attempt to overcome the unanimity requirement of member states for the adoption of environmental directives by creating a structure with the capacity to attract resources and generate ideas. This led the DG to transform itself into a regulatory agency capable of proposing innovative initiatives such as, for example, Directive 85/377 (Council of the European Union, 1985a) on environmental impact assessment, the first horizontal protection instrument.

This new political and institutional activism was based on the concept of “ecological modernization”, which originated in Germany and gradually became part of the Community agenda, defining a complex system of values by virtue of which economic and environmental policies were not to be considered as antithetical but rather as complementary. Secondly, the development of the worldwide debate and in particular the contents of the Brundtland Report, which introduced the concept of sustainable development for the first time at an international level, also fostered by industrial accidents with disastrous human and environmental consequences, alerted the Community elites and contributed to increasing the weight of environmental issues on the European agenda.

This movement of ideas and needs fostered the formation of a coalition between the Environment Directorate General and the Environment Committee of the European Parliament (Jordan, 2005), which opened up to the influences of states with advanced environmental policies and of environmental groups active at supranational level. Added to this was the very important role played by the Court of Justice in identifying the principles and operating rules of environmental policy, making it a kind of political activist in this field as well.

These years were also the scene of a fierce confrontation between northern European countries such as the Federal Republic of Germany, Denmark and the Netherlands, which had stricter environmental regulations and were more influenced by the rise of environmentalism and green movements, and those in southern Europe – France, Italy, Greece, Spain and Portugal – which, together with Great Britain, were against more constraints and commitments. The development of EU environmental policy was, in fact, largely also the result of the tension between countries with highly advanced protection policies, which transferred their domestic agendas to the EU arena (policy givers) and countries with no or emerging environmental policies, which progressively built their own domestic agendas as a result of Europeanisation (policy-takers).

The Chernobyl nuclear disaster of 26 April 1986, the urgent need for an institutional review after the enlargement of the Community to include the southern states, and the criticism raised by the legal imprecision of environmental policy, fostered a change in the landscape that was represented by the adoption of the Single European Act in 1986 (Porchia, 2006). Thanks to this Treaty, environmental policy was included among the recognised objectives of the EC, which was called upon to intervene to guarantee the protection and improvement of the quality of the environment and human health and the rational use of resources. In Title VII (Arts. 130R, 130S and 130T), environmental policy was in fact recognised as a “legitimate” aim. Decisions were also to be taken by the Council of Ministers according to the cooperation

procedure, which was joined by the EP with a qualified majority vote when they were related to the functioning of the single market, while the unanimity voting procedure of the Council remained in other cases.

The Treaty also provided for the possibility for Member States to introduce more ecological standards in their legal systems than the minimum and mandatory ones adopted at Community level, as well as the assessment of environmental protection as a fundamental element in other sectoral policies (Scichilone, 2008). The principles that European environmental policy had to be inspired by in its action were the following: prevention, the correction of damage at source (i.e. the elimination of environmental damage in the State where it was produced), the polluter pays principle, the principle of integration with other policies, the principle of a high level of environmental protection and the principle of subsidiarity.

On the other hand, as far as the specific interventions implemented in recent years are concerned, it should be noted that the greatest attention was given to air pollution and the safeguarding and protection of the quality of life. In fact, let us recall: directive number 337 of 1985 (Council of the European Union, 1985a) on environmental impact assessment and atmospheric protection; directive number 779 of 1980 (Council of the European Union, 1980) on the definition of limit values for sulphur dioxide emissions; directive number 884 of 1982 (Council of the European Union, 1982) on the definition of the acceptable quantity of lead in the atmosphere; directive number 203 of 1985 (Council of the European Union, 1985b) on the definition of nitrogen dioxide emission levels; directive number 360 of 1984 (Council of the European Union, 1984) on the permitted levels of emissions from industrial plants; finally, the last two directives were dedicated to the control and regulation of emissions from cars

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, the European Community adopted an ever-increasing number of pieces of environmental legislation until, in the summer of 1993, 150 bills were withdrawn in response to criticism of Brussels' excessive centralism.

The 1990s brought other important innovations. First of all, the role that the environment took on in the Maastricht Treaty, which dedicated Article 2 to sustainable, non-inflationary and environmentally friendly growth. The principle of sustainable development, officially defined for the first time at international level in 1987 by the World Commission on Environment and Development's report entitled *Our Common Future* (Brundtland Report) (United Nations, 1987), was thus incorporated into EU law. Furthermore, within the Treaty, the entire Title XVI was reserved for the environment and fully established environmental policy as a Community policy, applying qualified majority voting as the general decision-making rule, with limited but relevant exceptions where unanimous voting was used.

The most important measures in these years were: Regulation 1210 of 1990 for the creation of the European Environment Agency. This is an information agency with no decision-making or control powers over Community environmental policy, whose members include Iceland, Liechtenstein, Norway, Switzerland and Turkey, in addition to the EU countries. It is responsible for collecting, analysing and processing environmental data, providing information, studies, measurements and controls to states and third countries, and for the European environment information and observation network (EIONET); the 1992 Regulation 1973 on the LIFE Programme (*L'Instrument Financier pour l'Environnement*) (Council of the European Union, 1992a), the only financial programme exclusively dedicated to the co-financing of environmental projects submitted by public and private entities. The Programme's objectives were the conservation of natural habitats and of wild flora and fauna of particular interest to the EU;

Regulation 880 of 1992 (Council of the European Union, 1992b), amended by Regulation 180 of 2000, concerning eco-labelling, which provided for the award by the competent national bodies of an eco-label to products that meet the protection criteria set by the European Union; Regulation 1836 of 1993 for the adhesion to voluntary control systems aimed at the certification, again by competent national bodies, of the quality of companies that include environmental management measures in their production processes; Directive 689 of 1991 on hazardous waste, which provides for the approval of different types of waste and the harmonisation of management measures; Directive 313 of 1990 on free access to environmental information, which introduced the obligation for national administrations to provide, when requested, information on environmental matters, introducing a new form of democratic control, transparency and citizen participation; Habitats Directive 43 of 1992 for the conservation of biodiversity through the protection of fauna, flora and habitats by the selection of areas of ecological interest on European territory, called Special Areas of Conservation (SAC), which since 2000 form the “Nature Network”.

Despite the institutional advances contained in the Maastricht Treaty, the debate on subsidiarity and the doctrine of liberalisation took over the EU scene and called into question the EU’s commitment and ability to promote sustainability through regulation. The fear of some member states of having their sovereignty curtailed and the subsequent cautiousness of the Commission contributed to the slowdown of environmental policy. In general, EU environmental policy had, until then, followed the traditional regulatory approach, consisting of the adoption of rules based on command and control that set maximum pollution levels and regulated the use of natural resources (McCormick, 2001). The regulatory approach was criticised on several fronts. Firstly, the European Union’s harmonisation strategy, which, by virtue of unanimity, aimed for the highest degree of uniformity, was beginning to be perceived as an overly technical and complex limitation. Secondly, the traditional regulatory approach was, in the case of environmental policy, ineffective in terms of implementing environmental objectives. Thirdly, excessive environmental regulation at the EU level accentuated the criticism of less pro-European states that felt their national interests were threatened. Finally, environmental regulation was perceived by industry groups and many member states as an obstacle to international competitiveness (Querini, 2007).

Although the need for the European Union to pursue general protection objectives was recognised, it was recommended that the command-and-control, top-down, regulatory approach be abandoned and more flexible positions be adopted that would simplify policies and favour voluntary agreements and market instruments, such as taxes and eco-labelling.

This new approach was made explicit in the White Paper on Growth, Competitiveness and Employment, presented by the commission in 1993, proposing the reduction of labour costs and the adoption of fiscal measures. It also introduced the concept of the “double dividend”, i.e. the need for the environment to become a factor for growth, competitiveness and job creation through the use of market instruments, including fiscal ones (Scichilone, 2008).

3. The 2000s and the Green Deal

The 2000s, characterised by continuous and ever-increasing environmental disasters, saw the birth of an increasing number of environmental movements and a still growing attention by European institutions to environmental issues.

Specifically, it should be remembered that although the Treaty of Nice made only minor changes in the part dedicated to environmental policy, in June 2001 the European Council in Gothenburg approved a European Strategy for Sustainable Development (updated annually by the spring Council of Environment Ministers), which included the environmental dimension alongside the economic and social dimensions in the Lisbon Strategy, with the aim of pursuing sustainable economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion. Furthermore, in December 2006, after nine years of debate, the EP and the Council of Ministers passed a new chemicals directive that provided for the creation of a system for the registration, evaluation and authorisation of these substances, called Registration, Evaluation and Authorisation of Chemicals (REACH), which came into force in June 2007.

By ratifying the Kyoto Protocol that came into force on 16 February 2005, the EU also made a significant and ambitious commitment to reduce greenhouse gas emissions: an 8% reduction in emissions by 2008-2012 in the EU compared to 1990 emissions, with the introduction of flexible mechanisms to facilitate emission reductions such as joint implementation. Furthermore, the EU launched a European Climate Change Programme in 2005, according to which all governments were to set a cap on carbon dioxide emissions from their industries by 1 January of that year.

With Lisbon, then, the environment was confirmed as one of the areas of shared competence, with ‘conservation of the living resources of the sea within the framework of the common fisheries policy’ coming under exclusive competence.

Specifically, the main directives issued in recent years have been: EC Directive 101/2004 allowed the recognition of credits for the benefit of companies engaged in emission reduction projects in other countries by converting them into allowances to be used in the Community trading system; EP and Council Directive 35/2004 on environmental liability with regard to the prevention and remedying of environmental damage, adopted in April 2007; Directive 42/2001 establishes the Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA); Regulation 1829/2003 concerns genetically modified food and feed; in 2007 was issued: “An Energy Policy for Europe”, which called for a 20% reduction in harmful emissions by 2020, a 20% increase in the share of energy from renewable sources and a 20% increase in energy efficiency.

In recent years, the Commission has been particularly receptive to ideas formulated by a wide range of actors in the EU orbit, including national experts and political representatives, interest groups of various kinds or non-governmental organisations, especially environmental groups as well as multinational companies.

The permeability of the Commission to these interests facilitated the penetration of ideas and the improvement of the technical profile of these institutions. This was a precondition for the adoption of innovative policies that allowed the Commission to act as a political entrepreneur and to exploit opportunities that could favour its initiatives. It can be said, therefore, that the success of the Commission and of the European Union in general has not only consisted in the management of information and ideas from external sources, but also in the ability to pass them through the filter of integration and to attract actors operating within the EU to them.

Specifically, it should be remembered that although the Treaty of Nice made only minor changes in the part dedicated to environmental policy, in June 2001 the Gothenburg European Council approved a European Strategy for Sustainable Development that included the environmental dimension alongside the economic and social ones in the Lisbon Strategy, the ratifi-

cation of the Kyoto Protocol and the approval of the Lisbon Treaty in which the environment is confirmed as one of the areas of shared competence, represent a whole series of steps that led to the definition of the so-called European Green Deal (European Commission, 2019).

With regard to the European Green Deal, the aspect that has been highlighted so far has mainly concerned its essential aim, identified by the Commission as reconciling the economy with the planet by means of actions at European level inspired by the awareness of a collective responsibility, no longer optional and procrastinable.

However, another aspect, equally important, has remained rather in the shadows: what exactly is the relationship between the “new” policies that the Green Deal promotes and the guiding principles hitherto followed by the European Union and its member states in terms of environmental protection (European Commission, 2019).

The Green Deal could certainly be a suitable instrument for a truly “green turn” towards pressing environmental needs and, more generally, for a profound rethinking of the role and significance of the European integration process. This is also through a “return” to its founding values such as the well-being of citizens, sustainable development based on balanced economic growth and the strengthening of economic, social and territorial cohesion and solidarity between member states. In this way, therefore, the Green Deal could concretely represent an important opportunity for the Union to move from fragmented climate actions to a more articulated and coherent environmental policy framework. From this point of view, an element of non-negligible relevance seems to be represented by the fact that while in the past it was the other policies that were “greened”, with the new European growth strategy, the main policy now called upon to ‘drag’ all the others in implementation of the integration principle is precisely the environment policy.

Having said this, in the context of the European Union, however, the position currently developed regarding the reflection on the environment and sustainable development seems – only at times – to be moving towards full recognition of the intrinsic value of the environment as a third-generation human right. Very “measured” insofar as characterised by an attitude of excessive prudence on the part of the member states and the European institutions themselves, in fact, appear to be the developments in European law on the subject of the right to the environment.

And indeed, despite the leading role proudly assumed by the EU in this context with the new growth strategy, future scenarios on the success of the medium- and long-term objectives set by the Green Deal today appear highly uncertain due to a plurality of concomitant factors.

First of all, the internal divergences concretised in Poland’s refusal to adhere to the Green Deal targets and the consequent need for the EU to resort to the opting-out clause as an exception to the unanimity rule of the climate agreement in order to avoid a situation of unacceptable impasse, show *sine dubio* a weakened and uncohesive Union on fundamental choices for its future. Added to this is the diffidence expressed also by other Eastern European states, which, concerned about the economic and social fallout of the commitments required by the new climate neutrality strategy, could in the near future slow down the legislative process of the numerous proposals underlying the Green Deal, with the consequent risk of extending the implementation time or, worse, “downsizing” the ambitious objectives it envisages.

A second element of possible criticality is then represented by the adequacy of the Green Deal’s financial coverage, given that the success of the new growth strategy is closely linked to the economic commitment that can be agreed upon.

The main limitation seems to be the fact that at the moment the new growth strategy is essentially limited to tapping into existing funds, “promising” to mobilise more private investment over the years.

It is clear that the reluctance on the part of states to explicitly recognise the right to the environment as a fundamental right is based, on the one hand, on the fact that this could adversely affect the interests of certain economic sectors of a national nature and, on the other hand, on the fact that it would imply a further limitation of national sovereignty in favour of a supra-national order.

The main risk that could be incurred is, therefore, that of implementation, which continues to represent one of the challenges of the European Union’s environmental policy, given that it requires member states with different economies and environmental sensitivities to internalise huge environmental costs and implement far-reaching political and structural transformations, as well as that of continuous postponements for concrete definition, due to the absence of effective deterrent sanctions that could guarantee compliance. It is, in fact, quite implausible to think that the States that are less virtuous in achieving the objectives of the Green Deal can be effectively sanctioned for not having followed through on their commitments, given that the Commission’s control and impulse action ends up taking the form of the adoption of non-binding acts (recommendations).

In this way, the European Union would see an unprecedented opportunity to move from fragmented actions aimed at tackling climate change to a more coherent political and socio-economic framework that places full legal recognition of a genuine subjective right to the environment at the centre of its policies.

4. Conclusions

European environmental policy has proven to be a significant example of transnational cooperation and global leadership in addressing emerging environmental challenges. European directives have played a key role in shaping and harmonising the environmental regulations of individual member states, promoting common standards and shared goals for environmental protection and sustainability.

Through a process of progressive and iterative legislation, the European Union has adopted a series of directives and regulations covering a wide range of environmental issues, including air quality, waste management, biodiversity protection, climate change and the sustainable use of natural resources. These directives provide a clear and coherent regulatory framework for member states, while at the same time ensuring flexibility in adapting environmental policies to specific national needs.

The influence of European directives on the laws of individual states has been significant, as member states are required to transpose and implement the provisions of the directives into national law. This transposition process has led to a gradual convergence of environmental regulations at the European level, reducing disparities between the various member states and ensuring a minimum level of environmental protection throughout the European Union.

Furthermore, European directives have stimulated innovation and the development of clean and sustainable technologies, promoting investment in the environmental sector and encouraging the transition to a low-carbon economy. This has created economic and employment opportunities, contributing to the EU’s goals of economic growth and sustainable development.

European environmental policy and EU directives, therefore, have played a crucial role in promoting environmental protection and sustainability in Europe. Through a combination of harmonised regulations, transnational cooperation and innovation incentives, the EU has demonstrated a concrete commitment to mitigating climate change, protecting biodiversity and ensuring a sustainable future for future generations.

Conflicts of interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

About the author

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