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European Union external environmental policy: Engagement with third countries and international institutions

Abstract: This chapter examines the external dimension of European Union (EU) environmental policy by analyzing how the EU pursues environmental objectives toward third countries and international institutions. It explores four venues through which the EU conducts external environmental policy. First, via the enlargement venue the EU spreads its environmental regulatory framework toward candidate countries. Second, the unilateral venue consists of internal policies affecting third countries, either deliberately or unintentionally. Third, the bilateral venue contains sustainability clauses in trade agreements with third countries as well as dialogue mechanisms, capacity-building and diplomatic outreach. Fourth, at the multilateral level, the EU has co-shaped the global environmental governance architecture and presented itself as a leader in multilateral environmental negotiations. The chapter concludes by reflecting on the geopolitical relevance of the EU's external environmental policy and on the mainstreaming of environmental objectives in the EU's foreign policy.

Keywords: External climate policy; external environmental policy; extraterritorial effects; EU foreign policy; multilateral environmental agreements

1 Introduction

The European Union's (EU) environmental policies not only impact its Member States but also third countries and the wider world. As most environmental problems have a global dimension—or are even global problems in nature, such as climate change—it should not be a surprise that the EU aims to address environmental problems in the EU, but also beyond its borders. This chapter examines the external dimension of EU environmental policy, analyzing how the EU pursues environmental objectives toward third countries and international institutions. It argues that the EU conducts external environmental policy through four venues: enlargement, unilateral policies with an impact on third countries, bilateral relations and multilateral diplomacy. The chapter subsequently discusses the use of these four venues by the EU. It ends with a reflection on the mainstreaming of environmental objectives in the EU's foreign policy more broadly.

2 The enlargement venue

The first venue through which the EU has externalized its environmental policy toward a large part of the European continent is via its enlargement policy. Enlargement policy involves *ex ante* conditionality, which means that candidate countries—which are at that moment third countries for the EU and thus countries to which environmental policy can be externalized—must comply with certain conditions before they can join the EU (Schimmelfennig, 2008). One of these conditions is complying with the existing *acquis communautaire*, i.e., the EU legislation in force. This provides the EU with remarkable leverage over structural policy reforms in third countries in Europe (Keukeleire and Delreux, 2022). While this condition covers all EU policy fields, it is *a fortiori* applicable to environmental policies. Via the carrot of enlargement and the associated *ex ante* conditionality mechanism, the EU has managed to spread environmental standards in Europe.

The enlargement venue has particularly been important in the context of the 2004–2007 “Central and Eastern European” enlargement. The state of the environment in most of the countries joining the EU in that period was bad, particularly in areas such as water quality. Environmental standards were low or even nonexistent. The accession process has externalized the more stringent and ambitious standards to these countries. The enlargement venue is currently relevant for the EU’s external environmental policies toward the Western Balkans countries and more recently also toward countries such as Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova, which were recognized as candidate countries after the Russian invasion in Ukraine. Indeed, as the ‘enlargement fatigue’ of the 2010s seems to be over because of geopolitical considerations, the EU’s externalization of its environmental policy via the enlargement venue now affects these European-but-not-yet-EU countries.

3 The unilateral venue

Conducting external environmental policy through the unilateral venue refers to internal policies that have an extraterritorial effect on third countries. Two types of extraterritorial effect via unilateral environmental policies are distinguishable: those with a deliberate or primary effect on third countries and others with an unintentional or secondary external effect.

The first type of unilateral policies explicitly targets third countries. In the last decade, the EU is increasingly adopting such unilateral regulatory policies in the field of trade. These policies are unilateral in the sense that the EU adopts them without the formal involvement or approval of third countries. Yet, they are designed to have an external effect as they not only address trade-related practices of third countries but also aim to promote environmental objectives. In the context of the European Green Deal, a Regulation on Deforestation Free Products and a Directive on Corporate

Sustainability Due Diligence have been adopted. Aiming to achieve reductions of carbon emissions from the maritime sector, the EU has also adopted unilateral policies targeting regulatory addressees both in and beyond the EU, such as the Regulation on Monitoring, Reporting and Verification of CO₂ emissions and the Fuel EU Regulation. These legislative acts regulate emissions from ships ‘regardless of their flag’ and thus have extraterritorial effects (Abegón Novella, 2024).

Another example is the Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM) (Wettesstad, 2023; see Chapter 20). CBAM is a climate-related unilateral trade instrument that has been in force since 2023 but will only be fully operational from 2034 onwards. It requires that third country exporters pay a carbon price at the EU border that corresponds to what European producers have to pay for an allowance under the EU’s Emissions Trading System (ETS). It thereby aims to counter the risk of ‘carbon leakage’, i.e., the relocation of European industries to countries with less stringent climate policies, and to incentivize third countries to adopt more stringent climate policies in their jurisdiction. Although its scope might be extended in the future, CBAM currently only applies to imports from specific energy-intensive sectors.

A second type of internal, unilaterally adopted environmental policies is policies with unintentional external effects, or at least effects on third countries that are not the policy’s primary purpose. The underlying rationale here is that the norms and standards that are determined in EU legislation are conditions that products and services have to comply with before they can be sold on the European market. This applies to all producers, irrespective of whether they are European or not. Through the so-called ‘Brussels Effect’, the EU has “unilateral power to regulate global markets” (Bradford, 2020, p. xiv). The EU’s internally determined environmental standards become global standards because private corporations in third countries operating in the global market are incentivized to adhere to EU standards if they want to bring their products to the EU market. While the Brussels Effect has the potential to work in several policy fields, environmental policy is particularly suited for having such unintended external effects as it is a policy field in which the standards are determined in the jurisdiction where the products are sold. The Brussels Effect is observable for instance in the area of chemicals regulation, where many global producers of chemicals now comply with the EU’s stringent standards and where third countries such as South Korea, Japan and China have adopted domestic legislation that is inspired by the EU’s regulatory framework (Biedenkopf, 2018).

4 The bilateral venue

The third venue through which the externalization of EU environmental policy occurs is via bilateral relations between the EU and a third country. This can take different forms.

Since 2011, the EU systematically includes legally binding sustainability clauses in the bilateral free trade agreements with third countries. The free trade agreement

with South Korea was the first agreement of a new generation of trade agreements with a systematic inclusion of such provisions. These clauses, usually referred to as ‘trade and sustainable development’ (TSD) chapters, cover both environmental and labor standards. Regarding environmental standards, they refer to the importance of the ratification and implementation of multilateral environmental agreements (MEAs) and mainly include references to climate change and biodiversity, although forest management or the sustainable use of marine resources are also often mentioned. Since 2016, a clause that commits third countries to ratify and effectively implement the Paris Agreement on climate change is also systematically included. Overall, the content and the scope of the TSD chapters largely vary from one bilateral trade agreement to another (Lamy et al., 2021). The EU does not employ a single template or a unified approach in its different bilateral trade agreements. Before 2011, the scope of environmental standards was smaller and these provisions were not legally binding (Postnikov, 2018). The TSD chapters also establish bilateral cooperation arrangements and institutional structures for future dialogue on environmental matters between the EU and its trading partner.

Using the attractiveness of its market, the EU thus tries to externalize regulatory policies, such as environmental standards (Damro, 2012). While the rationale is that the EU may reduce trade preferences if third countries do not fulfil the requirements of the sustainability clauses, this form of *ex post* conditionality is mostly not very effective. Indeed, there is little evidence that the sustainability clauses have systematically strengthened environmental protection in third countries. Successful implementation of these provisions often depends on domestic factors in the third country in question, such as administrative capacities. Moreover, the lack of systematic effectiveness is partly due to the relative vagueness of the provisions and to the rather soft enforcement procedures, which are based upon consultation and dialogue rather than hard sanctioning (Postnikov, 2018). The EU thus has a ‘soft’ or ‘cooperative’ approach to the enforcement of TSD chapters (Morin and Rochette, 2017). This has led to TSD chapters being criticized for “serving primarily the purpose of ‘window dressing’, and not bringing about positive change through rule exportation” (Nessel and Orbie, 2022, p. 198). In practice, the chapters thus favor commercial interests over environmental protection.

Ex post conditionality is also the mechanism behind the promotion of environmental policies in the context of the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), which is the EU’s umbrella framework for strengthening its relations with the third countries in its eastern and southern neighborhood. Via the ‘more for more’ principle, the EU aims to achieve internal reforms in the ENP countries in exchange for market access, visa liberalization and financial support (Keukeleire and Delreux, 2022). This incentive of conditionality is complemented by the Commission publishing guides and recommendations to the ENP countries, encouraging them to converge their environmental policies with the EU’s (Biedenkopf and Groen, 2021). The EU has also established trans-governmental networks and frameworks for cooperation to provide capacity-building and share best practices (Shyrokykh, 2022). The result is a patchwork of different co-

operation patterns with several ENP countries, whereby these countries are incentivized and supported to engage in domestic policy reforms, but also in cooperating with EU bodies, such as the European Environment Agency. Although several requested internal reforms in the ENP countries deal with environmental policies, the environment is not among the most prioritized policy fields in the EU’s relations with ENP countries (Buzogány, 2018).

Bilateral relations do not only take the form of agreements and conditionality. External environmental policy is also conducted bilaterally through capacity-building. Via financial support, technical assistance, training and personnel exchanges, the EU aims to assist third countries in designing, formulating and implementing domestic environmental policies, which are often based upon existing EU environmental policies (Biedenkopf and Groen, 2021). Policy learning and emulation—and hence no longer conditionality—are the underlying mechanisms here (see Chapter 2).

A prime climate policy example that the EU is actively promoting to be implemented in third country jurisdictions is emissions trading based upon the EU’s own ETS design. The Commission has for instance organized training courses, study visits or workshops for experts and officials from third countries to support third countries in setting up national emission trading systems. The design of such policies and markets in, for example China and South Korea, is largely inspired by the EU example, demonstrating the relevance of such capacity-building efforts, which is less visible than the bilateral policies based on conditionality (Biedenkopf, Van Eynde and Walker, 2017). Likewise, in the run-up to the 2015 Paris climate conference, the EU helped developing countries to establish their national climate action plan (the so-called ‘Intended Nationally Determined Contribution’), which was to be submitted to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and which was an essential element of the design—and success—of the Paris Agreement (Torney and Cross, 2018).

Finally, bilateral relations take the form of diplomacy and outreach. EU Delegations in third countries often play an important role (Biedenkopf and Petri, 2019). The EU conducts bilateral diplomacy to try to influence the domestic environmental policies of third countries, but also to try to convince third countries about the EU’s positions and to try to gather intelligence about the positions of these countries in the context of multilateral environmental negotiations. Bilateral outreach has the potential to give the EU a better understanding of specific situations or constraints faced by third countries, which may be important during multilateral negotiations. Through the so-called ‘Green Diplomacy Network’ the EU and its Member States aim to coordinate their bilateral outreach and to integrate environmental concerns into the broader diplomatic relations with third countries (Torney and Cross, 2018; Bremberg and Michalski, 2024).

5 The multilateral venue

Global environmental governance, or conducting external environmental policy via the multilateral venue, has traditionally been an EU priority. Over recent decades, the EU has developed into a major player in global environmental governance on a wide range of environmental issues, including air, biodiversity, climate, chemicals, waste and ocean governance (Delreux, 2021). The EU and its Member States have been co-shapers of several multilateral environmental regimes and treaty frameworks (Kelemen and Vogel, 2010). The EU is a party to more than sixty MEAs and it has played a major role in the negotiation processes of these MEAs as well as in the subsequent follow-up negotiations (for instance, in the framework of Conferences of the Parties to the MEAs).

The EU presents itself as an ‘environmental leader’, and in the literature it is usually considered to be a leader in multilateral environmental negotiations (e.g., Zito, 2005). While several studies on the EU’s role in global environmental governance have applied different conceptualizations of leadership (Liefferink and Wurzel, 2017; Tobin, Torney and Biedenkopf, 2023), EU leadership is generally understood as the EU advocating strong environmentally friendly measures at the international level. Although the EU indeed usually promotes relatively stringent environmental measures, there are a few issues on which the EU’s positions are mostly less ambitious, such as technology transfer or new financial mechanisms, which are issues about which countries from the Global South are much more in a demanding position. Another qualification on the EU’s leadership is a relative assessment: compared to other major powers and negotiation blocs, the EU is indeed usually among those that defend the most ambitious environmental positions (Delreux and Ohler, 2021). However, that level of leadership and ambition is often insufficient to achieve the goals of many MEAs—such as limiting global warming to the 2 degrees of the Paris Agreement or halting biodiversity loss per the Convention on Biological Diversity—let alone to effectively improve the state of the environment. Moreover, the EU’s actual internal and external policies do not always fit with its leadership discourse and self-proclaimed objectives (Çelik, 2022).

The EU’s multilateral leadership has primarily been studied in the field of international climate negotiations (e.g., Wurzel and Connelly, 2011; Parker, Karlsson and Hjerpe, 2017; Oberthür and Dupont, 2021; Schunz, 2022). The EU managed to lead in the 1990s when the Kyoto Protocol, a diplomatic success for the EU, was negotiated. The EU aimed to continue this leading role in the 2000s, advocating for ambitious climate agreements. However, the 2009 Copenhagen conference was a major failure for the EU. Here, the EU’s leadership image was badly damaged, as the EU was sidelined from the endgame of the negotiations, and the outcome did not at all reflect the EU’s preferences. Lessons were learned from the Copenhagen experience, and the EU modified its strategy. While maintaining its preferences for an ambitious climate agreement, the EU invested more in coalition- and bridge-building (Bäckstrand and El-

gström, 2013). This more pragmatist, or even strategic, negotiation approach ultimately led to the EU’s success during the negotiations on the 2015 Paris Agreement (Oberthür and Groen, 2018).

The leadership approach that the EU has mostly applied is ‘leading by example’, which refers to setting the example of ambitious environmental policies by adopting them in the EU (i.e., internal environmental policies) and convincing third countries of their feasibility and the fact that such policies can go hand in hand with economic growth. Leading by example aims to highlight the international credibility of the EU when it promotes ambitious environmental policies at the international level. It might also provide inspiration to third countries to adopt similar policies at their domestic level. For instance, in the run-up to two important climate change conferences—Copenhagen in 2009 and Paris in 2015—the EU tightened its internal emission reduction targets and a set of binding policies to implement these targets. These internal targets also sent a signal to the EU’s external partners that the EU was serious about climate change ‘at home’ and trying to convince third countries of the EU’s ‘good example’.

The EU’s enduring support of multilateral solutions to global environmental problems is a clear example of its preference for multilateralism in its foreign policy more broadly. While this preference has clearly shaped the EU’s international identity and while it has contributed to the establishment and development of multilateral institutionalized structures (agreements, organizations), it is nowadays increasingly difficult for the EU to conduct external environmental policy via the multilateral venue. Multilateralism and the international rules-based order are increasingly contested. The increasing turbulence of the post-Paris Agreement period, with rising geopolitical and geo-economic tensions, populist governments in some of the world’s major powers, a weakened belief in global governance institutions, have made the international context increasingly challenging for the EU to exert environmental leadership (Tobin, Torney and Biedenkopf, 2023; Bremberg and Michalski, 2024). Moreover, the EU’s relative power in world politics and global governance is declining at the expense of emerging (or ‘emerged’) economies, which are now the major carbon emitters (Oberthür, 2016; Biedenkopf and Groen, 2021). This not only means that the high days of traditional multilateralism in environmental governance are probably over but also that the use of the venue that is closest to the EU’s DNA is increasingly challenging for the EU.

Nonetheless, while the multilateral venue as such has become less evident for conducting EU external environmental policy, it has also become more diverse. Environmental issues—and particularly climate change—have become an issue in a range of multilateral fora that do not exclusively or primarily focus on the environment or climate. Indeed, climate change is today no longer only discussed in the framework of the UNFCCC but also in the Group of Seven/Twenty (G7/20), the International Maritime Organization (IMO), the International Civil Aviation Organization and many other formal and informal institutional arrangements, treaty frameworks and plurilateral initiatives. The EU’s climate diplomacy has adapted to this changing international context, as it takes this ‘international regime complex’ increasingly into account by

addressing climate issues in various international fora (Earsom and Delreux, 2021). The EU has also taken diplomatic initiatives to mobilize multilateral and plurilateral fora to heighten third countries' climate ambitions, such as the Global Methane Pledge (Earsom and Delreux, 2023).

6 Mainstreaming environmental objectives in EU foreign policy

The environment, and particularly climate change, has increasingly become a foreign policy issue as environmental objectives, such as the EU's 2050 climate neutrality target, require the transition toward sustainable economic and societal structures and systemic changes that not only extend beyond the borders of the EU but also beyond the environmental policy field. This is why environmental concerns are called to become more integrated—or mainstreamed—into other policy fields, such as foreign policy (see Chapter 33).

Moreover, environmental policy integration is a legal principle of EU environmental law, seeking a mainstreaming of environmental objectives in all other EU policies, including foreign policies. However, this legal principle is far from being fully implemented in the EU (Dupont and Jordan, 2021). The environmental policy integration principle has recently gained more political traction in the context of the 2019 European Green Deal. Calling for a systemic approach to achieve climate neutrality by 2050, the Green Deal explicitly calls for incorporating environmental policies in other EU external policies, leading to potential 'Green Deal diplomacy' (Fajardo des Castillo, 2024). In that sense, the Green Deal has an important external dimension and has an impact on the EU as an international actor in several fields.

Particularly climate change has increasingly become a driver of different foreign policy facets (Tocci, 2023; Youngs and Lazard, 2023; also see Chapter 30). Climate change has major security components, such as conflicts over scarce natural resources, which may have destabilizing effects and entail serious military, humanitarian or migration consequences (see Chapter 22). Despite the growing awareness of the so-called climate-security nexus in the EU's discourse, the actual foreign policies do not always sufficiently take into account these concerns (Bremberg, Sonnsjö and Möbjörk, 2019). The transition toward climate neutrality also alters the EU's relations with countries that export fossil energy (such as Russia or the Gulf states) as well as with countries that the EU relies on for critical raw materials that are needed for green energy technologies (such as China). The diversification of energy sources and the EU's 'new' dependence on other exporting markets indeed raise questions on the energy and raw material security of the EU, and they have shaped the debate on the EU's strategic autonomy.

Nonetheless, environment and climate change have been taken more seriously in EU foreign policy in the last decade. Not only are environmental provisions systemat-

ically included in bilateral trade agreements (see above), but climate conditionality is also increasingly characterizing the EU's development cooperation policy (Adelle et al., 2018). However, despite the strong discourse on environmental conditionality in trade and development cooperation policy, pure commercial interests—or other conditions, such as migration-related conditions—often still dominate.

Although climate change has become a high-politics issue with important foreign policy relevance, the EU has a tendency to approach it in a rather legalistic and technocratic way. A strategic approach that considers the external dimension of environmental and climate policy as a genuine foreign policy issue is still largely lacking (Schunz, 2019). As climate change becomes a geopolitical issue, the EU increasingly faces broader strategic challenges in this field. The current geopolitical situation, with great power rivalries and contested multilateralism, poses one of the main challenges for the EU as an international actor in the field of environmental and climate policy: i.e., how to "enhance its capacity for strategic action" (Oberthür and Dupont, 2021, p. 1096).

However, some recent moves indicate that the EU's external environmental policy is "in the process of becoming to a larger extent informed by geopolitics and strategic thinking" (Schunz, 2019, p. 351). Climate change is occasionally debated in the Foreign Affairs Council and the EU has adopted a number of Climate Diplomacy Action Plans, specifying the priorities of the EU's climate diplomacy, outlining opportunities for diplomatic outreach in non-climate related international fora and highlighting the links between climate and other facets of foreign policy (Delreux and Earsom, 2024; Torney and Cross, 2018). Such efforts also potentially lead to the involvement of policymakers from the foreign policy community in external environmental policymaking. Not only Member States' foreign affairs ministers (via the Foreign Affairs Council) but also the European External Action Service are gradually becoming important climate actors (Earsom and Delreux, 2023).

7 Conclusion

The EU's set of stringent internal environmental policies not only provide the EU with an incentive to externalize these rules and objectives beyond its borders, but they also provide a solid basis for such external engagement. This chapter has discussed the four venues via which the EU's external environmental policies are conducted: enlargement, internal policies with extraterritorial effects, bilateral relations and multilateral diplomacy. While taken together these four venues have allowed the EU to conduct external policies and to profile itself as an important—and often 'leading'—international actor in this field, the EU is currently also facing challenges in each of these four venues. Each of these challenges puts limits on the EU's ability to continue to export its environmental policies and to shape environmental governance externally.

The geographic reach of the enlargement venue is by definition limited to third countries in Europe that are not yet an EU Member State but aspire to become one. Moreover, there has been an 'enlargement fatigue' after the Central and Eastern European enlargement wave of 2004–2007, although enlargement has made a comeback on the political agenda since the 2022 Russian invasion in Ukraine. The unilateral venue, where internal environmental policies have extraterritorial effects, has recently become more important in the externalization of EU environmental policies. Although such policies are regularly an effective tool to externalize environmental standards, this approach is increasingly contested by third countries, both legally and diplomatically. With regard to the bilateral venue, the *ex post* conditionality behind environmental provisions in bilateral trade agreements are not always effective because of the soft approach behind their enforcement and because commercial interests seem to dominate when trade-offs between trade and the environment have to be made. Finally, while the multilateral venue has historically been the most prominent venue of the EU's external environmental policy, this venue is clearly under pressure—and thereby also the EU's capacity to conduct external environmental policy via multilateral agreements and institutions. The EU's—and even the West's—decreasing power, increasing geopolitical competition and the contestation of the international rules-based order and multilateral institutions make the strategy of pursuing environmental objectives via the venue that for a long time has been the EU's preferred one far less evident than before. Taken together, these challenges indeed show the need for the EU to develop a more strategic approach toward addressing environmental issues at the international level, in which environmental concerns go hand in hand with broader geopolitical considerations.

The literature on the EU's external environmental policies has evolved in parallel with the development of these policies. Reflecting the historical importance of the multilateral venue in the EU's external environmental policies, there is a comprehensive literature on the EU's role in global environmental governance and multilateral environmental negotiations. The bilateral venue mainly started to attract scholarly attention beginning in the 2010s, when TSD chapters become a more prominent part of the bilateral trade agreements and when the EU started to invest more in bilateral environmental—and mainly climate—outreach. Likewise, the more recent unilateral turn in trade policy and the growth of internal policies with extraterritorial effects have triggered attention to the unilateral venue.

While the literature is well-developed and offers a broad picture of the EU's external environmental policies, three avenues for future research can be identified. Each avenue starts from a question that the current state of the art has insufficiently addressed. First, external climate change policy gets a lot of attention, often at the expense of other external environmental policy fields, such as water, chemicals or biodiversity. Given the specificities of climate change, such as its high level of politicization and its explicit link with security, findings on EU external climate policy do not necessarily travel to external policies on other environmental issues, which should not disappear from the research agenda.

Second, the current literature offers a rather comprehensive picture of what the EU's external environmental policies look like and how the EU approaches third countries and international institutions in that regard. However, the literature is more limited on the questions on the EU's actual impact at the external scene. Such a research agenda comes with methodological challenges, such as how to measure impact and influence empirically? Nevertheless, future research should not avoid examining the EU's influence both on third-country policies and on the state of the environment outside Europe.

Third, most literature applies—often implicitly—a rather positive image of the EU. The fact that the EU is often portrayed as an 'environmental leader' is illustrative of this. However, future research could benefit from questioning the assumption that "the EU is good for the environment" and from employing more critical perspectives to the study of this field. For instance, incorporating analyses on the EU's historical responsibilities or the negative impact that other external policies of the EU (such as external fisheries policies or investment policies) might have on the external promotion of environmental objectives might qualify—and analytically strengthen—our understanding of the EU as an international actor in the environmental field.

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