

Geopolitics for People and Planet

Why the European Green Deal is inspiring courage for the 2020s

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The pictures of the devastating bushfires in Australia have dominated the early days of 2020. Blazes spreading quickly and leaping over barriers; people fleeing to the beaches to wait for help under an orange sky, packed in tightly together with their pets: the kind of apocalyptic scenes that, for us, are more reminiscent of disasters in poorer countries. In Australia too, researchers have repeatedly been highlighting the link between rising temperatures, extreme drought and the growing risk of bushfires for 30 years now. As far as the Australian media are concerned, however, this is largely irrelevant, while the Australian government has so far been similarly reluctant to adopt this view. This is something of a tradition in Australia. The country recently joined Russia and Saudi Arabia in blocking progress at the climate change talks in Madrid in December so as not to jeopardise exports of its coal reserves or their use in generating domestic electricity.

The images from Australia highlight the impact that global heating of slightly over 1°C is already having on what is already a hot and dry continent: although Australia's ecosystems can withstand fires during dry summers, it cannot handle conflagrations on this scale. For us in Europe, these pictures come as a warning. The consequences and causes of climate change are being widely addressed in the media and discussed by politicians and civil society.

This is where the key difference between Europe and Australia lies: Europe knows that climate change exists and is keen to tackle it. With the European Green Deal, the EU now has a programme for reducing greenhouse gas emissions across the Union in a coordinated way and becoming climate-neutral by

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2050. The burdens that this imposes are to be shared in order to get Eastern European member states, in particular, on board as well. This approach by the Commission under Ursula von der Leyen may give courage to those people who took to the streets in 2019 demanding “climate action now!” – provided that it is implemented in earnest, the weaknesses in member states' climate and energy policy are identified, and those member states rectify those weaknesses. Thus Germany, for instance, must work quickly to remove the legal and economic obstacles to the continued expansion of renewable energy and be serious about transforming its transport system.

However, the European Green Deal also goes well beyond climate policy and aims to drive transformation processes forward in key areas of sustainable development. Amongst other things, it is geared towards reducing resource consumption by ensuring a clean circular economy, introducing a healthy, environmentally compatible agriculture and food system, and transforming mobility. All European policies and programmes will be obliged to align themselves with this Green Deal. Thus, the coordination of EU economic policy is to focus squarely on sustainability and human welfare and make the goals of the global 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development the key issue in shaping and implementing policy in the EU.

This is – after five years of hesitation and reflection - the first time that the EU has put sustainability and the climate at the heart of its activities. Adopting sustainability as the “brand essence” of the European government programme is also setting new benchmarks for the relevance and structure of the German Sustainable Development Strategy, which is to be refined in 2020.

With the Green Deal, the Commission wants to harness the opportunities for a better life in Europe, leverage benefits in economic competition and further strengthen global responsibility and international credibility. This will require the EU not only to act with clout and conviction internally but also to effect a coherent reshaping of its external relationships, both with other industrialised countries and with the developing countries and emerging economies. If von der Leyen's idea of a “geopolitical Commission” committed to sustainable policies is brought to life with courage and determination, it could bring about a sea change in international politics.

Development policy would have to declare sustainability and climate change its overarching priority and work consistently towards it in all areas. This could also prevent any further growth in coal-fired power stations, particularly in Africa. The overhaul of the EU's Africa strategy offers an opportunity to do so and one to which Germany's Presidency of the EU Council can make a decisive contribution this year.

All in all, the EU needs to deploy its full armoury of foreign policy and foreign trade tools to usher its partners across the world towards focusing their economic development on the chances being offered by the 21st century rather than clinging to the age of fossil fuels. Sustainability policy and climate policy would thus become key pillars of European-Australian co-operation relationships as well.