Official Journal
of the European Union

EN
C series

C/2024/1575

5.3.2024

Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on 'EU Climate Diplomacy'

(own-initiative opinion)

(C/2024/1575)

Rapporteur: **Stefano MALLIA**

Plenary Assembly decision	25.1.2023
Legal basis	Rule 52(2) of the Rules of Procedure
	Own-initiative opinion
Section responsible	External relations
Adopted in section	28.9.2023
Adopted at plenary	14.12.2023
Plenary session No	583
Outcome of vote	
(for/against/abstentions)	203/2/2

1. Conclusions and recommendations

1.1. The European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) reiterates that the current climate crisis is now of an existential nature and therefore requires immediate, real and bold action. There is no more room left for complacency. Employers, trade unions and civil society are clear on this and are all of the same view.

1.2. With regard to climate diplomacy, the EESC firmly believes that the way forward is by upgrading it to the status of flagship action of the EU's external affairs and foreign policy. At its core, climate diplomacy is preventive and multilevel diplomacy.

1.3. The EESC acknowledges the work that has been done so far and praises the role of the EU as a 'leadiator' in international climate negotiations combining leadership and mediation in shaping international climate action responses which encompass both the causes (mitigation) and the consequences (adaptation) of climate change. Nevertheless, to be trusted and strengthened in this role, the EU must not only establish ambitious targets for itself but also effectively achieve them.

1.4. For the EU to become a central driving force paving the way to climate neutrality, it needs a fresh, robust and credible strategic plan to adjust its climate diplomacy to the current geopolitical landscape and the UN Sustainable Development Goals. This strategy should set both short and long-term priorities and concrete activities for different EU actors in order to integrate climate action into all fields of external action, including security and defence, trade, investments, transport, migration, development cooperation, financial and technical assistance, culture and health. It should also enrich the climate diplomacy toolbox with new initiatives aiming not only to raise climate ambition, but also to share the EU's experience and best practices, as well as the cost and benefits of the climate and just transition.

1.5. The EESC firmly promotes a broader view of European climate diplomacy, which entails an array of different actions involving not only state but also non-state actors. European climate diplomacy must take into consideration and make the most out of the role of civil society, private stakeholders, businesses, and trade unions. By co-creating policies that will be readily acceptable and implementable, climate diplomacy will benefit from solutions found at other levels (such as regional and local), as well as from better implementation that can be shared externally. Civil society and the private sector have a significant role in climate diplomacy and, given the right support and legislative framework, they can export best practices to their foreign peers.

1.6. To enhance the above, the EESC recalls its proposals for establishing a Civil Society Climate Diplomacy Network and for strengthening the Domestic Advisory Groups (DAGs). The EESC believes that the EU should make climate change a strategic priority in diplomatic dialogues and initiatives occurring within different fora and with different partners.

1.7. On the road to COP 28, European climate diplomacy will have to succeed in two necessary endeavours. Firstly, based on the EU's significant contribution to establishing the Loss and Damage Fund in COP 27, the EU should continue to strive for its effective operation. Second, as in COP 28, the final step of the Paris Climate Agreement Global Stocktake will take place, and knowing that today's global commitments are not enough to achieve the Paris Agreement's goals, the EU should mobilise all its efforts and means to persuade other countries to update their 2030 targets, back them up with real action and make better use of all available solutions.

2. **Objective of this opinion**

2.1. The objective of this opinion is to provide the EESC's overall perspective on the issue of climate diplomacy. In a nutshell, climate diplomacy frames climate change as an element of external action policy and highlights the need to integrate climate objectives and address climate risks at the highest diplomatic level and across all policy areas.

2.2. The EESC wants to take an institutional position in order to provide the view of the EU's organised civil society on the crucial role played by climate diplomacy in implementing the Paris Climate Agreement and the EU's commitment to achieve climate neutrality by 2050.

3. **General comments**

3.1. Since the first EU report on climate change and international security (the 'Solana report' of 2008 ([1])), which explicitly identified climate change as a threat multiplier for security and stability across the globe, the EU has considered climate change as an external action policy topic and has developed the concept of climate diplomacy and a diplomatic toolbox to raise climate ambition worldwide. While the concept initially had a country-based connotation, the approach to climate diplomacy has been broadened to embrace the role of non-state actors and different networks between and within countries in raising climate ambition.

3.2. Therefore, the EU has played a significant role as a 'leadiator' ([2]), combining leadership and mediation in shaping international climate action responses which encompass both the causes (mitigation) and the consequences (adaptation) of climate change. The establishment of strategic alliances thanks to robust EU climate diplomacy contributed, inter alia, to the conclusion of the 2015 Paris Climate Agreement. Overall, the EU has made substantial progress in enhancing its position as a climate-conscious leader in international relations, thus strengthening its soft power and international influence ([3]). Positive developments in this direction have included the continuous updating of strategic documents on the issue, the appointment of an Hors Classe Adviser for Climate Diplomacy at the European External Action Service and the organisation of the annual climate diplomacy week with concerted activities by a variety of actors, including EU delegations in third countries. The EESC contributes to these efforts by facilitating the Domestic Advisory Group (DAGs) meetings that enhance trade partnerships with parties outside the EU based on green, just and sustainable economic growth, and strengthening the role of civil society in these processes.

3.3. The launch of the European Green Deal (EGD) in 2019 posed new challenges for EU climate diplomacy. The EGD is, on a global scale, the most ambitious plan so far for the implementation of the Paris Agreement, with a decarbonisation objective set for 2050 in parallel with a commitment to nature protection and restoration while ensuring a just transition where no one will be left behind. This strategy, aimed at transforming the EU's economy in a sustainable way, will inevitably affect geopolitics ([4]). With the adoption of the EU climate law and the Fit for 55 legislative package the aspirations of the EGD have become legally binding and operational. These revised EU internal policies setting more ambitious climate goals will change relationships with key energy supplier countries, and with countries producing raw materials for renewable energy sources and clean technologies; they will also have an impact on trade and investment patterns, mainly through the carbon border adjustment mechanism.

([1]) https://www.consilium.europa.eu/ueDocs/cms_Data/docs/pressdata/EN/reports/99387.pdf

([2]) S. Oberthür (2016) 'Where to go from Paris? The European Union in climate geopolitics', *Global Affairs* (https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/23340460.2016.1166332).

([3]) This progress is summarised in a study requested by the AFET committee and published in 2021: D. Tanzler, D. Ivleva, T. Hausotter, *EU climate change diplomacy in a post-COVID-19 world* (https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2021/653643/EXPO_STU(2021)653643_EN.pdf).

([4]) M. Leonard, J. Pisani-Ferry, J. Shapiro, S. Tagliapietra and G. Wolff (2021), 'The geopolitics of the European Green Deal', *Policy Contribution* 04/2021, Bruegel.

3.4. Even if Europe does become climate neutral by 2050, it will certainly not be enough to achieve the Paris Agreement goal to mitigate global warming, since the EU's emissions currently represent less than 10 % of global greenhouse gas emissions. Thus, the biggest challenge for the EU climate diplomacy is to persuade other countries to increase their climate ambitions, rapidly decarbonise their economies and develop concrete policies to achieve these ambitions while supporting the most vulnerable, and to build a constructive dynamic for a faster green and just transition by mobilising its partnership networks and enhancing its diplomatic capacity.

3.5. The importance of climate action has lost its momentum, at least temporarily, in view of the enormous energy security challenges currently being faced. While the EU had decided to jump-start its green transition after the COVID-19 pandemic, the war in Ukraine and the subsequent energy crisis have affected short-term priorities in some Member States, including delaying coal phase-out or even investing in new fossil fuel extracting activities in order to meet their energy needs. Such measures send confusing messages to third countries, which will justify delays in their own transition as they need more consistency in accelerating the green transition, emphasised by the plan to rapidly reduce dependence on Russian fossil fuels (REPowerEU).

3.6. The success of climate diplomacy greatly relies on internal climate policy decisions taken by the EU. To maintain credibility, the EU must not only establish ambitious targets but also effectively achieve them. It is crucial to acknowledge that even if current goals are met, the EU falls short of the necessary measures to remain within 1,5 °C. The EU must demonstrate a willingness to raise its ambitions accordingly, acknowledge its own shortcomings, and exhibit a genuine openness to learn from other nations while sharing best practices and experiences. Additionally, the coherence of EU climate policies across different sectors is essential to ensure a consistent and unified approach in tackling climate change challenges and to further enhance the EU's credibility as a global climate leader. By adopting this holistic approach, the EU can foster an environment of authentic collaboration, strengthening global efforts to combat climate change and effectively respond to its urgent challenges.

3.7. 2023 is a critical year for the international climate system. The third and final step in the Paris Climate Agreement Global Stocktake, a process for taking stock of the agreement's implementation, will occur at COP 28. This step is critical in assessing the world's collective progress towards achieving the purpose of the agreement and its long-term goals. However, the Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) submitted so far will not lead to net emissions reductions in line with the 1,5 °C target. The EU needs to mobilise its partnership network to build consensus for a complete fossil fuel phase-out commitment and to accelerate the global coal phase-out. To this end, the EU should showcase its own credibility and its commitment to the green transition by aligning its energy policy with the climate objectives. It can provide guidance for the next generation of NDCs.

3.8. Some major emitters have promoted ambitious climate plans that are not fully consistent with their international commitments. The US Inflation Reduction Act includes a comprehensive climate policy package, which will help the second largest CO_2 emitter behind China meet its 2030 climate target. It should, however, also be a cause for serious concern, since subsidies for climate-friendly technologies that include local-content requirements will have distorting effects and will hence force competitors, including notably the EU, to follow on the same path. The fight against climate change should not be allowed to degenerate into a subsidies war. Cooperation rather than confrontation should be sought. On the same track, fossil fuels subsidies must also be addressed.

4. **Specific comments**

The EU as a central driving force paving the way to climate neutrality

4.1. The EESC believes that the EU should make climate change a strategic priority in diplomatic dialogues and initiatives occurring within different fora and with different partners.

4.2. The EESC believes that the EU should raise (and reinstate) climate diplomacy as a flagship policy in its foreign relations and external affairs. As climate change is becoming an increasingly important factor in migration and other phenomena, it is becoming crystal clear that, in the very near future, many of the external challenges that the EU and its Member States will face will have their roots in climate imbalances. Thus, climate diplomacy should be elevated to the core of all diplomatic relations and become fully integrated with them, thus providing the EU with a powerful and meaningful tool that will allow it to continue to be in the world's diplomatic vanguard.

4.3. For the EU to become a central driving force paving the way to climate neutrality, it needs a fresh, robust and credible strategic plan to adjust its climate diplomacy to the current geopolitical landscape. This strategy should set both short and long-term priorities and concrete activities for different EU actors in order to integrate climate action into all fields of external action, including trade, investment, transport, migration, development cooperation, culture and health.

4.4. The EU can enrich the climate diplomacy toolbox with new initiatives aiming not only to raise climate ambition but also to share the EU's experience and address climate-related risks. The EU has a responsibility to share with other countries its expertise and knowledge in reducing carbon emissions, including the Emissions Trading System (ETS) and energy efficiency technologies, and recognise the critical role that renewables are playing in improving energy security.

A holistic approach to tackling climate change

4.5. The EESC promotes a holistic approach to tackling climate change. It views climate change not only as an environmental problem requiring technical or behavioural solutions, but also as a social problem where the solutions expand to include economic, political, cultural and institutional changes. Some of these solutions have the potential to transform society in ways that address multiple challenges, related to climate change and building resilience, including tackling poverty and inequality, food insecurity, water insecurity, biodiversity loss and health crises. At the same time, solutions to these challenges may contribute to climate mitigation and adaptation. For this reason, climate diplomacy should be an integral part of an overarching strategy, following the EU's commitments for achieving the UN Sustainable Development Goals.

Climate diplomacy and Trade agreements

4.6. The EU must recognise the significance of aligning trade policies with its ambitious climate objectives and climate diplomacy. This requires a comprehensive approach that ensures emissions are overall reduced rather than outsourced, as has occurred in the past. By promoting sustainability and incorporating climate considerations into trade agreements, the EU can foster a global framework that drives environmental protection and low-carbon practices. It is imperative that fair trade practices are embedded into such agreements and consequently reduce carbon leakage ([5]) and prevent the relocation of emissions-intensive industries to countries with less stringent environmental regulations. This is a critical element if the EU is to be a successful world leader in efforts on climate change.

The European Green Deal and its implications for EU climate diplomacy

4.7. The European Commission and the European External Action Service should map and analyse the geopolitical impacts and opportunities of the implementation of the EGD taking into account the current internal and external challenges and their impact on civil society. We need to explore the geopolitical repercussions of the EGD for business actors and step up dialogue regarding business opportunities and risks related to climate change.

4.8. The effective implementation of the EGD internally gives the EU credibility to influence and inspire others to draft similar green action plans. Therefore, the EU should enhance coordination among the EU actors — both Member States and institutions — so as to align their respective policies with the climate objectives and accelerate domestic action to implement the EGD. Better coordination should be established with Member States' ministries of foreign affairs, by encouraging them to align their foreign affairs with climate imperatives and the EGD's goals.

4.9. Green deal packages are much more encompassing than single policy elements. The EU can play an important role by providing technical assistance and building capacity to draft regional action plans (for example, a Mediterranean Green Deal in the context of the Euro-Mediterranean Cooperation, an ACP Green Deal in the context of the ACP-EU Partnership, or a Southeast European Green Deal in the context of the Southeast Europe Cooperation Process) and promote a just transition to climate neutrality by 2050.

([5]) Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on 'Compatibility of EU trade policy with the European Green Deal' (OJ C 429, 11.12.2020, p. 66).

4.10. Not all countries have the financial and technological capacities or the necessary capacity-building to follow the same path. The EU should spearhead and develop infrastructure, finance and governance pathways by mobilising public and private financial sources to assist partner and neighbouring countries to manage the impact of the EGD, foster their economic diversification, shape just transition plans and support adaptation and risk management projects so as to prevent and reduce climate fragility risks.

The European Blue Deal ([6])

4.11. The EESC believes that water crisis is a reality that needs to be addressed at both EU and international level. This crisis needs to be addressed with the same urgency and drive as the climate crisis and indeed both are explicitly linked. The EESC is calling for the setting up of an EU Blue Deal as a standalone strategic priority which in turn demands clear leadership at both European and international level.

4.12. The EESC is calling for the establishment of a European Water Centre which would have an international dimension and can aid nations, including those within the European neighbourhood and beyond, with water management. This centre should showcase instances of outstanding collaboration and offer policy recommendations to advance the objectives of the Blue Deal policy.

COP 28 and International Agreements

4.13. The EU has played a crucial role in the breakthrough decision to establish a Loss and Damage Fund at COP 27 in Sharm-el-Sheikh. A major challenge over the next year will be to operationalise the Fund and secure its financial capitalisation. To ensure the continued success of this project, a main goal of EU climate diplomacy must be the mobilisation of funds for Loss and Damage.

4.14. Tackling climate change is not only a matter of mitigating CO_2 emissions; it includes a variety of different actions regarding in particular adaptation, water management, biodiversity loss and pollution, which in many cases will be better approached synergistically in order to protect the most vulnerable. Nature protection and restoration actions within the EU and across the globe with EU support, in line with the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework and the implementation of the EU Biodiversity Strategy for 2030, can lead to both climate mitigation and adaptation benefits.

4.15. The UN Sustainable Development Goals for 2030, which the EESC has supported in previous opinions, recognise that all these goals are linked, and provide for a global road map covering not only the pressing climate issue but also other necessary goals for economic and social sustainability. In this context, the EU can be a valid partner to other nations by providing expertise, knowledge, best practices and technologies to achieve the SDGs and map a way forward.

Multilevel climate diplomacy

4.16. Climate diplomacy is multilevel. It refers not only to traditional state-to-state diplomacy, but also to the involvement of other diplomatic actors such as regions, cities, businesses, trade unions, academia, scientific experts. All these subnational actors have the potential to be agents of change, agents of climate transition. The EESC believes that civil society should play a vital role in co-creating ambitious and effective climate policies in Europe and around the world. The EU must set an example by enabling structured civil society participation, including women and young people, in climate policymaking, and encourage other States to follow a similarly participatory and inclusive approach in the design of their climate change responses.

4.17. International climate cooperation and coordination can also be achieved through various networks involving local authorities, social partners, and civil society. The EESC proposes operationalising the concept of climate diplomacy as a means to promote dialogue and strengthen cooperation on climate change issues at all levels between and within countries fully taking into account the implementation of international human rights. The EU has the potential to expand climate dialogues on how to promote climate neutrality and how just transition and green recovery goals are implemented in the EU.

([6]) EESC opinion on Umbrella Opinion 'A call for an EU Blue Deal' (OJ C, C/2024/878, 6.2.2024, ELI: http://data.europa.eu/eli/C/2024/878/oj).

4.18. Climate diplomacy should promote an intergenerational perspective that safeguards the needs and rights of future generations. Strategies and policies must be designed to ensure their well-being and a sustainable future. Additionally, it is crucial to recognise the vital role of youth in climate policymaking and the fresh perspectives, innovative ideas, and unwavering determination they bring to address the climate crisis. Empowering youth as agents of diplomacy and fostering their participation in international networks can generate impactful collaborations and propel transformative action towards a more sustainable world.

4.19. The EU should demonstrate leadership by communicating not only the threats and opportunities of climate change, but also the costs and benefits of climate action, and by creating an enabling environment for change. The EESC draws attention to the proposal to create a Civil Society Climate Diplomacy Network, supported in previous opinions by the EESC ([7]). It also suggests engaging stakeholders who influence the status of climate change on the political agenda, such as the media, industry and civil society in general. The power of collaborating across different disciplines and sectors will bring better results and push the conversation towards implementing solutions.

4.20. The EESC encourages the EU institutions to design and support initiatives for new participatory and more inclusive schemes that allow the co-design of climate-related solutions across borders.

Brussels, 14 December 2023.

The President
of the European Economic and Social Committee

Oliver RÖPKE

([7]) Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions: 'Fit for 55': delivering the EU's 2030 Climate Target on the way to climate neutrality (OJ C 275, 18.7.2022, p. 101).