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A key challenge for the European elections: Europe's commitment to global environmental protection and to sustainable development

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As the campaign for the European elections gets underway, the focus is on the make-up of the electoral lists, and on the status of the environment and the ecological transition in the minds of the electorate and in the priorities of programs. However, attention should also be given to the diplomatic action that Europe must adopt at the international level to address global environmental issues in all their aspects.

A virtuous Europe, internationally and internally...

According to the [Global Energy and CO2 Status Report](#) Global Energy and CO2 Status Report published by the International Energy Agency (IEA) last week, global primary energy consumption increased by 2.6% in 2018, i.e. double the average of the previous eight years, an increase that has essentially been met by the consumption of fossil fuels, especially gas. For its part, Europe only increased its consumption by 0.2%. Global CO2 emissions increased by a further 1.7% in 2018, 85% of which was attributable to China (+3.1%), India (+4.8%) and the United States (+3.1%), while at the same time they fell by 1.7% in Europe (-21.6% since 1990; stabilisation in the United States over the same period).

Thus, even if Europe is not as virtuous as we would like, it remains at the forefront of efforts being made in the framework of the world's major geopolitical entities to implement the Paris Agreement on climate change.

By doing so, Europe is fulfilling the role it defined for itself in the adoption of the [Lisbon Treaty](#) (2007), namely to “contribute to peace, security, the sustainable development of the Earth and to the strict observance of international law and the United Nations Charter” (Article 3) and to “help develop international measures to preserve and improve the quality of the environment and the sustainable management of global natural resources, in order to ensure sustainable development” (Article 21-2-f).

It is in this spirit that the European Union has supported the adoption of the major global environmental conventions and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, including the Sustainable Development Goals. It has also been active in a number of regional conventions relating to seas and oceans, rivers, mountains, migratory species and regional fisheries organisations. It has also made a substantial contribution to official development assistance (ODA): in 2017, ODA provided by the EU and its Member States amounted to €75.7 billion, compared to 31.3 billion for the United States; in the same year, the EU ODA/GNI ratio was 0.50%, compared to 0.21% for non-EU OECD/Development Assistance Committee (DAC) countries and 0.18% for the United States.

At the same time, domestically, a series of directives have been adopted, some of which are intended to transpose international agreements, which constitute an impressive corpus: the European environmental legislation. The directives not only relate to the various components of the environment—water, air, biodiversity and pollution factors such as chemicals—they also aim to promote in Europe, in accordance with the [Aarhus Convention](#) (1998), a participatory type of democracy regarding environmental decision-making, with the reinforcement of the rights of citizens and civil society to access information, to participate and to access justice. The extension of environmental assessments to plans and programmes and the dissemination of environmental information that it promotes, the creation of the European Environment Agency (EEA), which provides independent information, the ongoing adoption of the whistle-blower directive: all contribute to the emergence of a European ecological citizenship.

It is with some hesitancy, and well after the 1992 Rio Conference, that Europe has embarked on the start of a sustainable development strategy. It is within the areas of agricultural and fisheries policy, which are part of common policies, that it has tested new approaches, particularly with the creation of agri-environmental measures, the capping of surface area payments, and the support for struggling sectors such as livestock breeding and disadvantaged regions. Thus, the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) has started an approach towards sustainability, although this does not put it beyond criticism in the field because, according to the European Court of Auditors, the results in environmental terms are not yet tangible. In the context of the implementation of the Climate Convention in Europe, the EU has also been active in energy policy, mainly towards the advancement of renewable energies; while it has also shifted its regional policy towards sustainability.

... although results have been insufficient

The Barroso (2004-2014) and Juncker (2014-2019) commissions have been keen to examine this “acquis”, to reinforce firstly the **principle of subsidiarity** and the implementation of the acquis; and as a result Europe's capacity for initiative has declined. This evolution is not unusual during a period of public policy maturation that could not continue the pioneering spirit of 1980-1990. However, in the context of concern, both among scientists and in public opinion, due to the limited successes of the major conventions and the subsequent risks, and considering the “eco-sceptic” trends shown by many of its major partners, it is crucial that Europe, and first and foremost the Commission, elevates the issue of sustainable development to a high level, in Europe and throughout the world.

Indeed, within the EU itself, the assessments provided by the EEA in terms of environmental quality are unsatisfactory, in relation to the health of rivers and groundwater, waste production, the diffusion of chemicals, air pollution in large cities and biodiversity, along with the impact of infrastructure and urban sprawl in this highly anthropised continent. Environmental directives, unevenly applied, are not sufficient. For this reason, an approach to sustainability that includes economic, environmental and social aspects appears vital in Europe, as elsewhere. Progress can only be made by changing the rules of the internal market and trade policy, by reorienting sectoral policies for transport, energy, agriculture, control of chemical products and their usage, and by addressing touristic pressure in natural areas; which can only be done in the pursuit of equity.

A necessary integrated strategy for sustainable development

This is why Europe must build a real integrated strategy for sustainable development that will also include external action and development policy. It will not be an easy task due to the diversity of situations on the continent; but the challenge must be addressed, if only to encourage all parties to take ownership of the political and socio-economic issues of sustainable development.

At the international level, Europe, which is sometimes weakened by its internal divisions, has become more discreet. Given the lack of convincing results in terms of climate, biodiversity and ocean pollution, a feeling of despondency may have emerged. Moreover, there is a tendency towards self-criticism, a doubt about the relevance of what has forged Europe's reputation during the years between 1990-2000, namely its commitment to international law, multilateralism and the principles of the United Nations, approaches now described as irenic and expressing an overconfident idealism; some consider that Europe did not anticipate the dangers or rival ambitions, and has shown naivety. In this context, some are questioning an overly pronounced multilateral commitment, including in terms of protecting the planet; Europe is therefore being urged to harden, close itself, and to re-examine its international priorities, including by increasing its military spending.

We do believe, however, that, in accordance with the Lisbon Treaty, Europe must take up the initiative at the international level in terms of sustainable development, while avoiding any kind of naive optimism, particularly regarding security and trade. It is not conceivable that Europe, in the long term, would work to meet its climate commitments while others would not care. Europe should therefore take up the idea supported by France that trade agreements should be compatible with the Paris Agreement and that safeguarding measures can be adopted towards countries that do not respect international environmental or social agreements. On the domestic front, a new European strategy for sustainable development should be prepared covering the internal market and trade policy issues, as well as the different sectors. The Commission should reorganise itself to foster this issue. The development of social policies and the progress of fiscal harmonisation would be components of this policy.

At the international level, the revitalisation of European policy should relate to:

- the climate sector, with the increase of commitments and the adoption of an ambitious target of a reduction of around 50 to 60% in GHG emissions by 2030, and reorienting those of sectoral policies that could contribute to this objective;
- external policy: the Union should also carry out actions consistent with its climate commitments; this is particularly the case at the IMO (maritime transport) and the ICAO (air transport), where it must advocate for the reduction of GHG emissions;
- in the biodiversity field: successive assessments emphasising accelerating erosion; the failure of the [Aichi Strategy](#) has already been announced. Enabling the Convention on Biological Diversity to become efficient is an issue that the new Commission, the European Council and the Parliament must seize in the run-up to COP 15 in China in 2020;
- chemical substances and waste, and aiming to boost the relevant regulatory international conventions. One option could be to use the Basel Convention framework to tackle waste in the marine environment; another is the better regulation of production, circulation and the use of chemicals under the framework of the Rotterdam and Stockholm conventions;^{[1](#)}
- the dynamisation of the many regional frameworks where the EU is present as a party or as an observer;
- international governance, with the dissemination of the Aarhus principles, the development of a human rights/environmental law interface, the protection of civil society rights that are under threat in many countries, environmental justice, and the development of international legislation on environmental responsibility;
- the implementation of the 2030 Agenda, particularly in terms of financing for development, but also to serve as a guide for its external action as a whole, as well as the fulfilment of the financial commitments made in the framework of the Climate Convention.

¹ For the Basel, Rotterdam and Stockholm conventions, see <http://www.pic.int/Home/tabid/855/language/en-US/Default.aspx>