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EU climate governance: lessons from the COP21 RIPPLES project

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Today, the first ever European Climate Law is presented as the first piece of the new Commission's Green Deal. It is a piece of critical importance that will propose to set in stone an EU climate neutrality target and to reinforce the energy and climate governance mechanisms within the EU. What would be the priorities to reinforce the robustness of these mechanisms? This blogpost highlights relevant related findings drawing from a major EU research project, the COP21 RIPPLES Project (2017-2020).

The importance of sectoral transformations and international cooperation

The development of the Climate Law was announced with the publication of the European Green Deal in December 2019 as the mechanism to enshrine the 2050 climate neutrality objective in legislation, and to ensure that all EU policies contribute to the climate neutrality objective and that all sectors play their part.1 To deliver the neutrality goal, the European Commission (EC) needs to undertake the analysis of the necessary concrete changes along with their socio-economic implications, with a focus on overcoming the technological, financial, policy, cultural and governance-related barriers. The COP21 RIPPLES project was designed to contribute to this analysis with a multidisciplinary approach that combines research at multiple levels, ranging from EU Member States (MS), the EU level itself, to major emitters and the global scale.

COP21 RIPPLES research shows that gaps and opportunities to bridge the actual ambition gap exist for different dimensions—economic and social, governance—which tend to be overlooked when aiming to reduce emissions. If we look at current Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs), as the main planning instrument to bridge the ambition gap at the international level as per the Paris Agreement, their focus is usually on economy-wide emissions, with few or no details either on sectoral transformations or on the potential of international cooperation to strengthen domestic ambition. Only comprehensive approaches that address both of these aspects, taking into account their interrelationships, are likely to keep the 1.5°C objective within reach. Rather than overcomplicating things, more substantive domestic plans, embedded in the realities of the different geographies and for each of the sectors, while making the best of international cooperation potential, will facilitate the design of possible new avenues to make a more rapid and effective transition (from an environmental perspective) possible.

The ‘adequacy framework’ and its implications on climate policy governance

One of COP21 RIPPLES’ recent policy brief specifically suggests countries adopt an ‘adequacy framework’ to track progress of their current NDC, identify economic, social and governance barriers to implementation and find avenues for enhancing ambition, including through identifying opportunities for international cooperation. Adequacy assessments should play a prominent role at two levels: first with sectoral approaches, which are more likely to deliver ambition and can make transformation happen on the ground; second, with multi-level approaches that are needed to coordinate across levels of governance and action.

At the European level, applying this framework means suggesting some priority changes to the governance framework:

First, at the interface of EU-Member States, it means ensuring that existing tools of the Governance Regulation (the integrated National Climate and Energy Plans (NECPs) for 2030 and the national long-term strategies (LTSs) for 2050) produce the necessary level of detail to reveal how they intend to fulfil their part of the EU climate mitigation effort. Both the NECPs and LTSs should give sufficient details on sectoral transformations, integrate socio-economic realities and identify areas of cooperation both with neighbouring countries, within the EU and at the international level. This is important as, to date, much decarbonisation has been achieved by policy instruments that operate in a largely invisible way. However, when their effects (for example in raising consumer prices) become apparent, they may lose legitimacy. To reduce this risk, policymakers seeking to increase the rate of decarbonisation must do so more explicitly. This requires a country-driven approach that allows capturing the specificities of different country circumstances and recompose a EU perspective as a composite. As a result, national and EU policies can be developed in a way that more effectively engages affected communities, and produces economic and societal transformations with clearly identifiable benefits. Adopting this approach may require increasing capacities at MS level and expanding engagement activities with all parts of society. To this aim, COP21 RIPPLES proposes to invite all MS to consider the establishment of independent advisory bodies and ensure existing EU institutions support their collaborations at EU level. In return to increased capacity, MS will be equipped to inform coherent EU-level investments, cooperation strategies and solidarity mechanisms to deliver the neutrality target. The EU capacity to assess national measures will also need to be strengthened. Parts of these points seem to be addressed by the Commission, as a first leaked draft of the law reveals that the Commission plans to “regularly assess relevant national measures, and issue recommendations” when a MS national measures may be inconsistent, and mandates MS to convene “multilevel climate and energy dialogue” involving local authorities, businesses, and investors. While national advisory bodies are not specifically mentioned, the Commission will consult "experts designated by each Member State" when suggesting five-yearly revisions to meet the climate neutrality target.

Second, COP21 RIPPLES also provides governance-related recommendations regarding how the international climate regime could be strengthened and how the EU could contribute through its domestic and international climate policy strategy. It finds that the EU needs to take leadership: in framing NDCs in a way that will invite others to reveal these sectoral dimensions, their multidimensional framing, and the policy assumptions (beyond domestic level); and in promoting the development of LTSs that empower domestic thinking and policy exploration within the global long-term Paris vision of neutrality. The Paris Agreement’s Global Stocktake is a critical opportunity to assess adequacy, and therefore establish a political discussion beyond emissions, including sectoral assessments. Sectoral approaches are a pre-requisite for strengthening international governance as it facilitates the understanding of the drivers of transformation and the appraisal of policy options and open the door for discussions framed in terms of economic and social progress. Along these lines, the project finds that a transnational steel sector decarbonization club can advance domestic & global decarbonisation of this sector, and in fact, could be an ideal testbed to pilot the introduction of border carbon adjustments as discussed within the European Green Deal. It could also provide an enabling policy environment that allows for conventional CO2-emitting primary steel production to be phased out altogether by 2050 in Europe, and soon thereafter in emerging countries.

Finally, COP21 RIPPLES finds that international governance has potential to positively influence domestic climate policy processes. The guidance and signal function of international regime had significant influence on creating momentum to initiate policy processes and implementation in spite of the constraints of domestic political economy competition. This power of international norms should not be underestimated and can potentially make a big difference in high emissions intensive economies, including India and China. This further substantiates the importance of the COP26 deadline and the responsibility that EU has if it wants to strengthen this signal function. The recent Macron-Conte call to publish the impact assessment by June and to announce the new NDC by the pre-COP in Milano is a positive step into this direction.

1 European Commission (2019). Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the European Council, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions

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