

POLICY MEMO

## COVID-19 and the environmental crisis: major challenges for the European Union

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*Lead by Frédéric Mérand, director of the Montreal Centre for International Studies (CERIUM),  
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## Executive Summary

This policy memo deals with two vital crises that the world is currently facing: the COVID-19 pandemic and environmental challenges. Both crises are global in nature and require strong and comprehensive responses. While the pandemic has hit the world unprepared and with immediate effects, the environmental and climate crises seem less imminent and have rather medium- or long-term repercussions.

The COVID-19 pandemic carries the risk of further obstructing environmental initiatives for two main reasons. First, the postponement of international environmental negotiations could lead to a loss of momentum for enhanced commitments to environmental protection and climate change mitigation by the EU and other parties. Second, the current developments shift priorities from ambitious environmental programmes to concerns about economic recovery. Even if options for a sustainable growth strategy are discussed to some extent, COVID-19 has the potential to set back the international commitment to environmental protection and to climate change mitigation by several years.

We prescribe four policy recommendations that seek to counteract these challenges: (1) The EU should contribute to keeping environmental protection and climate change mitigation on the top of the world's agenda. (2) The EU should demonstrate how sustainable policies result in economic growth and the creation of jobs. (3) The EU should actively serve as a role model for other parties and diffuse its environmentally friendly policies globally. (4) EU leaders should find flexible procedural solutions to guarantee a strong European voice at the upcoming international meetings.

## The Policy Memo

### *Background*

Protecting the environment and averting the climate crisis in a timely manner have been prominent issues in politics, the media and civil society over the past ten years. The Paris Agreement, adopted under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) in 2015, created a particular moment of euphoria. Therein, 198 parties agreed to ambitious international commitments to fight climate change. The European Union (EU), a strong proponent of multilateral solutions, was one of the most ambitious leaders in these negotiations. Pushed by its citizens, especially the 'Fridays for Future' movement, the EU put environmental protection at the top of its agenda for 2020. One major output has been the European Green Deal, a economic growth strategy that the European Commission presented in December 2019. This roadmap seeks to stimulate the EU's economy, while making it more sustainable.

At the international level, both the 26<sup>th</sup> UNFCCC conference of the parties (COP26), as well as the COP of the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) were set to take place by the end of this year. However, due to COVID-19, both meetings had to be postponed to 2021. The CBD COP was due to adopt a new post-2020 framework, a necessary step to continue protecting the world's biodiversity. COP26 was likewise set to be a major milestone, as parties were supposed to bring forward their updated climate pledges to bridge the ambition gap between governments' existing commitments and the long-term goal of the Paris Agreement. The UNFCCC secretariat recently announced that COP26 would be postponed by one year, and only happen in November 2021. Thereby, the normally yearly COP will skip a year, losing critical time to fight climate change.



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Therefore, COVID-19 is thwarting the plans both of the global community and the EU itself. Priorities have shifted as conferences have been postponed, preparatory meetings are held virtually and the day-to-day management of the global pandemic is nowadays the most important issue. Thereby, environmental protection is not much more than a marginal note referred to when decision-makers speak about economic recovery. While the EU reaffirms its continued commitment to key initiatives of the Green Deal, the impact of postponing key international conferences is highly worrying. Both the European Climate Pact and the EU Biodiversity Strategy for 2030, anticipated in preparation for the UNFCCC COP and the CBD COP respectively, are now considered to be 'deferrable' and might be adopted a year later than originally planned. This development does not come as a surprise as the EU has previously shown that it tends to lower its internal ambitions if international environmental conferences fail to produce concrete outcomes. With the delay of major conferences, the EU thus risks to prioritise other, especially economic concerns over climate and biodiversity.

In the following, we discuss concrete challenges that the COVID-19 crisis poses for the EU's global environmental ambitions. Thereby, we aim at answering the following question: How does the COVID-19 pandemic challenge the EU's international environmental ambition? We conclude with four recommendations that seek to counteract losing track of biodiversity conservation and climate change mitigation.

### Key findings

The COVID-19 crisis has the potential to set back the international commitment to environmental protection and to climate change mitigation by several years. We argue that the challenges caused by the global pandemic result from a twofold problem. First, postponing international meetings and multilateral negotiations can cause an important loss of momentum for enhanced commitments to environmental protection and climate change mitigation by the EU and other parties. Second, the current developments have led to priorities shifting from an ambitious environmental programme to concerns about economic recovery.

From a European perspective, holding international conferences has been important for both internal and international reasons. On the one hand, the EU is less likely to adopt internal ambitious policies, if no international negotiations are happening. Usually, the European Union and its institutions have adopted their ambitious targets and negotiation positions in the immediate

run-up to international meetings. Upcoming negotiations have pushed the EU and its member states to decide on a clear and determined position. In addition, previous developments have shown that the EU tends to adopt internal policies with high ambitions if the global network advances as well. The EU has not yet updated its national determined contribution (NDC), outlining how it will contribute to implementing the Paris Agreement. Without convening COP26 in 2020, the important deadline might be pushed back and there are great doubts as to whether the EU will bring forward new reinforced commitments soon. The postponement of international meetings might thus reduce the EU's incentives to adopt new environmental and climate protection objectives and to move forward with concrete legislative projects.

On the other hand, with the postponement of conferences, the EU loses the possibility to influence other parties to adopt ambitious policies. The European Union has traditionally assumed a leadership role in international environmental and climate change talks. In previous multilateral negotiations, the EU and its member states have proven their capability to adopt a coherent, unified and ambitious negotiation position. They managed to appear as a persuasive negotiator and to largely contribute to the final outcome. Multilateral meetings have served as an essential venue at which the EU has urged other parties to engage in international commitments. Without these face-to-face negotiations, the EU will have a much harder time mobilising allies and pursuing hesitant parties.

Postponing the biodiversity COP to 2021 also represents a relevant challenge to the EU's internal work mode. As environmental policies are shared competences, the Council presidency is usually strongly involved in the preparatory work in the run-up to international meetings. Germany, which will hold the presidency from July to December 2020, anticipated the upcoming COPs and attended previous preparatory meetings with larger delegations than usual. Thereby, German delegates were preparing to negotiate for the EU in 2020 and Germany prepared its 6-month agenda to encompass the two major conferences. The CBD COP, only happening every two years, was not supposed to be held in 2021. With no date set yet, the COP might fall under either the Portuguese (presidency from January to June 2021) or Slovenian (presidency from July to December 2021) presidency. As the post-2020 biodiversity framework should have been adopted in 2020, neither has put biodiversity as a priority for its agenda. The rotating presidency of the Council generally poses challenges to the EU in international negotiations, but COVID-19 further complicates the EU's internal management.

In addition to the postponement of international conferences, the global reshuffling of priorities represents another part of the problem caused by the pandemic: The international community witnesses a global economic decline paired with increasing rates of unemployment and vital gaps in national budgets. Once the spread of the virus is under control, economic recovery will be the number one priority on the national and international agendas. Within the EU, issues related to the Union's fiscal capacity, a flexible use of the European Stability Mechanism, the creation of a recovery fund as well as the introduction of so-called Eurobonds or corona-bonds have been predominant elements in the current debate. At first glance, the debate about environmental protection and the fight against climate change seems to have faded into the background. This prevalence of economic concerns can, in turn, adversely affect the EU's own environmental ambitions and, consequently, its leadership role. In the context of a global economic crisis, the temptation to discontinue ambitious projects, including the Green Deal, might be irresistible. Delaying major conferences further contributes to climate change and biodiversity receiving less attention and having less priority.

Whereas some voices believe that environmental and climate policies will obstruct economic recovery, advocates of progressive ecological and climate policies argue that they are an effective instrument to stimulate economic growth. In support of this strategy, environmental ministers from 17 member states signed an opinion piece, demanding to put the Green Deal at the centre of the EU's recovery strategy:

“The Green Deal constitutes a new growth strategy for the EU, which is able to deliver on the twin benefits of stimulating economies and creating jobs while accelerating the green transition in a cost efficient way [and] provides us with a roadmap to make the right choices in responding to the economic crisis while transforming Europe into a sustainable and climate neutral economy.”<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Climate change news: European Green Deal must be central to a resilient recovery after Covid-19, 9 April 2020, <https://www.climatechangenews.com/2020/04/09/european-green-deal-must-central-resilient-recovery-covid-19/> (last access: 20 May 2020).

### *Policy Recommendations*

The following four policy recommendations can contribute to reducing and counteracting the risks discussed above.

- ▶ First, the EU needs to continue to prioritise climate and biodiversity considerations and to contribute to keeping these concerns on top of the world's agenda. Fighting the pandemic in the short-run is a priority, but long-term challenges must not be forgotten. Climate change and biodiversity loss are important environmental challenges, which can only be solved by considering long-term impacts and taking action now. Even if emissions are currently decreasing due to lockdowns worldwide, they are likely to return to pre-pandemic levels soon. In this respect, the EU should put forward concrete green policies and push for robust sustainable commitments at the international level.
- ▶ Second, the EU should put the European Green Deal at the centre of its recovery strategy. Thereby, the EU has a unique opportunity to demonstrate that economic growth and sustainability are not contradictory but can go hand in hand. This applies especially to areas that require vast investments. In the context of an economic crisis and in times of investment gaps, the EU should focus on the promotion of renewable energies and e-mobility, the expansion of charging points and the development of a genuinely European railway system as well as research funding in areas related to sustainable development and new technologies. Following the environmental ministers' beforementioned statement, this would not only contribute to making the European economic system more sustainable but also effectively give a push to the economy and create new jobs.
- ▶ Third, by pursuing ambitious environmental and climate policies as part of the European economic recovery programme, the EU should actively serve as a role model for third parties.

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It should be keen on promoting a sustainable economic model at the international level. Such a role model function also includes the intensification of the export of concrete EU policies, such as the EU Emission Trading Scheme. Through its comprehensive multilateral and bilateral partnerships and its energy dialogues inter alia, the EU could have an impact that goes beyond multilateral agreements based on the lowest common denominator. Whereas climate and biodiversity COPs allow the international community to adopt common standards, the EU needs to find allies that are willing to take fighting the environmental crisis a step forward. Only through highly ambitious actors, the environmental crisis can be solved. COVID-19 provides a unique opportunity to radically adapt environmental and climate policies worldwide.

- ▶ Fourth, in order to ensure a strong European voice and an effective negotiation position of the EU in the biodiversity conference to be held in 2021, the German, Portuguese and Slovenian governments should collaborate intensely. These challenging times require pragmatic and flexible approaches. Since the German delegation has been preparing to negotiate the post-2020 biodiversity strategy for the EU in the light of its upcoming Council presidency, it is important not to lose the resources and expertise already invested. By allowing the German negotiators a strong participation in the COP, even if they take place during the presidency of another EU member state, the chances of successful international negotiations, with highly ambitious outcomes, can be increased.

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