A RAIA profile on: **The President of the European Commission**

Ursula von der Leyen

First part of a six-part series on climate leaders ahead of the 2026 United Nations Climate Change Conference

IE School of Politics, Economics & Global Affairs, IE School of Science & Technology and RAIA NOW's Summer Research Programme 2026

Authors: Daria Holtea, Bianca Albu, and Ariadna Alvarenga
Editor: Dario Hasenstab
Project Lead: Dario Hasenstab

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Sponsorship: This report is a collaboration between the IE School of Politics, Economics and Global Affairs, the IE School of Science and Technology and RAIA NOW gUG. The funding for this project solely comes from IE University.

List of Abbreviations

EU - European Union

CDU - Christian Democratic Union

DANA - Depresión Aislada en Niveles Altos

CO_2 - Carbon Dioxide

EEA - European Environment Agency

EPP - European People's Party

S&D - Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats

GHG - Greenhouse Gases

ETS - Emissions Trading System

ETS2 - Emissions Trading System 2

CAP - Common Agricultural Policy

EMFAF - European Maritime, Fisheries and Aquaculture Fund

GDP - Gross Domestic Product

NECP - National Energy and Climate Plans

PNACC - National Climate Change Adaptation Plan

Ursula von der Leyen

Introduction

Ursula von der Leyen is one of the best-known names in European politics. She is a 68-year-old German politician who has served as the President of the European Commission since 1 December 2019.[1] Von der Leyen is now in her second term, which began in 2024.[2] Earlier in her career, she served at the state-level in Germany as Lower Saxony's Minister for Social Affairs, Women, Family Affairs and Health (2003-2005), Minister for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth in Germany's federal government (2005-2009), Federal Minister for Labour and Social Affairs (2009-2013), and then as Germany's first female Federal Minister of Defence (2013-2019).[3] These roles equipped her with a broad understanding of social policy, labour rights and national security. Yet her most significant contribution to politics came in the form of international climate policy, just ten days after taking office, when she launched the European Green Deal on 11 December 2019.[4] The Green Deal is a growth strategy that aims to make Europe the first climate-neutral continent by 2050, through 50 actions focusing on emissions, biodiversity, agriculture, and finance.[5]

To understand Ursula von der Leyen's climate leadership it is necessary to look at her background. Born on 8 October 1958 in Ixelles, Brussels, Belgium, as Ursula Gertrud Albrecht, she is the third of seven children.[6] Her father, Ernst Albrecht, was a German politician and economist.[7] In 1958 he moved to Brussels as one of the first senior civil servants at the new European Commission, serving as Chef de Cabinet to Hans von der Groeben and later as the Director General for Competition (1967-1970) and Minister President of Lower Saxony (1976-1990).[8] Her mother, Heidi Adele Albrecht, held a doctorate in German language and literature

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[1] Nicki Peter Petrikowski, 'Ursula von Der Leyen | Facts & Biography | Britannica', Encyclopædia Britannica (2026) <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Ursula-von-der-Leyen > accessed 9 June 2026.
[2] Christine Bach, 'Ursula von Der Leyen' (Konrad Adenauer Stiftung) <https://www.kas.de/en/web/geschichte-der-cdu/significant-figures/biogram-detail/-/content/ursula-von-der-leyen-1 > accessed 9 June 2026.
[3] Ibid
[4] 'Press Remarks by President von Der Leyen on the Occasion of the Adoption of the European Green Deal Communication' (2019) <https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/api/files/document/print/fr/speech_19_6749/SPEECH_19_6749_EN.pdf > accessed 9 June 2026.
[5] Ibid
[6] Bach, Konrad Adenauer Stiftung <https://www.kas.de/en/web/geschichte-der-cdu/significant-figures/biogram-detail/-/content/ursula-von-der-leyen-1 > accessed 9 June 2026
[7] Andreas Grau, 'Ernst Albrecht' (Geschichte der CDU) <https://www.kas.de/de/web/geschichte-der-cdu/personen/biogramm-detail/-/content/ernst-albrecht > accessed 9 June 2026.
[8] Ibid

but devoted herself to family life.[9] Ursula von der Leyen attended the European School of Brussels (1964-1971), where she learned several foreign languages.[10] This upbringing gave von der Leyen a unique perspective, as she put it, "That is why I was born in Brussels as a European, finding out only later that I am German with roots in Lower Saxony. And that is why there is only one option for me: to unite and strengthen Europe."[11]

Ernst Albrecht's entry into state-level politics brought the family back to Germany in 1971, near Hannover.[12] In 1976 von der Leyen graduated from high school in Lehrte. Afterwards, she pursued a degree in economics at the Universities of Göttingen and Münster, and at the London School of Economics (1977-1980), but she chose not to graduate.[13] Instead she changed her career path and began studying medicine at Hannover Medical School (1980-1987) because she wanted "more to do with people".[14] In 1991 she obtained her Doctorate of Medicine and later earned a Master of Public Health in 2001.[15]

The moment when her father was defeated by Gerhard Schröder, who later served as German Chancellor from 1998 to 2005, in the 1990 Lower Saxony state election, marked the starting point of Ursula von der Leyen's political career.[16] In response, von der Leyen joined the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) the same day, beginning her political journey that led her to the presidency of the European Commission and her climate leadership.[17] A personal moment of family redemption came in 2005 when Ursula von der Leyen joined Angela Merkel's first cabinet; Merkel had replaced Schröder in 2005.

This report argues that Ursula von der Leyen is a climate leader driven by economic transformation. This is highlighted by her proposal of the European Green Deal, which brought climate policy into every sector of the European economy and launched a global race for green technology and investment,

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[9] Bach, Konrad Adenauer Stiftung <https://www.kas.de/en/web/geschichte-der-cdu/significant-figures/biogram-detail/-/content/ursula-von-der-leyen-1 > accessed 9 June 2026

[10] Ibid

[11] 'Opening Statement in the European Parliament Plenary Session by Ursula von Der Leyen, Candidate for President of the European Commission' (European Commission 16 July 2019) <https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/pl/SPEECH_19_4230 > accessed 18 June 2026.

[12] Bach, Konrad Adenauer Stiftung <https://www.kas.de/en/web/geschichte-der-cdu/significant-figures/biogram-detail/-/content/ursula-von-der-leyen-1 > accessed 9 June 2026

[13] Petrikowski, Britannica', (2026) <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Ursula-von-der-Leyen > accessed 9 June 2026.

[14] Ibid

[15] Ibid

[16] Bach, Konrad Adenauer Stiftung <https://www.kas.de/en/web/geschichte-der-cdu/significant-figures/biogram-detail/-/content/ursula-von-der-leyen-1 > accessed 9 June 2026

[17] Ibid

positioning Europe as a standard setter. However, as political sentiments shifted, she gradually undermined this path in her second term by focusing on competitiveness and defence instead.

To prove this thesis, this report is divided into five sections. First, it establishes the stakes that von der Leyen is facing, explaining the three major climatic challenges confronting Europe now: heat stress, extreme weather events and the degradation of ecosystems and biodiversity. The report then turns to the second section, which is von der Leyen's defining moment, marked by the 2019 candidate speech in which she first introduced the European Green Deal as a main pillar of her agenda, responding to the public pressure created by movements such as the Fridays for Future which culminated in the 2019 EU parliamentary elections. Third, it explains von der Leyen's three most important policies, focusing on the Fit for 55 package, the Adaptation Strategy, and the Nature Restoration Law. Fourth, it evaluates the actual impact of these three main policies. Fifth, it offers concrete recommendations to strengthen these policies. The report confirms the thesis that Ursula von der Leyen is, indeed, a climate leader driven by economic transformation.

Ursula von der Leyen's Environmental Stake

This section analyses the main environmental challenges that the European Union is facing, in relation to Ursula von der Leyen's climate leadership. The European Environment Agency (EEA) in the European Climate Risk Assessment 2024 identifies 36 major climate risks, affecting ecosystems, food, health, infrastructure, economy and finance.[18] These risks directly impact European citizens, economies and ecosystems.

This section will focus on three main climate challenges that are central to von der Leyen's climate leadership: heat stress, intensified extreme weather events, and the degradation of ecosystems and biodiversity.

The rising threat of heat stress

The first and most severe climatic challenge the EU is facing is heat stress. Specifically, heat stress refers to the phenomenon in which the human body is no longer able to cool itself sufficiently, leading to heat cramps, exhaustion, heatstrokes, and the worsening of respiratory and cardiovascular conditions.[19] Compounding this, Europe is warming faster than any other continent.[20] The year

[18] 'European Climate Risk Assessment' (Europa.eu11 March 2024) , chapter 7, page 151 <https://www.eea.europa.eu/en/analysis/publications/european-climate-risk-assessment > accessed 9 June 2026.
[19] Ibid
[20] Ibid, chapter 2, page 62

2024 set a record as the hottest year Europe has ever experienced.[21] That summer's extreme heat caused an estimated 62,700 excess deaths.[22] Moreover, cities are hit hardest by heat stress due to the urban heat island effect, where asphalt and buildings absorb heat during the day and release it at night, keeping temperatures elevated.[23] The urban heat island effect creates a dangerous environment during heatwaves that can last for days or even weeks. Although southern Europe is the hottest region in the EU, northern countries are also increasingly experiencing record breaking temperatures.[24]

The consequences of high temperatures are felt across different sectors. As temperatures rise, mortality rates increase, healthcare systems are under pressure and labour productivity declines since outdoor work becomes difficult in extreme heat. Without action taken, Europe's healthcare systems could face climate-related costs of €400 billion every year.[25] [26] Meanwhile, extreme heat remains the deadliest climate threat Europe faces, responsible for 86-91% of all climate-related deaths between 1980 and 2020.[27]

The first weeks of summer 2026 have already brought record breaking temperatures in Europe. For example, France recorded its hottest day since 1947, with temperatures reaching 44.3°C in the town of Pissos on 23 June and 40.9°C in Paris the following day.[28] With 90% of the French population exposed to extreme heat, some residents sought to cool off in unauthorised waters.[29] As a result, 55 people died, the majority of whom were young people.[30] By 28 June, France had recorded approximately 1,000 excess deaths, with around 85% among those

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[21] World Meteorological Organization, 'WMO Confirms 2024 as Warmest Year on Record at about 1.55°c above Pre-Industrial Level' <https://wmo.int/news/media-centre/wmo-confirms-2024-warmest-year-record-about-155degc-above-pre-industrial-level > accessed 16 June 2026.
[22] Hannah Kriwak, 'Climate Inaction Could Cost Europe €5.6 Trillion by 2050, Study Finds' <https://euobserver.com/39856/climate-inaction-could-cost-europe-e5-6-trillion-by-2050-study-finds/ > accessed 17 June 2026.
[23] European Climate Risk Assessment' (Europa.eu11 March 2024) , chapter 11, page 208 <https://www.eea.europa.eu/en/analysis/publications/european-climate-risk-assessment > accessed 9 June 2026.
[24] Ibid, chapter 18, page 333
[25] Hannah Kriwak, 'Climate Inaction Could Cost Europe €5.6 Trillion by 2050, Study Finds' <https://euobserver.com/39856/climate-inaction-could-cost-europe-e5-6-trillion-by-2050-study-finds/ > accessed 17 June 2026.
[26] Ibid
[27] European Climate Risk Assessment' (Europa.eu11 March 2024) , chapter 11, page 213 <https://www.eea.europa.eu/en/analysis/publications/european-climate-risk-assessment >
[28] Ashifa Kassam, 'France Records Hottest Day Ever as 40 People Drown across Country' (the Guardian23 June 2026) <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2026/jun/23/heatwave-france-spain-italy-europe > accessed 30 June 2026.
[29] Ilayda Cakirtekin, 'Heat Wave-Linked Drowning Deaths Rise to 55 in France: Minister' (26 June 2026) <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/environment/heat-wave-linked-drowning-deaths-rise-to-55-in-france-minister/3978539 > accessed 30 June 2026.
[30] Ibid

aged 65 or older, who are significantly vulnerable to extreme heat.[31] These deaths show that for von der Leyen climate policy is a matter of life and death.

The 2026 heatwave is not just an isolated event. Heatwaves have become progressively more deadly over time. In the 1990s, heatwaves across Europe caused approximately 65 deaths per million per year.[32] By 2022 that rate had risen to 114 deaths per million across the general population.[33] Between 2000 and 2020, deaths caused by heat stress increased in 94% of European regions, with the elderly suffering the most.[34]

The human costs of heat extend beyond mortality into the workplace, where rising temperatures are undermining productivity and economic output. During high temperatures, workers in outdoor sectors such as agriculture and construction are not able to perform at the same level, resulting in significant economic losses.[35] Between 2016 and 2019, workers in these sectors lost an average of 16 hours per worker per year relative to 1965-1994, with the largest losses concentrated in southern Europe.[36] When multiplied across the millions of Europeans working in outdoor sectors, the total productivity loss is considerable.

A field study of grape pickers in Cyprus found that higher summer temperatures correlated with a labour loss of up to 27%.[37] By the end of the century southern Europe could see a productivity drop of 10-15%, while northern regions could experience declines of 2-4%.[38] Heat stress is a real economic damage that compounds over time. By 2030, annual productivity losses due to heat stress in the EU are projected to reach at least €17 billion.[39]

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[31] Makini Brice, Francesca Landini and Dave Graham, 'Record Heatwave Disrupts Europe as France Warns Death Toll to Rise' (28 June 2026) <https://www.reuters.com/business/environment/france-records-1000-excess-deaths-during-record-breaking-heatwave-2026-06-28/ > accessed 30 June 2026.
[32] Qi Zhao and others, 'Global, Regional, and National Burden of Heatwave-Related Mortality from 1990 to 2019: A Three-Stage Modelling Study' [2024] PLoS medicine <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC11093289/ > accessed 18 June 2026.
[33] Ballester J and others, "Heat-Related Mortality in Europe during the Summer Of 2022" (2023) 29 Nature Medicine 1 <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41591-023-02419-z > accessed 5 July 2026.
[34] Extreme Weather and Human Health ' (climate.copernicus.eu) <https://climate.copernicus.eu/esotc/2023/extreme-weather-and-human-health > accessed 18 June 2026.
[35] European Climate Risk Assessment' (Europa.eu11 March 2024) , chapter 7, page 157 <https://www.eea.europa.eu/en/analysis/publications/european-climate-risk-assessment >
[36] Ibid, chapter 11, page 213
[37] Rachel Arthur, 'Study Investigates Effect of Global Warming on Grape Harvesting' (2017) 4 Temperature <https://www.beveragedaily.com/Article/2017/07/13/Study-investigates-effect-of-global-warming-on-grape-harvesting/ > accessed 18 June 2026.
[38] Gosling Simon, Zaherpour Jamal and Ibarreta Ruiz Dolores, 'PESETA III: Climate Change Impacts on Labour Productivity' <https://publications.jrc.ec.europa.eu/repository/handle/JRC113740 > accessed 18 June 2026.
[39] Ibid

Over the past decades, the public has witnessed and felt these severe costs. From 1980 to 2023, the total cumulative economic losses from climate-related events reached €738 billion in the EU.[40] Heat stress alone accounted for €50-80 billion during the major heatwaves.[41] Every 10 years of delay makes fighting climate change 25-30% more expensive globally. For the EU, postponing emissions cuts in key sectors until 2035 could increase economic losses by 40-50%. This means that Ursula von der Leyen's approach reframes climate action as an investment, understanding that the longer Europe waits, the more it pays, not just in euros but in lives too.

Extreme weather events

Equally devastating as heat stress are extreme weather events. An extreme weather event is a severe weather phenomenon that falls outside the normal range of conditions expected for a specific region and time of year.[42] Extreme weather events, such as heatwaves, droughts, floods and storms are becoming more frequent and intense due to climate change.[43] There is a geographic divide in Europe in this regard, where northern and western regions are increasingly affected by floods and southern Europe faces more frequent and severe droughts.[44] These events often compound each other in dangerous cycles: drought parches soil, making it unable to absorb heavy rain, which then triggers flash floods. Heat and drought conditions simultaneously favour the outbreak and spread of wildfires.[45] This compounding effect means that one disaster often worsens the next. Therefore addressing one type of event in isolation is insufficient.

The impacts of the extreme weather events across the EU are creating economic, social and health issues that affect millions of citizens. Flooding has emerged as one of the most destructive threats, specifically in northern and western Europe, where heavy precipitation has increased in recent years.[46] The floods of July 2021 are a devastating example of these types of incidents. More than 240 people lost

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[40] 'Climate-Related Economic Losses' (Europa.eu29 September 2025) <https://www.eea.europa.eu/en/europe-environment-2025/countries/malta/climate-related-economic-losses/#ref-egGoB > accessed 18 June 2026.

[41] Emanuele Bonini, 'Extreme Heat to Cost EU at Least EUR 17 Billion in Annual Productivity by 2030' (Eunews21 November 2025) <https://www.eunews.it/en/2025/11/21/extreme-heat-to-cost-eu-at-least-eur-17-billion-in-annual-productivity-by-2030 > accessed 17 June 2026.

[42] David Karoly, 'What Is an Extreme (Weather or Climate) Event?' <https://www.wcrp-climate.org/images/summer_school/ICTP_2014/documents/presentations/day1/Karoly_Extremes.pdf > accessed 17 June 2026.

[43] Ibid

[44] 'European Climate Risk Assessment' (Europa.eu11 March 2024) , chapter 2, page 66 <https://www.eea.europa.eu/en/analysis/publications/european-climate-risk-assessment > accessed 17 June 2026.

[45] Ibid, chapter 2, page 66

[46] 'Floods EURO- World Health Organization' <https://www.who.int/europe/health-topics/floods#tab=tab_1 > accessed 25 June 2026.

their lives across affected regions including Germany, Belgium, Romania, Austria, the Netherlands and Switzerland.[47] In Germany and Belgium alone, floods caused approximately €44 billion in economic damage and claimed 200 lives.[48]

A more recent example is in the Valencia region of Spain, which was hit by the phenomenon Depresión Aislada en Niveles Altos (DANA) in October 2024. DANA is a phenomenon in which a mass of cold air becomes trapped above the warm Mediterranean waters, causing the warm air below to rise rapidly and form dense rain clouds that can release torrential rain over the same area for hours.[49] The storm dropped a year's worth of rain in a few hours, resulting in approximately 230 deaths and the displacement of 15,000 residents.[50] Material damage was estimated at €17.8 billion, with an additional €12 billion required for restoration.[51] This equalled 0.65% of Spain's GDP. Furthermore, provincial employment fell by approximately 1.4% and national employment by 0.2%.[52] Scientific analysis affirmed that human induced climate change amplified the intensity and spatial extent of rainfall.[53] The idea is confirmed by a study led by the Spanish National Research Council that concluded that the rainfall on 29 October 2024 was up to 20% higher than it would have normally been without the changes produced by global warming.[54]

Another category of destructive extreme weather events is drought. A drought is a period of dry weather that reduces water availability and negatively affects

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[47] 'Building Climate Resilience: Lessons from the 2021 Floods in Western Europe | UCP Knowledge Network' (Europa.eu29 April 2024) <https://civil-protection-knowledge-network.europa.eu/media/building-climate-resilience-lessons-2021-floods-western-europe > accessed 17 June 2026.

[48] European Climate Risk Assessment' (Europa.eu11 March 2024) , chapter 12, page 223 <https://www.eea.europa.eu/en/analysis/publications/european-climate-risk-assessment > accessed 17 June 2026.

[49] María de los Ángeles Orfila, 'What Is DANA, the Strange Weather Phenomenon That Has Caused Deadly Flooding in Spain?' (livescience.com31 October 2024) <https://www.livescience.com/planet-earth/weather/what-is-dana-the-strange-weather-phenomenon-that-has-caused-deadly-flooding-in-spain > accessed 25 June 2026.

[50] Joxe Mari Barrutiabengoa, Agustín García-Serrador and Camilo Ullao, 'Quantifying the Economic Impact of Extreme Climate Events: Evidence from the Valencia Floods' (2025) <https://www.bbvaresearch.com/wp-content/uploads/2025/11/WP_25_13_WB.pdf > accessed 9 June 2026.

[51] Agencia EFE, 'Las Cifras Para No Olvidar de La Dana de Valencia de 2024 - EFE' (EFE Noticias) <https://efe.com/comunidad-valenciana/2025-10-28/las-cifras-para-no-olvidar-de-la-dana-de-valencia-de-2024/#content > accessed 17 June 2026.

[52] Joxe Mari Barrutiabengoa, Agustín García-Serrador and Camilo Ullao, 'Quantifying the Economic Impact of Extreme Climate Events: Evidence from the Valencia Floods' (2025) <https://www.bbvaresearch.com/wp-content/uploads/2025/11/WP_25_13_WB.pdf > accessed 9 June 2026.

[53] Carlos Calvo-Sancho and others, 'Human-Induced Climate Change Amplification on Storm Dynamics in Valencia's 2024 Catastrophic Flash Flood' [2026] Nature Communications <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41467-026-68929-9#content > accessed 23 June 2026.

[54] CSIC, 'El Cambio Climático Agravó Las Lluvias de La Dana de Valencia | Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas' (Csic.es6 November 2025) <https://www.csic.es/es/actualidad-del-csic/el-cambio-climatico-agravo-las-lluvias-de-la-dana-de-valencia > accessed 25 June 2026.

agriculture, energy production and water supply.[55] The 2022 drought affected more than a third of Europe, with Italy's agricultural sector losing approximately €9 billion. Across the continent, the same drought caused €40 billion in economic losses and drove up food prices.[56] The European Climate Risk Assessment confirms what these numbers imply, that heat and droughts negatively affect European crop production, threatening food security.[57] These costs reveal that a single dry season can destabilise regional economies and strain household budgets.

Furthermore, the summer of 2026 brought devastation on an even larger scale. Extreme heat destroyed millions of tonnes of crops, delivering an economic shock to EU and UK farmers.[58] Nine million tonnes of crops across Europe were destroyed, making it, by July 2026, the smallest harvest since 2018.[59] The lost production was valued at €2 billion. EU members such as France lost 3.4 million tonnes of maize worth €891 million, while Hungary lost 2.4 million tonnes and Spain 1.4 million tonnes.[60] These losses represent two weeks of total EU agricultural subsidies. At the time of writing of this report, halfway through the 2026 summer, extreme weather events have become a recurring reality for EU citizens.

The same conditions that affect crops also create a favourable environment for a more violent event. Droughts and heat facilitate wildfires that release massive amounts of CO_2, turning forests into carbon sources.[61] In 2023 Greece lost around 175,000 hectares to wildfires.[62] The wildfires destroy homes and infrastructure

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[55] 'European Climate Risk Assessment' (Europa.eu11 March 2024) , chapter 11, page 221 <https://www.eea.europa.eu/en/analysis/publications/european-climate-risk-assessment > accessed 9 June 2026.
[56] Ibid, chapter 11, page 209-212
[57] Ibid, chapter 6, page 146
[58] Aleksandra Cupriak, "Farm Incomes and Food Security at Risk as Heatwaves Cut Crop Yields" (Farmers GuideJuly 24, 2026) <https://www.farmersguide.co.uk/arable/cereals/farm-incomes-and-food-security-at-risk-as-heatwaves-cut-crop-yields/ > accessed July 24, 2026
[59] Partridge J, "Food Price Fears After Europe's Heatwave Destroys Estimated €2Bn of Crops" (The GuardianJuly 22, 2026) <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2026/jul/22/europe-heatwave-june-farming-lost-revenue-crop-damage > accessed July 24, 2026
[60] Ibid
[61]'European Climate Risk Assessment' (Europa.eu11 March 2024) , chapter 13, page 248 <https://www.eea.europa.eu/en/analysis/publications/european-climate-risk-assessment > accessed 9 June 2026.
[62] Woolgar A, "Greece Wildfires 2023" (2024) <https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/5f3bf49a773f47e3b51894cbc5792a7b > accessed July 26, 2026

while releasing CO_2.[63] The resulting smoke causes respiratory illnesses among the affected population.[64]

By 2026, the devastation had reached unprecedented levels. In late July, wildfires raging across France and Spain forced more than 250,000 people to evacuate.[65] In France, 197,000 people fled the Gironde and Landes regions, near Bordeaux. The country deployed 1,500 military personnel in an unprecedented response to support firefighters.[66] In Spain, 70,000 people were evacuated west of Madrid, where the fire was described as the worst fire in the history of the region and beyond the capacity of firefighters to contain. The Spanish government declared a national emergency, representing the first time the country has ever done so over a wildfire.[67]

The growing scale of extreme weather events is highlighted by the financial exhaustion of the EU Solidarity Fund in 2021, 2022 and 2023.[68] The EU Solidarity Fund helps member states to recover from natural disasters.[69] It is clear that these events are persistent since institutional mechanisms are drained year after year.

However, the financial consequences have extended beyond public mechanisms. The private sector felt the significant costs as well, while public perception has shifted in response to direct exposure to extreme weather events. Insurers have faced record payouts in the past years.[70] The agricultural industry, facing the continued destruction of harvests, is pressing for action.[71] These climate-related losses are forcing the private sector to confront risks that traditional business models were not designed to handle. At the same time, the frequency and intensity of these extreme events has raised public concern and led to demands

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[63] 'European Climate Risk Assessment' (Europa.eu11 March 2024) , chapter 13, page 243 <https://www.eea.europa.eu/en/analysis/publications/european-climate-risk-assessment > accessed 9 June 2026.
[64] Ibid, chapter 7, page 152
[65] "Spanish PM Warns of 'Complex Hours' Ahead as Wildfires Displace 270,000 in Spain and France" BBC News (July 24, 2026) <https://www.bbc.com/news/live/c5y60307r0pt > accessed July 26, 2026
[66] Mackay H and others, "France and Spain Race to Control Wildfires as More Than 250,000 Evacuated – as It Happened" (The GuardianJuly 25, 2026) <https://www.theguardian.com/world/live/2026/jul/25/france-spain-wildfires-latest-news-updates-madrid-cap-ferret-bordeaux-gironde > accessed July 26, 2026
[67] Rawnsley J, "More Than 220,000 Evacuated in France and Spain Due to Wildfires" (July 24, 2026) <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/czjlenp0xk8o > accessed July 26, 2026
[68]'European Climate Risk Assessment' (Europa.eu11 March 2024) , chapter 17, page 306 <https://www.eea.europa.eu/en/analysis/publications/european-climate-risk-assessment > accessed 9 June 2026.
[69] ' EU Solidarity Fund' (ec.europa.eu) <https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/funding/solidarity-fund_en > accessed 25 June 2026.
[70] 'European Climate Risk Assessment' (Europa.eu11 March 2024) , chapter 17, page 310 <https://www.eea.europa.eu/en/analysis/publications/european-climate-risk-assessment > accessed 9 June 2026.
[71] Ibid, chapter 6, page 137

for stronger climate action. Citizens across Europe are directly experiencing the impacts. A survey of over 27,000 Europeans found that 80% of respondents were affected by at least one climate-related impact in the past five years, with the highest rates reported in southern and central-eastern Europe.[72] This level of direct exposure made these events impossible to ignore for von der Leyen.

Threats to Ecosystems and Biodiversity

While the immediate impacts of extreme weather events are measured in human and economic losses, a slower but equally destructive crisis is the devastation of ecosystems and biodiversity. Ecosystems sustain human life and economic activity. Forests purify the air, wetlands filter the water and pollinators enable the production of the fruits, vegetables and nuts. These are severely deteriorating, having consequences that reach beyond the natural world.

Forests cover approximately 35% of EU land and are increasingly threatened by climate change. Climate change has increased disturbances such as storms and pest outbreaks, compounded by human pressures including logging and land-use change. These factors reduce forest resilience and carbon sink capacity, meaning that forests absorb less CO_2 than they used to.[73] When forests lose their capacity to absorb carbon, they no longer slow the accumulation of GHG in the atmosphere. In Czechia, bark beetle damage to Norway spruce increased tenfold between 2017 and 2019. Czechia's Land Use, Land-Use Change, and Forestry sector became a net carbon source.[74] In Germany, tree mortality increased sevenfold between 2018 and 2020, costing the forestry sector an estimated €17.8 billion.[75] The situations in Czechia and Germany show that Europe's forests are reaching a tipping point where natural regeneration will no longer be fast enough to outpace losses.[76]

Forests are not the only ecosystems under threat. Wetlands and peatlands are among the most threatened ecosystems in Europe, facing degradation from both human activities and climate change. Many wetlands are degraded from unsustainable land use and water management, with climate change further aggravating the situation. Rising temperatures increase evaporation and drying,

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[72] 'Europeans' Experiences of Climate Change' (Europa.eu23 March 2026) <https://climate-adapt.eea.europa.eu/en/observatory/publications-data/analysis-data/overheated-and-underprepared-europeans-experiences-of-living-with-climate-change > accessed 17 June 2026.

[73]'European Climate Risk Assessment' (Europa.eu11 March 2024) , chapter 13, page 238 <https://www.eea.europa.eu/en/analysis/publications/european-climate-risk-assessment > accessed 9 June 2026.

[74] Ibid, chapter 13, page 246

[75] Ibid, chapter 13, page 264

[76] Abeshev K, "Europe's Forests Absorb Less Carbon: Why? And What Must Change? | ClimTip – Understanding and Assessing Climate Tipping Points" (Climate-Tipping-Points.eu2025) <https://www.climate-tipping-points.eu/post/europes-forests-absorb-less-carbon-why-and-what-must-change > accessed July 20, 2026

making peatlands more vulnerable to wildfires and accelerating the release of stored carbon.[77] Unlike forests, which can be replanted, peatlands take thousands of years to form, making their loss irreversible on human timescales.[78] The degradation of wetlands also reduces the capacity to filter water and mitigate floods, compounding the risks to human communities.

The crisis is not happening only on land. Europe's marine and coastal ecosystems are facing urgent risks on their own. Marine ecosystems regulate the climate by absorbing CO_2 and provide food for millions of people.[79] Over 40% of the EU population lives in coastal areas, making their livelihoods directly dependent on the health of these ecosystems.[80] Marine heatwaves have caused mass mortality of corals, fish and other marine life.[81] The concentration of population and economic activity along Europe's coasts creates a close relationship between marine health and human welfare. Marine heatwaves create permanent ecological changes, declining fish stocks, destabilising the food supply chain, eroding economic stability for coastal communities. Furthermore, as ocean temperatures continue to rise, this will result in a lasting weakening of one of the planet's primary climate regulation mechanisms.

The degradation of forests, wetlands and marine ecosystems is part of a broader collapse of biodiversity. The impact of biodiversity loss is profound. Its loss threatens food security through the decline of pollinators. Without them, crop yield for fruits, vegetables and nuts would fall significantly, which would lead to food shortages and higher prices.[82] Soil health has deteriorated across Europe due to erosion, loss of organic matter and contamination.[83]

The degradation of ecosystems increases flood risk by removing natural buffers to absorb excess water. Biodiversity loss is dangerous because of the compounding effect of multiple failures occurring simultaneously. For example, the decline of pollinators coincides with soil degradation, which reduces the nutrient content of crops, which further limits agricultural productivity. As a result the European food supply is deeply affected. Flood protection follows the same logic. Wetlands, forests, healthy soils form a network of natural defences that absorb rainfall, slow runoff and reduce flood flows. By degrading these defences,

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[77]'European Climate Risk Assessment' (Europa.eu11 March 2024), chapter 3, pages 89-91 <https://www.eea.europa.eu/en/analysis/publications/european-climate-risk-assessment > accessed 9 June 2026.
[78] Peatlands | Nature-Based Solutions | Earthly (Earthly-Org) <https://earthly.org/nature-based-projects/peatlands > accessed July 18, 2026
[79] 'European Climate Risk Assessment' (Europa.eu11 March 2024) , chapter 3, page 86 <https://www.eea.europa.eu/en/analysis/publications/european-climate-risk-assessment > accessed 9 June 2026.
[80] Ibid, chapter 18, page 333/chapter 4, page 104
[81] Ibid, chapter 4, page 106
[82] Ibid, chapter 3, page 95
[83] Ibid, chapter 3, page 101

a single heavy rainfall event that would have been absorbed by healthy ecosystems can now overwhelm communities, causing severe costs.

Beyond politics and economics, Ursula von der Leyen's commitment to climate action carries a personal dimension. As a mother of seven children, von der Leyen framed climate action as a maternal obligation, ''we owe it to our children''.[84] This maternal duty makes her responsible to save the planet where her children will live. The statement also reflects her Lutheran Christian background,[85] which emphasises caring for God's creation. Her background of growing up in a family that valued European unity has shaped her desire to protect the continent she calls home. This reflects her personal identity, a woman, a mother, a European, and resonates with voters who share those values.

Ursula von der Leyen's Defining Moment

In 2018, the Fridays for Future movement, founded by Swedish activist Greta Thunberg, mobilised millions of students across the globe to protest for stronger climate action.[86] The protests contributed to increased support for Green parties, particularly in Germany, where the Green Party gained approximately 7% more votes than in previous years in the federal, state, and EU Parliament elections.[87] This shift in the German public's values towards environmental concerns is particularly significant, given Germany's role as the EU's largest population bloc. Moreover, the movement heightened public awareness of climate change all across Europe and emphasised its repercussions as political momentum for more climate change policies increased.[88] In May 2019, the European Parliament elections took place: the Greens gained 22 seats, while the European People's Party (EPP) lost 34 seats.[89] By September 2019, climate activism reached unprecedented levels, with over 7.6 million people participating in protests across

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[84] 'Press Remarks by President von Der Leyen on the Occasion of the Adoption of the European Green Deal Communication' (European Commission11 December 2019) <https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/fr/speech_19_6749 > accessed 25 June 2026.
[85] Andreas Grau, 'Ernst Albrecht (Geschichte der CDU) <https://www.kas.de/de/web/geschichte-der-cdu/personen/biogramm-detail/-/content/ernst-albrecht > accessed 9 June 2026.
[86] United Nations Environment Programme, *Fridays for Future Movement,* https://www.unep.org/championsofearth/laureates/2019/fridays-future-movement, accessed 12 June 2026.
[87] iFo Institute, *ifo Schnelldienst 05/2022: Die grüne Transformation* (2022), https://www.ifo.de/sites/default/files/docbase/docs/sd-2022-05-gruene-transformation.pdf, accessed 29 June 2026.
[88] Jan Pollex and Lars E. Berker, *The European Parliament and Fridays for Future: analysing reactions to a new environmental movement by Europe's climate policy champion* (2024), https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/07036337.2024.2334079, accessed 29 June 2026.
[89] European Parliament, *Comparative Tool: European Election Results,* https://results.elections.europa.eu/en/tools/comparative-tool/, accessed 6 June 2026.

185 countries, mainly from Europe.[90] These figures highlighted the public's growing concern about the environment.

After the parliamentary elections, Ursula von der Leyen was chosen as the President of the European Commission as a compromise candidate after Emmanuel Macron blocked Manfred Weber, the EPP's Spitzenkandidat.[91] The Spitzenkandidaten process is the democratic practice in which, before a European Parliament election, each major political party chooses a lead candidate (Spitzenkandidat) for Commission President. In 2019, the EPP had Weber as a lead candidate, while the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats (S&D) had Frans Timmermans.[92] Ursula von der Leyen was elected without the Spitzenkandidaten process being followed, leaving her perceived by many as lacking the democratic mandate the process was designed to confer.

The absence of a mandate from the Spitzenkandidaten process caused grievances amongst the parliamentarians and dimmed von der Leyen's prospects to secure a majority amongst the coalition between the EPP and the S&D groups. As a consequence, she needed to particularly court the members of her coalition partner, the S&D, which strongly supported climate action.[93] The EPP saw the Fridays for Future protests, the Greens winning seats in the Parliamentary election and the overall demand for more climate action as the reason for its lost seats. This prompted von der Leyen to place climate action as one of the main pillars of her political agenda and as a way to legitimise her presidency.

On 16 July 2019, Ursula von der Leyen gave a speech to the European Parliament to gain the parliamentarians' support as a candidate for President of the European Commission. The speech introduced the European Green Deal and signalled her commitment to making Europe the first climate-neutral continent, which she also positioned as an economic opportunity.[94] In an effort to appeal to the major European political parties, she presented it as a new growth strategy. The speech also positioned the European Union as a potential global leader in climate

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[90] Joost de Moor, Katrin Uba, Mattias Wahlström, Magnus Wennerhag, and Michiel De Vydt, *Protest for a future II: Composition, mobilization and motives of the participants in Fridays For Future climate protests on 20-27 September, 2019* (2020), https://www.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:1397070/FULLTEXT01.pdf, accessed 23 June 2026.
[91] Matei Rosca, *Weber: Macron and Orbán caused 'severe damage to European democracy* (22 December 2019), https://www.politico.eu/article/manfred-weber-spitzenkandidat-emmanuel-macron-viktor-orban-caused-severe-damage-to-european-democracy/, accessed 18 June 2026.
[92] European Parliament, *Understanding the Spitzenkandidaten process,* https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2018/630264/EPRS_BRI(2018)630264_EN.pdf, accessed 18 June 2026.
[93] Group of the Progressive Alliance of Socialists & Democrats in the European Parliament, *The Green Deal*, https://www.socialistsanddemocrats.eu/content/green-deal, accessed 15 June 2026.
[94] Ursula von der Leyen, *Statement by the Candidate for President of the European Commission*, speech to the European Parliament, Strasbourg (16 July 2019) YouTube video, https://www.youtube.com/live/rq1soQ2LQLE?si=K1FFjWqdB5kQ4-Hb, accessed 6 June 2026.

governance. This was the promise on which she sought office and her defining moment as a climate leader. That same day, she won the presidency with 383 votes out of 747.[95] In order to be elected, she needed 374 votes, meaning she won by a margin of just 9 votes. The narrow margin underscored the need to deliver concrete action to build political legitimacy.

She fulfilled her commitment in December 2019 by launching the Green Deal as the flagship policy of her presidency.[96] She framed it as what the people wanted and an opportunity for economic growth: "It is the people of Europe who have called us to take decisive action against climate change."[97]

Ursula von der Leyen's Climate Solutions

The following section examines three of Ursula von der Leyen's most significant environmental policies: Fit for 55, the Adaptation Strategy, and the Nature Restoration Law. These policies are part of a broader environmental framework, namely the European Green Deal. While each policy refers to a different challenge, they all reflect von der Leyen's broader objective of modernising the economy by implementing climate policies. This section highlights that Ursula von der Leyen pursued climate leadership to both address environmental concerns and strengthen the economy.

Fit for 55

In the April 2019 Eurobarometer, citizens were questioned on what they deemed most relevant for the European Parliament electoral campaign. 'Combating climate change and protecting the environment' was voted among the top concerns, as the response rose by 3 percentage points from the survey conducted the prior year.[98] This was sparked by the challenges outlined in the first section of this report, namely heat stress, extreme weather events, and threats to ecosystems and biodiversity. In order to address this, von der Leyen introduced the Green Deal, which was a long-term promise that initially lacked legislation. The Fit for 55 legislative package was proposed and gradually

[95] European Parliament, *Parliament elects Ursula von der Leyen as first female Commission President* (16 July 2019) https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20190711IPR56824/parliament-elects-ursula-von-der-leyen-as-first-female-commission-president, accessed 15 June 2026.
[96] Ursula von der Leyen, *The European Green Deal presentation by Ursula von der Leyen at the European Parliament* (11 December 2019), YouTube video https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Nq0azn0RCFA, accessed 6 July 2026.
[97] European Commission, *Speech by President von der Leyen in the Plenary of the European Parliament at the debate on the European Green Deal* (11 December 2019) https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/speech_19_6751, accessed 15 June 2026.
[98] European Parliament, *Closer to the citizens, closer to the ballot: Spring Eurobarometer 2019*, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/at-your-service/files/be-heard/eurobarometer/2019/closer-to-the-citizens-closer-to-the-ballot/report/en-eurobarometer-2019.pdf, accessed 29 June 2026.

adopted as an attempt to implement the European Green Deal. The package contains 15 proposals and aims to reduce greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions by at least 55% by 2030 compared to 1990 levels and achieve climate neutrality by 2050.[99] [100]

1. *EU Emissions Trading System (ETS):* a cap-and-trade system that sets an annual cap on GHG for companies, which receive emission allowances, either for free or through an auction. Free allowances are granted to EU industries at high risk of carbon leakage, while auctioning applies to sectors that can pass carbon costs directly onto the consumers.[101]
2. *EU Emissions Trading System 2 (ETS2):* extends this facility to the buildings and transport sectors, with no free allowances granted.
3. *Social Climate Fund:* provides financial support to vulnerable households, transport users, and micro-enterprises throughout the green transition.
4. *Effort Sharing Regulation:* sets binding reduction targets for member states in sectors not addressed by ETS.
5. *Regulation on the Land Use, Land-Use Change, and Forestry sector:* requires countries to increase carbon absorption through forests and soil by reducing deforestation and improving land management.[102]
6. *CO_2 emissions standards for cars and vans:* mandates that all new cars and vans sold in the EU must be zero emission by 2035.[103]
7. *Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism:* imposes a carbon tax on certain imported goods, such as iron and steel, cement, fertilisers, aluminium, electricity, and hydrogen.
8. *Renewable Energy Directive:* increases the use of renewable energy by establishing a binding target for member states.
9. *Energy Efficiency Directive:* requires member states to reduce energy consumption.
10. *Alternative Fuels Infrastructure Regulation:* ensures that there are sufficient recharging and refuelling stations.
11. *ReFuel EU Aviation Regulation:* requires airlines to use cleaner fuel.

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[99] European Commission, *Fit for 55: Delivering on the proposals (31 October 2025)* https://commission.europa.eu/topics/climate-action/delivering-european-green-deal/fit-55-delivering-proposals_en, accessed 6 June 2026.
[100] Heras, Beatriz Pérez de las (2022) *'The "Fit for 55" Package: Towards a More Integrated Climate Framework in the EU', Romanian Journal of European Affairs*, 22/2 (2022): 63–78, http://rjea.ier.gov.ro/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/Art.-4_Beatriz-Perez-de-las-Heras.pdf , accessed 6 June 2026.
[101] KPMG, *Fit for 55*, (2023) https://assets.kpmg.com/content/dam/kpmgsites/be/pdf/Fit-for-55-2023.pdf.coredownload.inline.pdf, accessed 15 June 2026.
[102] European Union, Regulation (EU) 2018/841 of 30 May 2018, https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:02018R0841-20230511, accessed 18 June 2026.
[103] European Council, *Fit for 55*, https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/fit-for-55/, accessed 16 June 2026.

12. *FuelEU Maritime Regulation:* requires ships to use cleaner fuel.
13. *Energy Performance of Buildings Directive:* aims to transform buildings into zero-emission buildings.
14. *Updated EU rules to decarbonise gas markets and promote hydrogen:* it regulates the shift from natural gas to renewable and low-carbon gases.
15. *EU Methane Regulation for the energy sector:* targets the reduction of methane emissions in the energy sector.

Several methods of funding have been made available under this framework. The most prominent one is the ETS where member states are expected to allocate 100% of their emission trading revenues toward climate action.[104] This works as such: the national governments auction allowances to companies, which grants them the right to emit GHG. The money national governments receive by auctioning allowances is expected to be spent on climate objectives such as renewable energy projects and clean transportation.

To access EU funding, the Fit for 55 package requires member states to adopt national legislation in order to meet the proposed binding targets. A key example of this is the Social Climate Fund, which was created to support vulnerable groups affected by the green transition.[105] It provides up to €86.7 billion of funding to member states for the 2026-2032 period while also requiring a 25% national contribution.[106] In order to receive funding the European Commission is requiring the member states to submit their national plans first. As of now, several countries are undergoing the submission assessment phase, in which the plans are either approved or rejected by the European Commission. Two countries, namely Sweden and Lithuania, have been successful in gaining the Commission's approval. Sweden's plan commits to mobilising €530 million for 115,500 households, while Lithuania aims to allocate €880 million for 74,000 households, 74,000 transport users, and 3,200 micro-enterprises.[107]

Adaptation Strategy

When global temperatures reached the highest levels on record, and the continent experienced a rise in extreme weather events, it became apparent to

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[104] European Commission, *Completion of key 'Fit for 55' legislation,* https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_23_4754, accessed 12 June 2026.
[105] Council of the European Union, *Fit for 55: a fund to support the most affected citizens and buinesses (2024)*, https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/infographics/fit-for-55-social-climate-fund/, accessed 6 June 2026.
[106] European Commission, *Social Climate Fund*, https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/eu-budget/performance-and-reporting/programme-performance-statements/social-climate-fund_en, accessed 18 June 2026.
[107] European Commission, *Social Climate Fund national plans,* https://employment-social-affairs.ec.europa.eu/policies-and-activities/funding/social-climate-fund/social-climate-fund-national-plans_en, accessed 27 June 2026.

Ursula von der Leyen that solely regulating GHG emissions was no longer sufficient.[108] As a consequence, adaptation efforts became increasingly necessary, reflecting that mitigation alone could no longer protect societies. The Adaptation Strategy was adopted in 2021 and acknowledges that certain climate changes are unavoidable and therefore action towards a climate-resilient Europe needs to be taken. The policy features four key objectives:[109]

- 'Smarter adaptation' recognises the necessity of better climate data collection. The main tool used is the Climate-ADAPT Knowledge platform, which provides data on climate-related risks.[110] Other EU research and data programmes used are Copernicus, Horizon Europe, Digital Europe, and EMODnet.[111]
- 'Faster adaptation' calls for the quicker development of solutions in order to reduce risks. One of the instruments used is the EU Taxonomy, which classifies economic activities based on how environmentally sustainable they are.[112] Moreover, the Commission aims to implement several Horizon Europe Missions, including 'Adaptation to Climate Change'. The Mission's goal is to support more than 150 European regions in becoming climate-resilient by helping them identify challenges and developing the appropriate tools to address them.
- 'Systemic adaptation' refers to the integration of climate resilience across sectors, and its main priority is mainstreaming adaptation into macro-fiscal policies, alongside nature-based solutions and local adaptation action. This systemic approach is a cross-sectoral response that seeks to embed climate resilience into financial markets, urban planning, public health, infrastructure, and ecosystems.
- 'International action' recognises that climate change is an international threat that needs to be addressed through global cooperation. The EU plans to increase international financing and broaden political engagement on adaptation measures with partner countries.

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[108] European Commission, *Forging a climate-resilient Europe - the new EU Strategy on Adaptation to Climate Change* (2021), https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=COM:2021:82:FIN, accessed 29 June 2026.
[109] European Commission, *Forging a climate-resilient Europe - the new EU Strategy on Adaptation to Climate Change* (2021), https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=COM:2021:82:FIN, accessed 29 June 2026.
[110] Climate-ADAPT, *Sharing adaptation knowledge for a climate-resilient Europe,* https://climate-adapt.eea.europa.eu/en/knowledge-1, accessed 29 June 2026.
[111] European Commission, *Forging a climate-resilient Europe - the new EU Strategy on Adaptation to Climate Change* (2021), https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=COM:2021:82:FIN, accessed 29 June 2026.
[112] European Commission, *EU Taxonomy Navigator*, employment-social-affairs.ec.europa.eu/policies-and-activities/funding/social-climate-fund/social-climate-fund-national-plans_en, accessed 29 June 2026.

The Multiannual Financial Framework 2021-2027 guarantees that at least 25% of the European budget is spent on climate action.[113] Unlike the Social Climate Fund, the Adaptation Strategy does not establish a dedicated funding instrument. Instead, it draws funding from existing EU funds such as the Recovery and Resilience Facility, Horizon Europe, and the LIFE Programme, particularly the Climate Change Mitigation and Adaptation sub-programme.[114] Beyond public funding, the strategy also seeks to mobilise private investment by integrating climate risks into financial decision-making. The European Investment Bank further supports adaptation by providing loans for climate-resilient projects. In 2022, subnational governments invested approximately €8.3 billion in climate adaptation.[115]

The Adaptation Strategy's newest framework includes an open public consultation, allowing citizens, businesses, and public authorities to provide feedback on adaptation efforts.[116] This approach improves the legitimacy of the policy by ensuring that measures better reflect local needs. Political parties within the European Parliament played an influential role in shaping the policy by demanding more ambitious adaptation commitments. In its 2020 resolution, Parliament demanded the development of a new climate adaptation strategy, among other requirements.[117] Support came from the S&D, Renew Europe, the Greens, and a majority of the EPP.[118]

The strategy provides further political legitimacy for Ursula von der Leyen, as it addresses climate change beyond mitigation and reinforces her position as a leading figure in shaping the EU's climate agenda. Additionally, it directly tackles heat stress and extreme weather events, major concerns that progressively worsened over the past decade. This signals a commitment to safeguard citizens from climate risks, extending past the economic goals reinforced through the Fit for 55 agenda.

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[113] Climate-ADAPT, *'EU Funding of Adaptation'* https://climate-adapt.eea.europa.eu/en/eu-adaptation-policy/funding, accessed 6 June 2026.
[114] Ibid.
[115] Pathways2Resilience, *The Adaptation Investment Cycle*, https://www.pathways2resilience.eu/adaptation-investment-cycle, accessed 18 June 2026.
[116] European Commission, *European Climate Resilience and Risk Management – Integrated Framework,* https://climate.ec.europa.eu/eu-action/adaptation-and-resilience-climate-change/european-climate-resilience-and-risk-management-integrated-framework_en, accessed 6 June 2026.
[117] European Parliament, Resolution of 15 January 2020 on the European Green Deal, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2020-0005_EN.html, accessed 15 June 2026.
[118] HowTheyVote, *The European Green Deal Resolution Vote* (15 January 2020), https://howtheyvote.eu/votes/111994, accessed 18 June 2026.

Nature Restoration Law

As societies entered an era of intensive production and consumption, in which consumption and disposal have come to dominate over reuse and recycling, biodiversity loss turned into an extreme risk for human well-being. Similarly, the Earth is experiencing a reduction in forested land due to widespread deforestation, alongside a decline in species populations. The EU recognised that in order to overcome these threats, urgent action must be taken.

The Nature Restoration Law, proposed in 2022 and formally adopted in 2024, is the first law of its kind that encompasses the whole continent and directly addresses the aforementioned climatic challenges. The regulation requires member states to implement restoration measures on at least 20% of EU land and sea areas by 2030, with the broader goal of restoring all ecosystems in need by 2050.[119] It targets habitats like wetlands, rivers, forests, and marine ecosystems, including legally binding targets such as restoring biodiverse habitats, restoring 25,000 km of free-flowing rivers by 2030, maintaining urban green space, and reversing pollinator population decline. In the Danube delta, Europe's largest wetland, restoration efforts, such as reintroducing native grazing animals, reduced wildfire and flood risks.[120]

Although the regulation sets binding targets, national governments are free to determine how they implement it.[121] Member states are required to develop and submit a national restoration plan by 1 September 2026; however, exact methods vary by country due to different restoration needs and environmental conditions. To assist member states in drafting their plans, the Commission established a uniform format through 'Implementing Regulation (EU) 2025/912'.[122] Member states are expected to outline basic information, the national approach to meeting restoration targets and fulfilling obligations by article, for implementation. Submission will be made through Reportnet 3, the EEA platform for reporting environmental data.[123]

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[119] European Commission, *'The EU NatureRestoration Law' (4 June 2026)*, https://environment.ec.europa.eu/topics/nature-and-biodiversity/nature-restoration-regulation_en, accessed 6 June 2026.
[120] United Nations Environment Programme World Conservation Monitoring Centre, *Bringing Nature Back* (December 2022), https://www.unep-wcmc.org/en/news/bringing-nature-back-new-report-showcases-five-powerful-european-restoration-initiatives, accessed 26 July 2026.
[121] Grabbe, H., C. Mehlbaum, B. Heerma van Voss and S. van der Zwaag (2025) *'Implementing the EU Nature Restoration Law: exploring pathways for member states'*, Working Paper 11/2025, Bruegel, https://www.bruegel.org/sites/default/files/2025-06/WP%2011%202025_2.pdf, accessed 12 June 2026.
[122] European Commission, *Commission Implementing Regulation (EU) 2025/912 of 19 May 2025,* https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/reg_impl/2025/912/oj/eng, accessed 1 July 2026.
[123] European Environmental Agency, Reportnet, https://reportnet.europa.eu/, accessed 1 July 2026.

The Multiannual Financial Framework (2021-2027) allocated a budget of €114 billion for biodiversity.[124] As with the Adaptation Strategy, the Nature Restoration Law does not establish a dedicated funding instrument, but instead draws funds from existing EU funding mechanisms, such as LIFE, the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), the European Maritime, Fisheries and Aquaculture Fund (EMFAF), Cohesion Policy funds, Horizon Europe, and InvestEU.[125] Moreover, several member states have established dedicated funding. For example, Spain created the 'Fund for Ecological Restoration and Resilience'.[126]

Before the law was implemented, in the 2010-2020 period, 8% of the funding of restoration projects came from private sources, amounting to an estimated €6.5 million per year. This underscores the fact that the private sector already invested in restoration efforts, when appropriate incentives were in place.[127] However, this contribution remains significantly below what is needed.

Furthermore, an important aspect of the financial implications of this regulation was stated by the European Commission, which claimed that "Every euro invested into nature restoration adds €4 to €38 in benefits"[128]. This reflects the estimated economic cost of failing to restore ecosystems.

Ursula von der Leyen's Impact

The following section assesses the impact of three policies implemented by Ursula von der Leyen through the Green Deal, considering her economic drive, the extent to which environmental concerns have been reflected throughout her mandate, and the effectiveness of these policies in national, political, and environmental terms.

Fit for 55

The Fit for 55 package aims to reduce GHG emissions by 55% through legally binding targets set for 2030.[129] As of 2026, all 15 core legislative acts have been

[124] Institute for European Environmental Policy, *Nature Restoration Law and Funding* (2023), https://ieep.eu/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/4_-Nature-Restoration-Law-and-Funding.pdf, accessed 18 June 2026.
[125] European Commission, *Nature Restoration Regulation Implementation - Green Forum* https://green-forum.ec.europa.eu/nature-and-biodiversity/nature-restoration-regulation-implementation_en, accessed 6 June 2026.
[126] Institute for European Environmental Policy, *Nature Restoration Law and Funding* (2023), https://ieep.eu/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/4_-Nature-Restoration-Law-and-Funding.pdf, accessed 18 June 2026.
[127] Institute for European Environmental Policy, *Nature Restoration Law and Funding* (2023), https://ieep.eu/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/4_-Nature-Restoration-Law-and-Funding.pdf, accessed 18 June 2026.
[128] European Commission, *'The EU NatureRestoration Law' (4 June 2026)*, https://environment.ec.europa.eu/topics/nature-and-biodiversity/nature-restoration-regulation_en, accessed 6 June 2026.
[129] Fit for 55, European council <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/fit-for-55/?__cf_chl_f_tk=CnYLuhS2lXzI98rMWg8

adopted, strengthening existing mechanisms while introducing new regulations concerning climate policies, energy, transport, buildings, and land usage.[130]

In 2024, GHG emissions from ETS-covered power sector installations fell by nearly 11% compared to 2023, reflecting a continuous reduction in emissions due to the increase of renewable energy and the replacement of coal with gas in power generation and heavy industry sectors.[131]

The ETS has also generated significant revenue for the clean transition, raising up to €38.8 billion in 2024 and enabling member states to accelerate their shift towards renewable energy and reduce dependence on carbon technologies.[132] Furthermore, the EU's renewable electricity has increased from 34% in 2019, the year the Green Deal was introduced, to 47% in 2024, while the combined share of wind and solar energy rose from 17% to 29%.[133] Rather than just setting policy targets, this acceleration is also directly attributed to EU-level funding. The Recovery and Resilience Facility allocated €153.8 billion to energy-related measures, which accounts for 27% of its total funding, while the Modernisation Fund, financed by the ETS revenues, has distributed an additional €20.7 billion to clean energy projects since 2021, creating financing channels that did not previously exist at the EU level.[134] The leader in such transitions is Denmark, with more than 55% of their electricity generated from wind and solar power, demonstrating strong national implementation and a sustained commitment to the clean energy transition.[135]

While the revised ETS has accounted for over 65% of the total EU GHG emissions, significant limitations in sectors such as road transport, buildings, and agriculture have showcased a much slower emissions reduction pace. The agricultural

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[130] Legislative Train Scheduele<https://www.europarl.europa.eu/legislative-train/package-fit-for-55> Accessed July 14, 2026

[131] '2025 Carbon Market Report: EU ETS Lowers Power Sector Emissions and Expands to Maritime Transport' (3 December 2025) <https://climate.ec.europa.eu/news-other-reads/news/2025-carbon-market-report-eu-ets-lowers-power-sector-emissions-and-expands-maritime-transport-2025-12-03_en > accessed 12 June 2026.

[132] '2025 Carbon Market Report: EU ETS Lowers Power Sector Emissions and Expands to Maritime Transport' (3 December 2025) <https://climate.ec.europa.eu/news-other-reads/news/2025-carbon-market-report-eu-ets-lowers-power-sector-emissions-and-expands-maritime-transport-2025-12-03_en > accessed 12 June 2026.

[133] European Electricity Review 2025<https://ember-energy.org/app/uploads/2025/01/EER_2025_22012025.pdf> Accessed July 29, 2026

[134] REPowerEU plan: Energy policy in EU countries' recovery and resilience plans<https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/repowereu-plan/> Accessed July 29, 2026

[135] Eurostat, Electricity from renewable sources reaches 47% in 2024 <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/products-eurostat-news/w/ddn-20250319-1> Accessed 17 June 2026

sector, for example, has only reduced its emissions by 1.2%, illustrating an uneven pace of decarbonisation shaped by political and economic constraints.[136] To address this gap, the EU adopted ETS2, initially scheduled for implementation in 2027, extending emissions trading to suppliers of fuels used in buildings and road transport, alongside integrating the Social Climate Fund to mitigate the policy's social impacts. However, its implementation has been postponed by one year and is now expected in 2028. Furthermore, the €45 per tonne limit and the absence of mechanisms addressing methane and nitrous oxide from agriculture limit its overall effectiveness.[137] [138]

Beyond these sectoral gaps, the carbon market framework has generated economic discrepancies across the EU. Carbon prices rose to €80 per tonne between 2022 and 2023, briefly exceeding €100 per tonne in February 2023, making home and industry energy much more costly, in an industry that had already been impacted by the Russo-Ukrainian war, which had heightened volatility in gas markets.[139]

These disparities can be attributed to three main fault lines. First, among member states, the carbon-intensive economies of Central and Eastern Europe have experienced significantly greater losses in production and employment compared to Western countries, partly because free emission allowances have been concentrated in a few nations with steel and refinery capacities.[140] Second, across income groups, low and middle-income households bear a disproportionately greater burden, as energy represents a larger share of their household expenditure at the same price per tonne.[141] Third, across sectors, industries with high energy consumption, such as steel and chemical production, remain exposed to carbon leakage, as free allocation covers more than 90% of industrial emissions without sufficient differentiation based on the risk of leakage.[142]

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[136] Ibid
[137] EU officially adopts the 2040 climate target, postpones ETS 2 by one year <https://icapcarbonaction.com/en/news/eu-officially-adopts-2040-climate-target-postpones-ets-2-one-year> Accessed 18 June 2026
[138] Fit for 55: reducing emissions from transport, buildings, agriculture and waste <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/infographics/fit-for-55-effort-sharing-regulation/> Accessed 18 June 2026
[139] https://ieefa.org/sites/default/files/2024-11/Carbon%20Pricing%20Factsheet%20Updated.pdf
[140] The unequal costs of carbon pricing in European regions<https://cepr.org/voxeu/columns/unequal-costs-carbon-pricing-european-regions
[141] Europe's ETS is an ally, not an enemy, of industrial competitiveness> Accessed August 4, 2026 <https://www.bruegel.org/analysis/europes-emissions-trading-system-ally-not-enemy-industrial-competitiveness> Accessed August 4, 2026
[142] Economic and distributional effects of higher energy prices on households in the EU <https://employment-social-affairs.ec.europa.eu/economic-and-distributional-effects-higher-energy-prices-households-eu_en> Accessed August 4, 2026

The automotive sector also posed a significant political and economic challenge. Employing approximately 13.8 million people across the EU, the industry faced mounting pressure from the transition to zero-emission mobility, rapid technological change, and growing competition from Chinese electric vehicle manufacturers.[143] At the same time, manufacturers were required to invest heavily in battery production, charging infrastructure, and workforce reskilling while maintaining their global competitiveness. These challenges intensified concerns over industrial competitiveness and employment, contributing to political resistance against several Green Deal transport measures.[144]

Politically, the Fit for 55 package of the Green Deal became one of the defining policies in von der Leyen's presidency. It remained a central priority despite the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, the subsequent energy crisis, and the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, all of which disrupted the pace of the energy transition.[145] At the same time, rising carbon prices contributed to higher energy costs, fuelling public discontent and strengthening support for far-right and agrarian parties in the June 2024 European Parliament elections.[146]

A clear example was the revision of the planned ban on new combustion engine vehicles in December 2025. Under pressure from the EPP and the German government, the policy was diluted by allowing greater flexibility for certain vehicle technologies, thus weakening the originally established targets. The European Commission changed the requirement for all new cars to be 100% zero-emission by permitting exemptions for certain hybrids and range-extender vehicles.[147]

By June 2024, most member states had missed the deadline for submitting the updated NECPs. In response, the Commission opened infringement proceedings against 13 member states, and as of March 2025, Belgium, Croatia, Estonia,

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[143]Automotive Industry, EU commission <https://single-market-economy.ec.europa.eu/sectors/automotive-industry_en> Accessed August 4, 2026

[144] The crisis facing the EU's automotive industry, EU Parliament <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/ATAG/2024/762419/EPRS_ATA(2024)762419_EN.pdf> Accessed August 4, 2026

[145] When talk meets actions – return to Commission leadership in EU environmental policy-making with the European Green Deal <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13501763.2024.2402866#abstract> accessed 17 June 2026.

[146] EU carbon markets 2024 <https://www.esma.europa.eu/sites/default/files/2024-10/ESMA50-43599798-10379_Carbon_markets_report_2024.pdf> accessed 17 June 2026.

[147]Pablo Castaño, 'The European Union Is Turning Away from the Green Transition' (Jacobin.com21 December 2025) <https://jacobin.com/2025/12/europe-merz-leyen-climate-rearmament > accessed 12 June 2026.

Poland, and Slovakia had still not submitted, raising concerns about the consistency of implementation across the EU.[148]

These limitations suggest that the effectiveness of the package relies on the ability to extend emission reduction mechanisms to more dispersed and politically sensitive sectors. These include areas where GHG emissions are more difficult to regulate, given that policies directly affect citizens, voters, or influential parties.

Overall, the Fit for 55 package has delivered measurable progress towards the EU's climate objectives through strengthened emissions regulation, increased renewable energy deployment, and greater financial support for the clean transition. However, its implementation has also exposed significant political, economic, and social trade-offs. These challenges have placed Ursula von der Leyen under increasing pressure to balance the EU's climate ambitions with concerns over industrial competitiveness, affordability, and member state support, making the implementation of Fit for 55 one of the defining pressure points of her presidency.

Adaptation Strategy

The Adaptation Strategy does not directly reduce CO_2 emissions but instead aims to minimise the damage caused by extreme weather events, economic losses, and systemic societal disruptions, while preparing member states for increasingly severe climate impacts.[149] However, this broad political commitment has not been matched by equally effective implementation.

By 2024, all 27 member states had started implementing the adaptation strategy, but monitoring is irregular.[150] The EEA's Climate resilience in Europe 2025 found that while all EEA member countries have adopted national adaptation policies, progress remains uneven. Persistent gaps in implementation, financing, monitoring and cross-border cooperation continue to limit Europe's preparedness for escalating climate risks.[151]

The strategy's impact has varied considerably across the member states. Finland, the Netherlands, and Austria are among the most successful examples, having developed advanced multisectoral plans with dedicated financing streams.

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[148] Europe's climate checkpoint: national climate plans under scrutiny <https://caneurope.org/news/climate-plans-necpr/> Accessed 18 June 2026.
[149]The EU Climate Adaptation Strategy: Towards a climate-resilient Europe? https://www.epc.eu/events/The-EU-Climate-Adaptation-Strategy-Towards-a-3b7c84/> accessed 18 June 2026.
[150] 'Adaptation' (ECNO) <https://climateobservatory.eu/building-block/adaptation > accessed 12 June 2026.
[151] European Environment Agency, Climate Resilience in Europe, 2025 — Progress and Challenges, Kopenhagen, European Environment Agency, 2026, https://www.eea.europa.eu/en/analysis/publications/climate-resilience-in-europe-2025-progress-and-challenges> accessed 5. October 2026.

Finland, for example, demonstrates one of the most developed adaptation systems within the EU. Apart from implementing the national adaptation plan, it has designed multi-sector-specific policies that target health, agriculture, forestry, and environmental protection.[152] These measures translate national adaptation objectives into sector-specific actions, such as strengthening climate-resilient agricultural and forestry practices, protecting ecosystems, and improving preparedness for climate-related health risks. Austria is also well recognised for its comprehensive adaptation framework. It has implemented 132 adaptation recommendations throughout 14 priority sectors, targeting agriculture, forestry, water management and energy[153] These recommendations promote climate-resilient agricultural and forestry practices, improved water management, and stronger resilience of critical infrastructure and energy systems.

The best example is the Dutch National Delta Programme, funded continuously since 2011, which protects the Netherlands from extreme floods and ensures freshwater security for the community, aiming to make the country water-resilient by 2050. The programme strengthens the country's climate resilience through coordinated governance and a continuous, long-term monitoring system. It combines sustained investments in flood defences, freshwater management, and spatial planning with regular assessments of climate risks, allowing measures to be adjusted as conditions change.[154]

In contrast, many Central and Eastern European countries have faced constraints in adaptation efforts as they are fossil-fuelled, industry-driven economies, which limits their financial and institutional focus on climate adaptation.[155] This dependence has created political and economic resistance to stronger climate policies, as governments face pressure from energy-intensive industries and concerns over the costs of transitioning away from fossil fuels. These competing interests can divert political attention and public funding towards energy security and economic competitiveness rather than long-term climate resilience. This showcases how the policy's main weakness is the lack of binding targets and enforcement mechanisms.

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[152] Climate ADAPT, FInland <https://climate-adapt.eea.europa.eu/en/countries-regions/countries/finland> accessed 5 July 2026

[153] The Austrian Strategy for adaptation to climate change <https://unfccc.int/sites/default/files/resource/NAP-Austria-2025.pdf> accessed 5 July 2026

[154] Climate Adapt, Delta Programme Description <https://climate-adapt.eea.europa.eu/en/metadata/portals/delta-programme> Accessed 17 June 2026

[155] Unveiling the Impact of EU Climate Adaptation Strategy on Safeguarding the Rights of the Most Vulnerable in the Czech Republic <https://www.europeum.org/wp-content/uploads/Impact-of-EU-Climate-Strategy-FINAL.pdf> Accessed 17 June 2026

Regarding its positive outcomes, the Adaptation Strategy's impact is best reflected in its social benefits, particularly through its implementation in local projects and improvements to climate information systems. Projects funded by the LIFE programme have already produced visible changes in micro-climatic variables controlling the local climatic demand, including a 15% reduction of evapotranspiration demand, soil evaporation and plant transpiration, with a 15% increase in water infiltration rates.[156] These improvements strengthen climate resilience by reducing heat stress while increasing water retention and ecosystem stability. A clear example of this is the expansion of Lisbon's urban green infrastructure through the LIFE LUNGS programme that planted over 113,000 trees and shrubs, allowing for the development of 10.9 hectares of grassland.[157] This helps reduce urban heat by providing shade and lowering surface temperatures, while the vegetation absorbs rainfall and strengthens the city's resilience to flooding and erosion. The programme also increases biodiversity and, as the trees mature, will increasingly sequester carbon, demonstrating how urban greening can simultaneously address multiple climate risks.[158]

Furthermore, the Adaptation Strategy has expanded the Climate-ADAPT platform and supported the development of the Copernicus climate services, in line with its objectives of promoting smarter adaptation by providing more accurate climate risk data, adaptation tools, case studies, and guidance for member states.[159] [160] These resources improve access to reliable climate information, helping member states identify vulnerabilities, anticipate future climate impacts, and incorporate adaptation into long-term planning and policymaking.

Despite these efforts, the policy still needs a more rigorous and developed system regarding social vulnerability to climate change. Particularly vulnerable groups include agricultural workers exposed to extreme heat and low-income households that lack access to adequate cooling systems.[161] This suggests that while adaptation planning has expanded across the EU, implementation has not consistently translated into effective protection for vulnerable populations.

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[156] Climate Resilient Options for Productive Soils and crops LIFE<https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/life/publicWebsite/project/LIFE24-CCA-FR-CROPS-LIFE-101213211/climate-resilient-options-for-productive-soils-and-crops-life>accessed 17 June 2026.

[157] The first LIFE project led by the municipality will make Lisbon greener and "cooler" <https://life-lungs.lisboa.pt/en/> accessed 18 June 2026.

[158] Breathing LIFE into Lisbon through enhanced urban green infrastructure <https://cinea.ec.europa.eu/news-events/news/breathing-life-lisbon-through-enhanced-urban-green-infrastructure-2025-06-12_en?prefLang=da&> Accessed July 31, 2026

[159] June 2025 Release: Improving and Maintaining Consistent, High-Quality Ocean Observations <https://marine.copernicus.eu/news/june-2025-release-improving-and-maintaining-consistent-high-quality-ocean-observations> accessed 18 June 2026.

[160] Discover the key services, thematic features and tools of Climate-ADAPT < https://climate-adapt.eea.europa.eu/en>accessed 18 June 2026.

[161]'Adaptation' (ECNO) <https://climateobservatory.eu/building-block/adaptation > accessed 12 June 2026.

For example, in August 2024 in Italy, agricultural worker Dalvir Singh, 54 years old, died after being exposed to temperatures above 40°C, during outside work without proper regulations, protections, or adaptations.[162] Although Italy had adopted the National Climate Change Adaptation Plan (PNACC) in 2023, implementation remained insufficient, allowing for alarming incidents that highlight the gaps between national adaptation planning and its actual practice.

Lastly, from an environmental perspective, the Adaptation Strategy recognises that emissions reductions alone are insufficient to address the climate impacts that are already unfolding.[163] As mentioned, the lack of binding targets and enforcement mechanisms results in regional disparities in adaptive capacity. These limitations are visible in southern Europe, particularly through the environmental challenges of extreme heat and drought, especially agricultural production, outdoor work, and the water availability.

A clear example is the already mentioned 2024 Valencia DANA flood in Spain, where poor adaptation implementation resulted in catastrophic events. Although the floods were triggered by an extreme rainfall event, researchers at the University of Valencia argued that the severity of the disaster was amplified by the neglect and poor management of strategies by the state.[164] Lack of policies and actions regarding land usage, flood-risk management, infrastructure resilience, and even timely responses to early warning systems are some of the implementations that could have reduced the magnitude of the disaster.[165]

Overall, the Adaptation Strategy has strengthened the member states' capacity to prepare for ongoing climatic challenges. Through the implementation of a common framework, the EU has allowed member states to develop their own national strategies and improve the system by expanding access to climatic data, developing planning management, and implementing nature-based solutions. Nevertheless, its impact is disproportionate throughout the member states because it relies on voluntary implementation. The absence of legally binding targets that hold members accountable for their national plans, together with differences in financial resources, institutional capacity, and political commitments, continue to produce significant disparities in adaptation outcomes.

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[162] 'Working here is hell': latest death of farm worker in 40C heat shocks Italy <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/article/2024/aug/27/indian-migrant-worker-death-heat-stress-italy>Accessed 17 June 2026

[163]The EU Climate Adaptation Strategy: Towards a climate-resilient Europe? https://www.epc.eu/events/The-EU-Climate-Adaptation-Strategy-Towards-a-3b7c84/> accessed 18 June 2026.

[164] Assessment of the October 2024 Cut-Off Low Event Floods Impact in Valencia (Spain) with Satellite and Geospatial Data <https://www.mdpi.com/2072-4292/17/13/2145> accessed 18 June 2026.

[165] The 2024 Spain Floods: Failures in Early Warning, Action, Coordination, and Localisation <https://www.gndr.org/2024-spain-floods-early-warning-action-coordination-and-localisation/> accessed 18 June 2026.

Nature Restoration Law

The Nature Restoration Law entered into force in 2024 as part of the EU's environmental legislation. However, early assessments by the non-governmental organisation BirdLife suggest a mismatch between the regulation's objectives and the progress achieved so far, highlighting significant disparities in national progress.[166]

Although the law has not yet been fully implemented, it has already generated political and economic opposition at the national level, particularly within the agricultural sector. Agricultural organisations and farmers staged protests in Brussels, Warsaw, Paris and Berlin throughout 2023 and 2024 during the legislative process, arguing that the law's binding restoration targets, a historic baseline, and deadlines would impose significant costs to them and their production, contributing to widespread early opposition.[167] [168]

Currently, the European People's Party, von der Leyen's political family, is fighting to weaken it, framing it as a threat to food production. The EPP claimed that it "does not want new forms of bureaucracy and reporting obligations for farmers", as it feared national governments would use the regulation to introduce reporting obligations and later blame the European Commission.[169] At the same time, opposition has grown from those who fear that climate policies will undermine economic competitiveness, particularly as the costs of the transition have become clearer. The shift towards competitiveness during von der Leyen's second term shows that she is weakening her climate agenda. This opposition highlights the tensions between the ambitions of the European Green Deal and the political realities of competitiveness.

However, a think-tank report by Bruegel suggests that the projected economic burden of implementation may be overstated, as members that prioritise the efficiency of their national restoration plan could reduce implementation costs by 81%.[170] This challenges the arguments put forward by agricultural organisations and farmers regarding the expected economic costs of the regulation.

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[166] 'BirdLife', Nature restoration takes off: mid-term assessment of National Restoration Plans <https://www.birdlife.org/news/2025/12/18/nature-restoration-takes-off-mid-term-assessment-of-national-restoration-plans > accessed 12 June 2026.
[167] A Critical Analysis of the Regulation on Nature Restoration: Have the problems been resolved? <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/362303813_A_Critical_Analysis_of_the_Regulation_on_Nature_Restoration_Have_the_problems_been_resolved>accessed 18 June 2026.
[168] ibid
[169] European People's Party (EPP) Group, EPP Group will vote against Nature Restoration Law (26 February 2026), https://www.eppgroup.eu/newsroom/epp-group-will-vote-against-nature-restoration-law, accessed 1 July 2026.
[170] Heather Grabbe and others, 'Implementing the EU Nature Restoration Law: Exploring Pathways for Member States' (Bruegel | The Brussels-based economic think tank14 July 2025) <https://www.bruegel.org/working-paper/implementing-eu-nature-restoration-law-exploring-pathways-member-states > accessed 12 June 2026.

From an environmental perspective, implementation has already begun through ecosystem restoration initiatives that contribute towards the EU's 2030 restoration objectives. Early measures include river restoration, peatland rewetting, reforestation, the restoration of carbon sinks and improvements in water retention, demonstrating early environmental progress.[171]

This progress is reflected in the 2025 LIFE SUPER EU project, which aims to scale up peatland restoration across 15 European countries. The project seeks to restore 1,285 hectares of peatland while preparing 14,600 hectares for future restoration.[172] According to the European Environmental Bureau, countries such as Spain, Germany, Finland, Portugal, and Czechia are among the most advanced in integrating restoration objectives into national planning, supported by existing biodiversity strategies, scientific assessments, and stakeholder consultation processes.[173] Spain, for example, had already linked restoration planning to ongoing river restoration and drought resilience initiatives, while Finland and Germany benefited from established ecosystem monitoring systems that facilitated compliance with the new regulation.[174]

The Nature Restoration Law is a significant development in the EU climate policy, as it is the first EU instrument to legally require active restoration of degraded ecosystems. This is particularly relevant as 80% of Europe's natural habitats are currently in poor condition and the policy focuses on restoring degraded ecosystems rather than solely conserving them.[175] Furthermore, the policy simultaneously contributes to climate mitigation through carbon sequestration and to adaptation by enhancing resilience to extreme weather events.

The EU is the second-largest GHG emitter from drained peatlands, releasing 230 million tonnes of carbon dioxide equivalent per year accounting for approximately 15% of global emissions from drained peatlands. If peatland and wetland restoration is fully implemented, it could absorb 230 million tonnes of CO_2 annually, demonstrating the considerable climate potential of ecosystem restoration.[176] At the global level, the policy counts on nature-based solutions, which could contribute up to 30% of the global emission reduction needed to limit warming to below 2°C. Nevertheless, these benefits ultimately depend on

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[171] 'The EU #NatureRestoration Law' (Environment) <https://environment.ec.europa.eu/topics/nature-and-biodiversity/nature-restoration-regulation_en?utm_ > accessed 12 June 2026.
[172] LIFE SUPER EU <https://www.eurosite.org/life-super-eu-scaling-up-peatland-restoration-in-europe/> accessed 18 June 2026.
[173] Ibid
[174] Ibid
[175] Transposition and Implementation of European Union Renewable Energy …<https://www.mdpi.com/2075-471X/15/1/3>accessed 18 June 2026.
[176] Peatlands in the EU Nature Restoration Law Proposal <https://greifswaldmoor.de/files/dokumente/Infopapiere_Briefings/2022_Policy%20Briefing%20Peatlands.pdf> accessed 18 June 2026.

effective implementation, as poor management could significantly reduce the EU's annual carbon sequestration potential. This demonstrates that ecosystem-based mitigation depends not only on restoring natural carbon sinks such as forests, wetlands, and peatlands, but also on ensuring that these ecosystems are effectively managed and protected over time to maintain their carbon storage capacity.[177]

Overall, the Nature Restoration Law has the potential to significantly reshape the EU's environmental policy by establishing the first legally binding restoration targets across members. Although still in early stages, the regulation has already started to have an influence on national planning processes, and ecosystem restoration programmes have already been launched in accordance with it and the European Green Deal. However, additional implementation is required before the regulation's effectiveness can be comprehensively evaluated. Ultimately, the results will depend on the quality and consistency of the national restoration efforts each member state offers. The regulation therefore demonstrates considerable potential, but its long-term impact will depend on the quality and consistency of national implementation and the achievement of the 2030 and 2050 targets.

Recommendations for Ursula von der Leyen

While the Fit for 55 package, the Adaptation Strategy, and the Nature Restoration Law represent significant steps forward in the EU's climate agenda, all three have faced criticism regarding gaps in implementation. The following recommendations aim to address these recurring limitations.

Leaving No Worker Behind: Fit for 55

The Fit for 55 package has faced criticism regarding the possible loss of jobs and economic insecurity for workers in sectors affected by decarbonisation. These concerns contributed to public resistance toward climate policies.[178] Employment is predicted to increase by 3% by 2030 in a scenario without the Fit for 55 regulations, whilst expected to increase by only 1.3% by 2030 with the Fit for 55 regulations.[179] Although the annual growth rate of employment in the EU remains positive, eight member states are predicted to experience a contraction in

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[177] Ecosystem Based Mitigation <https://iucn.org/our-work/topic/ecosystem-based-mitigation?utm_>accessed 18 June 2026

[178] IndustriALL Europe, *The Fit for 55 Package: unions step up their fight to reconcile ambitious climate goals with a Just Transition* (2 December 2021), https://news.industriall-europe.eu/Article/682, accessed 17 June 2026.

[179] Borgonovi, F. et al., *"The effects of the EU Fit for 55 package on labour markets and the demand for skills"* (2023), https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/the-effects-of-the-eu-fit-for-55-package-on-labour-markets-and-the-demand-for-skills_6c16baac-en.html, accessed 17 June 2026.

employment: Romania and Poland.[180] In addition, several sectors will experience a loss in employment levels, including agriculture, energy, mining and extraction, energy-intensive industries, and transport and storage.[181]

The legislative package focuses on reducing emissions and transitioning to clean energy. However, many workers lack the necessary skills to work with the green technology that this transition requires. To address this gap, the EU must establish dedicated programmes that focus on retraining workers from carbon-intensive industries. A partial framework for this already exists through the Just Transition Mechanism, though its scope extends beyond reskilling.[182] This issue therefore needs a dedicated policy response, rather than being included within a wider set of objectives. The programmes could be funded through existing EU mechanisms, including the Social Climate Fund and the Just Transition Mechanism. Member states need to cooperate with vocational schools and private companies to develop training programmes tailored to local market needs. This recommendation directly addresses a major public concern by facilitating employment opportunities whilst also prioritising worker protection.

This approach is not without precedent. The German federal government established the Coal Commission in 2018 with the aim of gradually phasing out coal.[183] The phase-out was particularly controversial among workers, who feared being left without employment. However, trade unions negotiated early retirement schemes, retraining for alternative employment, and direct compensation for those who declined retraining.[184] This serves as evidence that reskilling can be successfully implemented and that shifting away from carbon-intensive industries does not necessarily need to result in unemployment.

Closing the Accountability Gap: Adaptation Strategy

The Adaptation Strategy has faced significant criticism regarding the broadness of its goals and the absence of legally binding standards.[185] As adaptation needs

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[180] Eurofound, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg, Fit for 55 climate package: Impact on EU employment by 2030 (2023), https://www.eurofound.europa.eu/en/publications/all/fit-55-climate-package-impact-eu-employment-2030, accessed 3 July 2026.
[181] Ibid.
[182] European Commission, *The Just Transition Mechanism: making sure no one is left behind*, https://commission.europa.eu/topics/regional-and-urban-policy/just-transition-mechanism_en, accessed 17 June 2026.
[183] World Resources Institute, *Germany's "Coal Commission": Guiding an Inclusive Coal Phase-Out* (1 April 2021), https://www.wri.org/snapshots/germanys-coal-commission-guiding-inclusive-coal-phase-out, accessed 4 July 2026.
[184] Nicole Kleinheisterkamp-González, *Agencies of transition: why German coal workers are not accepting an energy transition despite social provisions* (4 February 2025), https://iopscience.iop.org/article/10.1088/2753-3751/adaec2, accessed 4 July 2026.
[185] Klaas Lenaerts, Simone Tagliapietra, Guntram B. Wolff, *How Can the European Union Adapt to Climate Change?* (2022),

and performance vary across member states, it is difficult to determine whether countries are adequately preparing against climate risks such as heat stress, floods, and droughts. Furthermore, the policy relies on existing EU funding mechanisms rather than dedicated financing, which raises questions about whether adaptation will be prioritised over competing policies.

The strategy encourages member states to develop national adaptation plans, but implementation varies significantly by country, making it difficult to assess progress as a whole. To address this gap, the EU must establish a dedicated fund for non-governmental organisations and independent research institutions to monitor and report on member states' adaptation progress. These organisations are uniquely equipped to assess local vulnerabilities and share best practices. Their findings could be compiled into a publicly accessible annual report on adaptation progress across the EU, therefore promoting accountability through transparency rather than legal obligation. A tool already partially serving this purpose is Reportnet 3, an online platform used by member states to report progress on GHG inventories and national adaptation plans.[186] Since the tool already exists, the additional economic costs would be limited primarily to non-governmental organisation funding. This recommendation addresses the lack of accountability whilst preserving national flexibility.

From resistance to restoration: Nature Restoration Law

The Nature Restoration Law encountered strong opposition from farmers, which significantly watered down the policy.[187] The problem was driven by concerns over low prices, unfair competition and burdensome regulations.[188] These concerns come from a lack of knowledge and resources during the transition. Many farmers do not know how to farm sustainably and they fear that the transition will cost them their livelihoods. To address this, Ursula von der Leyen must establish free training programmes for farmers, teaching them sustainable practices, such as paludiculture, and how to use new technologies that maintain productivity while meeting the restoration targets. Member states can partner with farming cooperatives, agricultural universities and agricultural technical schools to develop these programmes. At the same time, von der Leyen must create a dedicated compensation fund separate from CAP to support farmers during the transition. It will cover lost productivity and provide financial incentives

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https://www.intereconomics.eu/contents/year/2022/number/5/article/how-can-the-european-union-adapt-to-climate-change.html, accessed 4 July 2026.

[186] European Environment Agency, Reportnet, https://reportnet.europa.eu/, accessed 18 June 2026.

[187] Ajit Niranjan, The Guardian, <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2024/feb/27/european-parliament-votes-for-watered-down-law-to-restore-nature-farmers-protests > accessed 12 June 2026.

[188] Alan Matthews , 'The Farmer Protests in the EU', page 1 <https://feps-europe.eu/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/10.-The-farmer-protests-in-the-EU.pdf >, accessed 12 June 2026.

for adopting sustainable practices. Without a dedicated fund, farmers will face financial insecurity, continuing the initial resistance. The fund must be separated because CAP is designed more for food production and security, not for large-scale nature restoration. As a result, farmers receive fair compensation and it attracts private investment.

Furthermore, the policy was affected by the misinformation spread by the EPP, Ursula von der Leyen's own party. The EPP spread contested claims that the law destroys villages and threatens food production.[189] This amplifies farmers' fears and undermines public trust in the policy, making it difficult to implement. A contradiction is created between von der Leyen's climate agenda and her own party. To resolve it, von der Leyen must publicly confront and correct the false claims spread by her own party. By doing so, she restores trust in the legislation and demonstrates that her climate agenda takes priority over internal party politics.

Conclusion

During her time as President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen proved to be one of the most influential European climate leaders. Although it started as a campaign promise, she established the European Green Deal as a framework that reshaped the continent's climate policy. From her defining moment in the 2019 candidate speech to the implementation of strong climate policies like Fit for 55, the Adaptation Strategy, and the Nature Restoration Law, Ursula von der Leyen pursued an agenda that linked environmental goals with economic transformation.

Europe faces ongoing severe climate challenges which are escalating fast. Heatwaves have become the deadliest climate threat, responsible for the majority of climate-related deaths across the continent. Extreme weather events such as floods, droughts and wildfires have become a frequent reality for Europeans, causing billions in economic losses and displacing thousands. Furthermore, the degradation of ecosystems and biodiversity threatens food production, water security and public health, with 80% of Europe's natural habitats now in poor condition.

Von der Leyen responded to these challenges with a strong policy framework. The Fit for 55 package is a legislative agenda that aims to reduce GHG emissions by at least 55% by 2030 compared to 1990 levels. It includes the ETS, which puts a price on carbon and has raised billions for the clean transition, alongside the Social Climate Fund, which provides €86.7 billion to support vulnerable

[189] Guillot L and Bartosz Brzeziński, "EPP Pitches Itself as Farmers' Party Ahead of 2024 European Election" (PoliticoMay 4, 2023) <https://www.politico.eu/article/european-peoples-party-farmer-rural-interest-2024-european-election/?no-geo-redirect > accessed July 24, 2026

households during the green transition. The Adaptation Strategy acknowledges that certain climate changes are unavoidable and Europe needs to take action against climate risks. It focuses on improving climate data, integrating resilience across sectors, and encouraging member states to develop national adaptation plans. The Nature Restoration Law, adopted in 2024, is the first continent-wide law requiring restoration of degraded ecosystems, mandating that member states restore at least 20% of EU land and sea areas by 2030.

The impact of these policies has been significant but all of them are under a threat of being watered down. Fit for 55 has driven emissions down, renewable electricity increased from 34% in 2019 to 47% in 2024, and the ETS raised €38.8 billion in 2024 alone. Yet rising carbon prices, which reached €80 per tonne, have made energy more expensive for households and industry, fortifying public dissatisfaction and contributing to far-right gains in the 2024 European Parliament elections. The combustion engine ban was diluted under pressure from the EPP and the German government. Meanwhile, the Adaptation Strategy has expanded climate planning across all member states. However, only half of member states have fully operational national plans, and the gap between planning and practice has significant consequences. Furthermore, the Nature Restoration Law has shown early promise through the LIFE SUPER EU project restorating peatlands across 15 countries, with the potential to absorb 230 million tonnes of CO_2 across EU-wide peatland and wetland restoration. Yet it has been weakened because of the public resistance, and its success depends entirely on how member states implement the targets.

The results show that while the policies have delivered progress, all three of them have faced significant criticism. The Fit for 55 package risks deepening economic insecurity, the Adaptation Strategy lacks legally binding targets, and the Nature Restoration Law faces resistance from the agricultural sector and misinformation spread by von der Leyen's own party, EPP. The policies mentioned are still in the process of implementation, which means that full effectiveness remains to be determined in the years ahead.

These pressures define Ursula von der Leyen's second term. Her personal background as a doctor, combined with her experience in social affairs and defence, equipped her to navigate these trade-offs. She has presented climate action as an economic opportunity, arguing that the transition to sustainability can drive innovation, create jobs and enhance European competitiveness. But the opposition's perception that she is prioritising economic growth over environmental protection threatens to undermine trust in von der Leyen's leadership and in the Green Deal. The way Ursula von der Leyen manages this narrative will determine the legacy of her climate leadership.

To address these weaknesses, von der Leyen must take action. First, for Fit for 55, she must establish dedicated retraining programmes for workers in carbon industries to address job loss fears and build public support for the transition. Second, for the Adaptation Strategy, she must fund independent monitoring of member states' adaptation progress and publish annual reports to promote accountability through transparency. Third, for the Nature Restoration Law, she must confront the misinformation spread by her own party, the EPP, while simultaneously creating free training programmes for farmers and a dedicated compensation fund separate from the CAP to support them through the transition.

To conclude, Ursula von der Leyen is an economic transformation-driven climate leader. She linked environmental policy to competitiveness, by understanding that climate change is a structural challenge, affecting all aspects of economic and social life. Indeed, von der Leyen reframed climate action as an opportunity for growth. However, the shift toward competitiveness in her second term raised questions about her commitment to the Green Deal's original ambition. Nevertheless, what remains certain is that Ursula von der Leyen made climate policy central among Europe's goals.

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