

PERSPECTIVE OPEN ACCESS

What Comes After the European Green Deal? Analyzing the State and Perspective of the EU's Land Use and Conservation Policy

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ABSTRACT

The EU's Green Deal, a comprehensive policy package for sustainability transition in Europe, was launched in 2019 with the ambition to demonstrate global environmental leadership. It has been successful in establishing new EU environmental policy instruments, with a strong focus on sustainable land use and conservation, such as the EU Nature Restoration Law or the EU Deforestation Regulation. Recently, however, the Green Deal has lost political traction, and its sustainable land use and conservation-oriented policy instruments are under pressure or have already been cut back. In this paper, we undertake a multidisciplinary assessment of the Green Deal, presenting four theoretical perspectives (policy analysis, international relations, political economy/macroeconomics, and political ecology). These perspectives provide a so far missing comprehensive analysis of the strategic situation of EU land use and conservation policy, rooted in complementary explanations for the emergence, evolution, and faltering of the Green Deal. We move on to present two pathways for future EU land use and conservation policy—one assuming a continuation of currently visible patterns of deterioration in environmental ambitions; the other arguing for the possibility of reinvigorating the policy as what may be labeled as a new, Social Green Deal.

1 | Background and Objective

Over the last decade, global environmental policy has come under pressure. This is due to the combined impact of adverse economic interests, rising geopolitical tensions, a diffusion of global power, and emerging patterns of deglobalization (Linn 2017; Braw 2024). In this context, the importance of regional regimes in developing diverging, and at times competing, policy responses to global environmental challenges has become evident (Zhang et al. 2022).

The European Union (EU) is a prominent example of such a regional regime. In 2019, the EU launched the Green Deal,

a comprehensive policy package for sustainability transition. Drawing on the rationale to overcome “climate change and environmental degradation,” the Green Deal sets the ambition for Europe to become “the first climate-neutral continent” (European Commission 2024a). It aims to “transform the EU into a modern, resource-efficient and competitive economy,” building on the core objectives of “no net emissions of greenhouse gases by 2050, economic growth decoupled from resource use, (and) no person and no place left behind” (European Commission 2024a).

Considering land use, the Green Deal puts a strong emphasis on the combined aspects of climate mitigation and biodiversity

conservation. This materialized in new EU Biodiversity and EU Forest strategies. It also resulted in the adoption of new laws, for instance, the EU's Nature Restoration Law which sets a targets to restore at least 20% of the EU's degraded ecosystems by 2030; and the EU's Deforestation Regulation commanding that agricultural commodities and timber placed on the EU market must neither contribute directly to global deforestation and forest degradation nor be illegally sourced.

The European Green Deal has recently been under strong pressure. As *The Guardian* noted in 2024, “since the turn of the year, the U-turns and capitulations have come thick and fast” as “Brussels and national governments have been busily sounding a disorderly, panicked retreat on environmental targets” (The Guardian 2024). This backlash was profound for various policies targeting conservation and sustainable land use: for agriculture, the Sustainable Use Regulation (targeting a reduction of pesticides) has been called off, and the use of glyphosate has been extended for 10 more years. For forests, attempts to define more precisely what sustainable or biodiversity-oriented management could mean have failed under the EU's Taxonomy regulating sustainable finance (Begemann et al. 2025). The proposed EU Forest Monitoring Law failed mostly due to the resistance of Member States with economically significant forest sectors. Finally, the full implementation of the EU's Deforestation Regulation has been postponed twice. This is due to growing concerns about costs and red tape—resulting *inter alia* in discussions about the creation of a “no risk category” that would give an advantage to EU internal producers vis-à-vis their EU external competitors. For wildlife conservation, the recent case of lowering the protection status for wolves is another symptom of dwindling environmental ambitions as EU institutions face increasing criticism from various groups, ranging from farmers to the Political Right/conservative parties across the EU (Guillot 2024).

The elections for the European Parliament in the summer of 2024 have reinforced this trend. Voters generally shifted to the Political Right, and European sceptics have increased their share in the parliament (Wong 2024). Concurrently, the EU Commission and member states' political leaders changed political rhetoric. They increasingly underline Europe's global (economic) competitiveness as a key paradigm (European Commission 2024b). In line with this shift, the Green Deal has been rhetorically replaced i.a. by an envisaged new “Clean Industrial Deal” emphasizing industry competitiveness (Euractiv 2024). And even more, as Politico (2025) recently reported, the Green Deal has become politically so “toxic” that members of the European People's Party, the party of the President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen and the largest party in the parliament, “made its support for a Parliament text conditional on stripping out those two words.” Drawing an analogy to the popular Harry Potter novels, the former flagship policy has seemingly turned into a Voldemortian must-not-be-named term.

In this paper, we examine the emergence and faltering of the EU Green Deal by using four complementary theoretical perspectives: (1) regulatory policy analysis, (2) international relations, (3) political economy, and (4) political ecology. Doing so helps us to generate a novel, comprehensive perspective on the EU Green Deal, including rationales for its recent political collapse.

We conclude by exploring two distinct possible futures of the EU's land use and conservation policy.

2 | Analysis: Explaining the Green Deal and Its Faltering

2.1 | Perspective 1: Ideological-Material Promise and a “Strange-Bedfellow Coalition” Trap

This perspective focuses on the EU Green Deal through a policy analysis lens. It considers the Green Deal to be an exponent of the ideology of *ecological modernization* (Mol et al. 2013). Ecological modernization refers to the vision to align economic growth with environmental protection through a socio-technical transition toward a green economy. The rationale is thus to reform capitalist-industrial societies “from within,” drawing on innovation and green competition (Mol et al. 2013). Ecological modernization is arguably at the core of the Green Deal.

As opposed to narratives arguing for the necessity to constrain economic growth or fundamentally reform the economic system (see Wanner 2015), ecological modernization holds considerable potential to create political support among both environmental and economic constituencies. It builds the ideological basis for strategic alliances between environmentalists, industries (and regulators) labeled as “Baptist-bootlegger (televangelist)” or “strange-bedfellow” coalitions in the literature (Yandle 1999). These alliances unite policy stakeholders who hold different policy beliefs but share an interest in a certain regulatory policy. They form based on complementarity in moral arguments of environmental protection (held by environmental groups or agencies), vested economic interests in gaining competitive advantages (held by business sectors), and bureaucratic interests in expanding power through regulation (held by public regulators) (Yandle 1999). Several examples for such alliances can be found in the EU's land use and conservation policy sector, for example, for the EU's LULUCF Regulation targeting land use-related carbon sinks and sources, the EU's Habitats and Birds Directives (Sotirov et al. 2021), and the EU's Deforestation Regulation (Berning and Sotirov 2024). “Strange-bedfellow coalitions” are acknowledged for their critical role in enabling environmental regulation. They create support across ideological camps by drawing on win-win narratives, that is, aligning economic promises with environmental protection. Yet, they are also criticized, for instance, for disguising environmental protection versus economic development trade-offs, and for displacing negative impacts of new regulation on groups not involved in the alliances (Yandle 1999).

We argue that the win-win rationale of the EU Green Deal over time has turned into what one may call a “strange-bedfellow” trap. This is as: (1) economic benefits from win-win promises are not (yet) visible—while burdens for businesses are increasingly dominating public debates; (2) environmental promises remain unachieved or are not visible enough, while the societal appeal of such promises has waned compared to 2019 when the Green Deal was launched, (3) “strange-bedfellow” coalitions have contributed to debatable policy designs creating disadvantages for third parties (as, for instance, observable for the EU's Deforestation Regulation's potentially negative impacts on smallholders [Van Noordwijk et al. 2025]), and (4) opposing

business actors, EU critical governments and respective elected members of parliaments exploit ignored trade-offs to mobilize against the Green Deal. Altogether, this weakens the Green Deal's ecomodernist promise, resulting in compromising adjustments to please opposing economic interests within the EU. This, in turn, increasingly questions the (environmental) legitimization and promise of the overall project.

2.2 | Perspective 2: Green Hegemony and Multi-Level Constraints

From an international relations perspective, the EU Green Deal can be conceived as a project of the European Commission to claim both global and EU-internal leadership. Through the Green Deal, termed by von der Leyen as Europe's "man-on-the-moon moment" (Simon 2019), the EU positioned itself as a global leader in the green economic transition (Grimm et al. 2021; Almeida et al. 2023). With global hegemonic military and economic power becoming increasingly diffused (Singh and Woolcock 2022), aiming for green discursive leadership holds considerable promise. Green hegemony occurs as an alternative, compensatory choice for Europe's relatively decreasing demographic, economic, and military power, aligning with the classical notion of Europe as a "normative power" (Manners 2002). The Green Deal, moreover, positioned the European Commission as a frontrunner vis-à-vis its member states (Steininger et al. 2022).

The faltering of Green Deal policies would, under this perspective, be the outcome of three main developments: (1) insufficient domestic support for environmental leadership of the EU, compromising its credibility domestically and abroad—as exemplified by the inclusion of natural gas as sustainable investment cases owing to pressure from, *inter alia*, the German government in the EU Taxonomy on Sustainable finance (Begemann et al. 2025); (2) green advancements in other regions across the globe questioning Europe's leadership in that field—as exemplified by the rise of China as the greatest producer of renewable energy and electric mobility; and (3) changing geopolitical dynamics with a returning emphasis on (hard) military strength and Machiavellian alliances as opposed to leadership models driving on normative power (Dahal 2024). Trapped in a multi-level game of domestic resistance, global competition, and Machiavellian geopolitics, the EU Green Deal is losing momentum as a concept for global leadership, eroding both its normative appeal and transformative potential.

2.3 | Perspective 3: Economic Stimulus and Incipient Deglobalization

From a political economy perspective, the Green Deal can be conceived as a policy project of Keynesian fiscal stimulus to counteract economic crises and decline—similar to what the New Deal policy package was to the United States in the 1930s. The Global Financial Crisis of 2008/09 marked the ending stages of a remarkable post-WWII boom connected to progressing globalization and, on average, high economic growth rates. Since the financial crisis, the benefits of further trade liberalization have increasingly been questioned (Braw 2024). This was spurred

by the COVID crisis from 2020 onward that also exposed the vulnerability of heavily globalized supply chains.

Policy responses to sustain the capitalist system have included increased public spending, monetary easement and debts, so as to sustain low-to-moderate economic growth (Wunder et al. 2021). The EU Green Deal, not least through the post-COVID National Recovery and Resilience Plans, was one of the policy pathways to boost fiscal expansion despite overstretched public budgets in the hope of counteracting economic crisis, including under the narrative of "building back better."

Taken together, exhausted public budgets and crisis symptoms in global trade systems spurred an increasing willingness to turn toward regulatory policies giving advantages to European producers, departing from the free trade imperative. Green Deal policies tie into an emerging trend toward slowing globalization, increasing trade regionalization, and eventually also import protectionism (incipient deglobalization), partially legitimized by an environmental/sustainability rationale (Goldberg and Reed 2023). The current policies of the 2nd Trump Administration in the United States—and possible countermeasures in affected countries and blocks—are in line with this more significant trend, even though they are clearly not justified by environmental arguments.

In sum, under a political economy perspective, the Green Deal can be interpreted as an attempt to sustain Europe's economy through renewed public spending and innovation, but increasingly also protectionist regulation, supported through a sustainability transition rationale. The "hollowing-out" (Winkel 2024) of the Green Deal would then also follow an economic rationale, in two distinct but related ways: either through deteriorating environmental policies in cases where they violate economic interests of EU based businesses (e.g., as it has been the case for agricultural environmental regulations), or through measures targeting "green products" (such as electric vehicles or batteries) from outside the EU competitors (Fang 2023).

2.4 | Perspective 4: Societal Change and Expanding Green Frontiers

From a political ecology perspective, the EU Green Deal can be understood as a project restructuring access to natural resources within and outside the EU. The Green Deal marks a division between the aspirations of two distinct and mostly Western Europe-centered elites: industrial-financial capital on one hand, interested in investing in intensified natural resource use (such as agriculture, forest biomass, or renewable energy) supported by the EU's common market and competition rules, and green urban milieus on the other hand, demanding strengthened environmental protection. Both ambitions have been incorporated under the Green Deal's main paradigm of ecological modernization. And yet, both ambitions meet with resistance not only beyond the EU boundaries, but also within the EU territory itself. Notably, within the EU, peripheral regions in countries that joined the EU only in the last two decades (most of them in Eastern and South Eastern Europe) are in the spotlight of both green-growth and conservation interests (Krasznai Kovacs 2021). Political ecology scholarship has labeled these new governance orders brought by

TABLE 1 | Synthesis of theoretical perspectives on the EU Green Deal.

Theoretical perspective	Policy making	Green Deal logic	Main drivers	Main challenges
Policy analysis	Interplay of moral values, vested economic and bureaucratic interests	EU regulation for ecological modernization aligning economic prosperity and environmental benefits	Strategic industry-environment-regulator coalitions	Ideological trap if economic promises do not materialize, changing value priorities, unresolved trade-offs, red tape, and transaction costs
International relations	Competition for hegemony	Normative (soft) power (green values and market-based leadership)	International security and global leadership	Lack of domestic support, international prevalence of hard power (military and economic)
Political economy	Sustaining capitalism	Economic stimulus and green regulatory protectionism	Economic gains	Waning public resources and competitiveness, economic interests opposing regulation
Political ecology	Appropriation of natural resources	Formation of green frontiers legitimizing both conservation interventions and green extractivism	Competing demands for natural resources	Incompatible governmentalities, uneven distribution of costs and benefits, local resistance, and environmental justice concerns

green-growth and conservation as ‘green frontiers’ (Peluso and Lund 2011).

“Green frontiers” have boomed under the Green Deal. This is as, on the one hand, conservation ideas have been spurred, *inter alia*, through the EU’s new Biodiversity Strategy, and more recently in the EU’s Nature Restoration Law. On the other hand, natural resource-based industries are also expanding into peripheral regions of the EU territory (Saleth and Varov 2023), often supported by subsidies. From the perspective of green frontiers, resistance to the Green Deal is hence grounded in two separate but connected fields of tension: First, it is rooted in the alleged incompatibility of a green economy (including the agricultural, forestry, fisheries, or renewable energy sectors) with conservation, while both make claims on the same territories. Second, it is spurred by the resistance of rural populations in regions rich in biodiversity and natural resources, but often economically underdeveloped—in parts exploited by adverse vested interests to self-servingly mobilize either against the Green Deal, or against the EU itself.

Table 1 summarizes the four theoretical arguments formulated above.

3 | Outlook: Continued Corrosion or Reform Toward a Social Green Deal?

What takeaways does our multi-perspective assessment of the EU’s Green Deal point to? First, we add to the emerging literature on the EU Green Deal (Almeida et al. 2023; Arezki et al. 2024; Pollex and Lenschow 2025; Ramcikovic-Suominen 2025) by looking for explanations from distinct social science schools of thought—thus providing a set of complementary theoretically framed perspectives, applicable for future empirical work on the meaning and functioning of the EU’s environmental, land use and conservation policies.

Second, our assessment allows for conclusions for future EU policy development in those fields. We see actually two main pathways for the Green Deal arising from our analysis—one assuming a continuation of the key patterns identified above, and the other arguing for the possibility of a socially embedded renewal—and transformation—toward a Social Green Deal.

For the first pathway, a further erosion of environmental ambitions related to land use and conservation policies can be expected. Specifically, policies aiming at conservation within the EU would remain under pressure, including the Nature Restoration Law and the Natura 2000 network. For policies mainly targeting conservation abroad, such as the EU Deforestation Regulation, an increasing shift to predominantly serve protectionist demands would be logical. Global environmental leadership becomes diffused along this pathway, and moves elsewhere. We hypothesize that only significantly more painful environmental crises, for instance, related to accelerating climate change, could again reshape policy priorities in the EU. The impacts of increasingly extreme heatwaves on both ecosystems and people are already an indication for such future crises that could lever another policy change.

The second pathway would require a political renewal and, specifically, better societal embedding of the Green Deal, which could follow three main principles:

First, a key focus would be on increasing transparency regarding the social, environmental, and economic consequences of land-use and conservation policy decisions. This includes assessments of the trade-offs and synergies between environmental and economic interests, made accessible for public scrutiny and debate. Notably, this would require a dismantling of the policy narrative of harmonic congruence of economic growth, environmental protection, and equity. Anchor points for mitigation policies would need to be identified, where also winners could (partially) compensate losers from a green transition. Being clear on trade-offs and mitigation strategies would deprive anti-environmental

lobbies of their usual argumentative ‘hooks’ for mobilizing societies for their vested economic interests, and could create the basis for broader political and societal support.

Second, more societal involvement to increase the legitimacy of environmental reforms would be critical, including debates about the need (and limitations) for cooperation at the EU level. This would aim at moving more decision-making processes from little transparent lobbying silos (including Baptist-bootlegger constellations) to more direct forms of public engagement and approval, also including regions at the heart of the “green frontier.” It could possibly even involve European-wide referenda by citizens on key questions and trade-offs, or EU-wide public consultations on environmental matters, but also regional bottom-up participation to establish regional transformation priorities under a common European-wide regulatory framework. Sociological research has consistently shown considerable support for nature conservation in the EU on a general level, but there are also numerous examples of bottom-up mobilization against conservation projects if they are perceived or portrayed as being enforced technocratically top down. Socially anchoring the Green Deal for land use and conservation policy through broad societal participation could help overcoming this paradox.

Finally, increasing the consistency between EU-external and EU-internal environmental policies, but also across EU member states, remains important to level the global playing fields. This includes the full implementation of rules the EU has globally agreed on (e.g., the post-2020 Global Biodiversity Framework), also within the EU territory, and of common environmental standards across all major land-use types within and outside the EU.

Whatever the fate of the Green Deal and its policies is, the necessity to deal with environmental decline will not vanish, but rather increase going into the future. This will render the sustainability transformation of global economic systems as being increasingly inevitable, and with that increases the prospects of gains from leading this transition vis-à-vis the profits gained from continuing harmful exploitation patterns. Turning the EU Green Deal into a Voldemortian must-not-be-named term may help policymakers to survive politically for the next years. Socially embedding the Green Deal may, however, create a Harry Potter moment of legitimacy, and new inspiration for a sustainable future EU’s land use and conservation policy that is rooted in public support.

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