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European Council's summit: Delivering the Paris Agreement

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The outgoing energy and climate commissioner, Miguel Arias Cañete, has been clear on many occasions: the EU's current targets are not sufficiently ambitious to be in line with the Paris Agreement target of a maximum 1.5-degree warming.

The IPCC's 2018 special report concluded that to meet the target, we would need to globally achieve net zero emissions between 2045 and 2055. It is clear that at last week's European Council, the only way for the heads of the EU Member States to be consistent with the scientific consensus was to commit to net

We know that setting a clear and unambiguous target for a challenge of this nature helps economic actors make the right decisions; and we know that the longer the setting of targets is delayed, the more that benefit reduces. Reaching net zero requires significant investment in the right infrastructure – and, just as importantly, avoiding investment in the wrong one.

The right conditions

The way in which the 2030 targets are met can itself create the conditions for meeting – or failing to meet – longer-term goals. For example, if more expensive investments in renewables are delayed, the costs of meeting net zero by 2050 will increase.

This delay could be due to the fact that lower-emission fossil fuels – such as gas – can help meet the 2030 targets – or, worse, because of new fossil-fuel infrastructure being put in place.

Needless to say, if the investments are delayed, the political difficulty of putting in place the necessary policies over the opposition of incumbent industries will only be greater.

The UK has now set a net zero target based on advice from the independent Committee on Climate Change, which recommends that not only is such a target necessary and feasible, but that it is cost-effective; other Member States, like Finland, have done the same; and many leaders were pushing for the right answer.

The EU 27 need to make sure that they agree the target unanimously at the next European Council. Otherwise, the progressive majority needs to make it clear that it wants the Commission to bring forward proposals for adoption by majority voting to set the net zero target in law, and use it as the basis for detailed legislation setting out the pathway to achieving it.

Opposition within the EU

There are, of course, a number of Member States, which still have reservations about the 2050 target – particularly Poland and the Czech Republic.

The European Council's discussions aim to always reach decisions by consensus. This means that even a minority of Member States, which would otherwise not be sufficient to stop legislation from being passed, can hold up progress.

When this happens – as it did at last week's summit – the way in which the European Council deals with the problem is an important test for its ability to provide clear leadership for the EU over this crucial period.

Ideally, the hesitant Member States will be persuaded, and a clear target for net zero can be adopted. Failing that, however, there are other approaches that can be adopted.

The alternatives

more optimistic assessments of the climate contribution from the CAP. This comes despite the fact that the European Court of Auditors has previously criticised plans to reform the CAP and the widespread concerns from stakeholders that greater flexibility for Member States on CAP spending could lead to weaker delivery of environmental objectives.

Focusing expenditure more directly on climate mitigation – and adaptation – would help to turn the climate ambitions into reality, provided there is a clear understanding of the expected contribution to emissions reductions and increased resilience.

Budget

If the resistance from individual Member States to the net zero target countries, the countries that are net contributors to the European Budget and are under pressure to reduce expenditure could make a clear bargain:

A higher level of expenditure through structural funds and the CAP could be agreed for the Member States that do sign up to their share of a net zero target – on the basis that greater investment is necessary to ensure decarbonisation.

In the cohesion budget, resources made available to coal-mining or other heavy industry areas could be made conditional on a commitment to decarbonisation.

There is a clear solidarity element to the climate debate, with the need to demonstrate that social and regional impacts of decarbonisation will be addressed through a Just Transition.

But solidarity is a two-way process; and where a Member State fails to sign up to the long-term objective, the funding could be withheld. If continued coal production in some regions – and a continued reluctance to address agricultural emissions – is damaging the economic prosperity of future generations across the EU, there is a strong case for not supporting the economy of those regions or those sectors until there is a commitment to the collective policy of change.

Other investments could help address both the social and wider political challenges associated with decarbonisation.

In some areas, concerns over the impact on energy bills of vulnerable consumers – particularly older households – is a political constraint on ambition. This could be addressed by making available funds for a targeted programme of energy efficiency investment for disadvantaged households.

Once again, these funds would be available only to those Member States that sign up to targets consistent with net zero emissions by 2050. As IEEP research has shown, European expenditure has been effective in the past on energy efficiency – although it could be better targeted.

Decision making

Because it always aims to achieve consensus, this sort of explicit bargaining is not comfortable for the

In particular, the normal legislative route also involves the European Parliament, where debates between Euro-and climate-sceptic currents on the one hand, and the groups in favour of climate progress on the other, can play out in an open and democratic way.

In this case, European leaders may take the view that they cannot afford to emerge from their next discussions without a decision and a way forward.

If the reluctant Member States remain unconvinced, perhaps the best approach will be to clear in the next European Council conclusions about that difference of opinion.

The majority of Member States could also make clear their intention to press ahead, and to call on the Commission to come forward with the necessary legislation on both climate targets – and on a more directly climate-oriented European budget, including through more ambitious environmental reform of the Common Agricultural Policy.

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