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## It's not easy being green in an austere climate: the impact of austerity upon environmental policy in Europe<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

*Environmental policy is now formally embedded in national policy agendas across Europe and is recognised as being an important function of government. However, there are good reasons to suspect that this policy sector may have been - and continues to be - negatively affected by the economic downturn and the austerity policies that have come in its wake. The election of the new Juncker Commission in November 2014 has placed austerity at the heart of EU policy-making. Following the merger of both the Environment brief and the Climate brief with other portfolios, environmental issues appear to be a lower priority than economic growth. Yet, measuring policy change is notoriously fraught with difficulties, as change may simply be stagnation rather than the deliberate dismantling of policy. Or, alternatively, political actors may use events, such as the Economic Crisis, as a fig leaf to disguise long-cherished policy ambitions. This paper will explore the conceptual and methodological difficulties associated with capturing environmental policy change in response to the Economic Crisis. The paper will review the various measures that can be used to assess policy - such as quantitative and qualitative measures, budgetary changes and institutional alterations - before establishing a methodology that is applied to a study of environmental policy change in Europe. The paper will be of particular interest to researchers specialising in environmental politics, comparative analysis, and research methodology.*

Keywords: Europe, austerity, crisis, environmental policy.

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## **Introduction**

The global financial and Eurozone crises that have afflicted European economies since 2008 have caused radical changes to the economic strategies of many states (Blyth, 2013; Hodson & Quaglia, 2009; Magalhães, 2014; Russel & Benson, 2014). The replacement of stimulus packages with austerity measures that seek to roll back public spending has dominated the European policy agenda since 2010 (Lekakis & Kousis, 2013; Leschke *et al.*, 2015; Zezza, 2012), with ramifications for many policy sectors. Prior to the wave of austerity measures, the European Union (EU) had sought to define its international identity by developing ambitious environmental policies, such as the Climate and Energy package for 2020 enacted in 2009, and by taking a lead at international environmental negotiations (Kilian & Elgström, 2010; Parker & Karlsson, 2010; van Schaik & Schunz, 2012; Schreurs & Tiberghien, 2007; Wurzel & Connelly, 2011). However, the financial crisis constitutes an archetypal exogenous shock with attendant ramifications for existing environmental governance structures in Europe (*see* Buckley & Howarth, 2010; Roubini & Mihm, 2011). Environmental policy is therefore of particular importance to scholars of European Studies, as austerity holds the potential to shape the fabric of the EU's international identity. If the presence of a pro-austerity narrative can force change in this most symbolic of policy areas, any policy area addressed by the EU could be influenced. Moreover, we contend that the pursuit of austerity is particularly damaging for environmental policy, and that the prospect of a weakened EU environmental policy is a significant concern. Many environmental issues, such as climate change, require long-term solutions, such that the policies developed in the mid-to-late 2010s may prove vital. As such, the establishment of a methodology with which to measure the impact of austerity on this policy field is of great analytical value. Furthermore, once established, such an approach may be used to assess changes across the EU's other policy spheres.

Below, we briefly outline the EU's response to the 2008 financial crisis, and critically review the implications for European environmental policy. From here, we review extant methods for measuring the impact of austerity upon environmental policy in Europe, namely: environmental quality indicators; environmental policy budgets; and policy density and intensity (Jordan *et al.*, 2013; Knill *et al.*, 2009). We suggest that a combination of these measures, alongside a broader analysis of the policy context and the perception of shifts – or indeed stasis – in that context by key policy-makers, offers a comprehensive methodological toolkit. This toolkit can enable a holistic understanding of the impacts of the crisis upon EU environmental policy and analytical leverage for measuring policy change in the field.

## **A Pro-Austerity Commission?**

Since 2010, the European response to the global financial and economic crises has been dominated by a narrative of austerity, with governments seeking to bolster confidence in their economies by rolling back public spending (Blyth, 2013, p.53-92; Krugman, 2012, p.191-199). Austerity has been a significant policy challenge for European states and has become an existential crisis for the EU, as the organization has sought

to navigate competing economic narratives in its member states (Gravey, 2014). With the decline of US leadership in environmental policy during the 1990s, this rudderless policy area provided the EU with a niche in which it could formulate its global identity throughout the 2000s. The ascendance of austerity onto the political agenda therefore poses a threat to the EU's international reputation. Thus, the year 2014 was pivotal for the EU, with the election of a new European Parliament (*see* Hobolt, 2015) and the selection of a new European Commission taking place at a time of austerity across the continent.

Throughout the two five-year EU Commissions led by José Manuel Barroso from 2004 until 2014, the Commission was known for its ambitious approach towards environmental legislation. Barroso claimed that the targets outlined in the EU Climate and Energy package were the most ambitious in the world (Barroso, 2008). The Europe 2020 strategy placed sustainable growth at the heart of its thinking (Leschke *et al.*, 2015, p.295). Moreover, the separation of the Commission's Environment and Climate Change briefs in 2010 enabled Janez Potočnik and Connie Hedegaard, respectively, to push their remits onto the global political agenda, strengthening the profile of the EU as a global environmental pioneer (Kilian & Elgström, 2010; Parker & Karlsson, 2010; van Schaik & Schunz, 2012; Schreurs & Tiberghien, 2007; Wurzel & Connelly, 2011). Towards the end of his time as President of the Commission, Barroso increasingly flirted with the concept of 'green growth', arguing in January 2013 that '[t]he terms "green" and "growth" are not a contradiction' (Barroso, 2013). The Barroso Commissions were not a period of unquestioned environmental ambition – the quantity of new policies dipped during the second Commission, potentially in line with the impacts of the financial crisis – but the environment was a flagship policy area.

Jean-Claude Juncker, the new Commission President, touted climate change leadership and green growth among his key messages whilst seeking election during the summer of 2014, and has made personal calls for energy efficiency to remain high on the policy agenda (*see* Shankleman, 2014). A former Prime Minister of Luxembourg, Juncker employed a pro-austerity agenda during his time as President of the EuroGroup between 2011 and 2014, suggesting that he will continue to favour austerity measures as Commission President. Upon the announcement of the new structure of the European Commission, concern was expressed about its lack of environmental focus by civil society organizations, certain MEPs and the President of the European Parliament (*see* Bonaccorsi, 2014).

The new structure of the Commission appeared to weaken its ability to prioritize environmental issues in a number of ways (*see* Čavoški, 2015). First, the Environment Commissioner Brief was merged with Fisheries and Maritime Affairs, as was Climate with Energy Policy. Moreover, the merged Climate and Energy portfolios were placed under a Vice-President for Energy Union, suggesting that climate issues were a secondary concern. Second, the mandate of the Commissioner-designate for Environment, Fisheries & Maritime Affairs, Karmenu Vella, appeared to prioritize deregulation, by calling for a review of all of the

major initiatives that were not yet complete. Additionally, Vella was tasked with considering changes to the existing EU Nature protection legislation, posing a potential threat to biodiversity. Thirdly, none of the Vice-Presidents held a responsibility for sustainability, suggesting that the issue had been neglected at the upper echelons of the Commission. Finally, the new Climate Action and Energy Commissioner, Miguel Arias Cañete, has held well-known links to the fossil fuel industry (Čavoški, 2015, p.4).

In response to the initial outline of the Commission, in October 2014 a 'Green 10' of environmental NGOs wrote an open letter (Caserta, 2014), highlighting their concerns. The Juncker Commission took steps to respond to these concerns immediately, most significantly by allocating responsibility for sustainability to Vice-President Frans Timmermans. However, with other concerns still unaddressed by November 2014, Gerben Jan Gebrandy MEP warned that Juncker was endangering jobs and growth by diluting green policies, arguing that shifting to a circular economy could save EU industry more than €600bn annually (*see* Shankleman, 2014). By December 2014, the Commission had outlined plans to postpone its flagship Circular Economy package and weaken proposed air pollution rules (Neslen, 2014). Although Timmermans promised a more ambitious replacement for the Circular Economy package within twelve months, the postponement has been met with disappointment and confusion within environmental policy spheres. While it is usual for a new Commission to take stock of the policy landscape, the direction and focus of the new Commission appears to replace the narrative of green growth with austerity measures and a retrenchment of environmental policy. How do we capture whether this broad rhetorical shift has policy substance?

### **Methods for Measuring Environmental Policy Change**

The potential impact of a pro-austerity Commission on policy-making across the EU is profound, representing a burgeoning area of research in European Studies. There are three principal approaches that have been used by scholars seeking to analyze the impact of economic downturns upon environmental policy change generally, and also specifically in a European context: environmental quality indicators; changes to budgetary allocations; and analyses of changes in the number and quality of environmental policies brought forward (policy density and intensity).

#### *Environmental Quality Indicators*

Existing studies analyzing environmental quality indicators (EQIs) in the immediate aftermath of economic downturns suggest that in the short-term, economic crises are generally good for the environment. Siddiqi (2000) examined changes in air and water pollution in Asia following the economic crisis of 1997, finding that due to contractions in manufacturing outputs, the crisis resulted in short-term environmental benefits. However, he also suggests that the crisis led many Asian countries to cut back their investment into environmental protection in the long-term. Elliott (2011), in her examination of the impacts of the 1997 and 2008 financial crises on the environment in East Asia, finds the impacts to be ambiguous at best, but

negative on the whole. Lekakis and Kousis (2013) also assess changes in air and water pollution to analyze the impact of austerity policies on the environment in Greece and note that levels of sulphur dioxide, carbon dioxide, phosphorus and nitrogen fell between 2007 and 2010, in line with reductions in economic productivity. However, like Siddiqi, they posit that these environmental gains may be short-term in nature, noting the creation of unexpected smog in Greek cities. For Peters *et al.* (2012), any global reduction in CO<sub>2</sub> emissions as a result of the financial crisis had ended a year after the crisis, as developing states increased rapidly their emissions again.

Measures that assess changes in environmental quality via emissions provide useful snapshots for understanding how financial crises can affect the environment. However, it can be difficult to identify whether the obtained results represent short-term changes; once the economy improves and productivity increases, environmental degradation is likely to worsen again. Indeed, in the long-term, environmental degradation may be exacerbated by financial crises, as efforts to strengthen the economy dominate government policy objectives, to the cost of other policy areas (Tienhaara, 2010). As such, in order for such analyses to be effective, a longitudinal study comprising several decades may be more beneficial, in order to identify longer term trends. Even with the benefit of a long-term analysis, however, it is clear that there is a range of confounding factors that can have an impact upon environmental quality indicators, independent of economic growth. Thus, whilst EQIs can provide an interesting snapshot of potential environmental impacts, they cannot be used in isolation.

### *Environmental Budgets*

Using changes in budgetary allocations to determine policy change is a well-established methodology within public policy (e.g. Baumgartner *et al.*, 2006; Citi, 2013). Increases in spending or sharp downturns can indicate punctuated equilibrium (Baumgartner and Jones, 1993); indeed, Gravey (2014) suggests that budgetary changes can act as an indicator for determining the influence of austerity upon EU policies. Certainly at the European level, budgetary allocations to national environmental projects have been central drivers of environmental policy developments in poorer states and any cuts to such budgets are likely to have a detrimental impact. Interestingly, when the economic crisis initially broke, there was a general call globally for more green investment, with the pursuit of an environmental transition to a low carbon society identified as a potential vehicle for growth (e.g. see *inter alia* Obama, 2009; UNEP, 2009a; 2009b). For example, the Barroso Commission made the goal of a sustainable EU a central plank of its recovery plan (see above).

However, with cuts to high profile publicly-funded sectors, such as healthcare and education, policy-makers are likely to reduce environmental spending in line with – or, more than – other budgets. Lekakis and Kousis (2013) use budgetary changes to highlight the potential impact of the financial crisis on the environment.

They review green investments between 2005 and 2011, underlining the importance of green stimulus measures to the Greek economy, and the potential economic damage caused by reducing public investments in these areas. Russel and Benson (2014) analyze green budgeting practices in the USA and UK, comparing the period from 1940 to 2009 against policy decisions made after 2009. However, they concentrate upon explaining the drivers of spending changes during periods of austerity, rather than measuring the impact of austerity on budgets. Thus, there remains a significant gap in the existing literature regarding whether and how environmental budgets change as a consequence of economic downturns.

For example, a key indicator of reduced government spending in the UK has been cuts to local authority spending (Butler & Jowit, 2014), with local government a key vehicle for implementing environmental policy. However, disentangling environmental spending from cognate areas is challenging, especially in the EU where environmental budgets are mainstreamed across all areas, with only a small percentage of the budget dedicated to the EU's environmental LIFE+ programme (Withana *et al.*, 2014). Moreover, whilst the Commission can allocate funds to particular budget headings, expenditure is generally carried out at the Member state level. Disentangling EU funds from particular budget headings as part of national funds becomes complex (Withana *et al.*, 2014), data may be patchy (e.g. see Soroka *et al.*, 2006), and determining what counts as environmental requires careful consideration. Yet, even if large portions of the environmental budget are accorded to specific projects, such as the Common Agricultural Policy, a longitudinal study that tracks whether there are significant changes to the financial support given to these 'constants' can enable an insight into priority changes. As such, while careful and transparent coding decisions would be crucial, budgetary changes could provide an effective indicator of the impact of austerity on environmental policy, particularly when conducted in conjunction with other measures.

### *Policy Density and Intensity*

Measuring policy change by reviewing the amount of legislation produced (policy density) and the content of legislation (policy intensity) is an important feature of the emerging literature on policy dismantling (Bauer & Knill, 2012; Jordan *et al.*, 2013). A reduction in the number of pieces of EU legislation post-2009 in comparison to the preceding ten years would be significant, as it would call into question the general assumption that EU environmental policy is expansionist in nature. Prior to the financial crisis, the body of environmental legislation increased steadily, in response to recently-identified threats, or as a means of increasing ambition on already-formulated policies. This process appears to be halting under the new Juncker Commission. Moreover, as part of the REFIT agenda, the possibility of removing existing legislation has become more possible (European Commission, 2015). However, it is important not to draw hasty conclusions: as Grant and Kelly (2008, p.306) argue, 'simply counting laws without accounting for their content is likely to produce measurement error when attempting to measure policy production'. Thus, some kind of qualitative evaluation of policy content (intensity) is also required.

The concept of ‘policy intensity’ can be used to express the strictness, or generosity (often in the case of welfare policies) of a given policy (Knill *et al.*, 2009). In other words, policy intensity conceptualizes the ‘ambition’ of policy. Jordan *et al.* (2005) note that by changing the instruments involved, policies may remain substantively the same in their goals and objectives despite appearing to be deregulated. Bauer and Knill (2012) expand the conceptualization of policy intensity further, by including the ‘scope’ of the policy intervention. Here, the scope generally changes in line with the number of cases or target groups addressed by a certain policy; for example, the number of factories emitting pollutants addressed by a particular environmental policy (Bauer and Knill, 2012, p.34). Schaffrin *et al.* (2015) derive six forms of intensity by building on the taxonomy developed by Howlett and Cashore (2009), namely the objectives, scope, integration, budget, implementation, and monitoring of a policy. In so doing, the authors attempt to establish a consistent means of comparing policy outputs, or ‘actions’, across different contexts. Policy intensity is therefore a useful companion to analyses of policy density as it provides additional and rich data that can be used to determine broader legislative trends. For example, by using both policy density and intensity in combination, it may be possible to determine that a decline in the number of policies has occurred but that the scope and ambition of those policies has increased, or *vice versa*.

However, as with environmental budgets, these measures raise some methodological challenges. First, to evaluate the density and intensity of environmental policy requires a clear understanding of what counts as environmental. In their study of European Parliament (EP) amendments to EU environmental legislation, Burns and Carter (2010; also see Burns *et al.*, 2013) suggested that environmental policy could be selected by analyzing those policies addressed by the European Parliament’s Environment Committee.<sup>2</sup> However, this approach potentially excludes agricultural and energy policy developments that have important environmental dimensions; a problem also faced when using the Commission’s own coding of policies on Prelex<sup>3</sup>, where policy areas are given a number code (‘environment’ is 13). As with the budgetary measures outlined above, a clear set of criteria for identifying policies for consideration is required that can be used by other scholars seeking to replicate results. A key drawback with the analysis of policy density is that a reduction in the number of new policies being produced may be explained by the presence of existing policy solutions. If an actor is already responding effectively to an environmental challenge then there is little need to develop new policies. In such a situation, we would expect to see a decline in policy outputs over time, but this reduction would not necessarily suggest a diminution in ambition. A further methodological

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<sup>2</sup> They explicitly excluded health and consumer protection legislation that falls within the committee’s brief from their dataset (See Burns and Carter, 2010; Burns *et al.*, 2013).

<sup>3</sup> <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/collection/legislative-procedures.html>

challenge is to account for the evolution of knowledge about environmental threats and solutions over time. For example, the severity of an environmental problem may be more acute than expected, requiring more ambitious policies. These issues weaken the analytical utility of the policy intensity and density approaches, yet they can be mitigated by taking into account the wider environmental and policy context within which legislation is proposed.

### **Summary and future directions**

We have identified three principal approaches for capturing policy changes in response to the economic crisis. However, we have also highlighted a number of methodological challenges associated with employing each of these measures. In order to mitigate these weaknesses, we argue that by using all three approaches as a framework, a holistic analysis of the potential impacts of austerity upon environmental policy can be achieved. This framework can subsequently be adapted for other policy areas, for example health, education or human rights. Such a framework may seem like an apparent step but thus far there have been no attempts to integrate these methods to achieve a multi-dimensional perspective of change.

Hence, EQIs can capture short-term changes in response to economic downturns. Each EU state provides reports on a range of environmental quality indicators to the EU, and the European Environment Agency publishes regular State of the Union reports (*see* EEA, 2015). It is therefore relatively straightforward to get a sense of the state of general trends in environmental quality over time. As EQIs cannot be used in isolation a wider consideration of changes in policy instruments over the longer term needs to be undertaken.

Allocations of spending are a well-established tool for capturing policy change but become challenging at the European level due to the mainstreaming of environmental spending. However, investigating budget allocations at the national level within European states may be more amenable to analysis. How should we determine which budget lines and policies should be included in an analysis? We argue that a combined approach, which reviews legislation from existing datasets (e.g. the OEIL and Prelex), including consideration of cognate areas such as energy and agriculture, should be implemented. The Commission's work programme should also be reviewed, to cross-check the initial selection of policies.

Regarding policy density and intensity, two further issues need to be considered. First, the pattern of change must be taken into account. If there is a decline in the quantity or ambition of policy-making, it is important to determine if it represents a longer term gradual trend. Secondly, and relatedly, analysis of density and intensity require consideration of the wider policy context. The views of representative policy practitioners should also be taken into account, and findings should be triangulated against contemporaneous media, corporate and non-governmental organization (NGO) material, in order to get a sense of the wider policy

context. Thus, if there is a drop in policy density, for example, policy-makers may suggest that is due to policy saturation rather than a deliberate scaling back in response to wider exogenous shocks. Equally, a change in patterns of policy may reflect other exogenous factors, such as international agreements, so a clear understanding of the wider policy context is essential.

## **Conclusion**

Whilst much work has been conducted on measuring the impact of austerity on economic growth, the impact upon environmental policy has so far been neglected. This issue is of significant importance to scholars of European Studies, as the EU has staked much of its international reputation on its environmental credentials; austerity therefore holds the potential to shape the fabric of the EU's global identity. The identification and usage of methods for measuring the impact of austerity upon environmental policy are crucial for understanding the extent to which environmental policy is 'future-proofed' against exogenous shocks. If environmental policy remains static – or, more significantly, is rolled back – during times of economic strife, then environmental problems are unlikely to be addressed effectively. Indeed, such exogenous shocks may even exacerbate environmental problems. This article has sought to develop a robust means for ascertaining the impact of austerity upon environmental policy by evaluating existing approaches for assessing policy change. Whilst each of these measures provides useful indicators of how austerity may impact upon the environment, they all comprise individual weaknesses. In order to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the impact of austerity, therefore, it is argued that the measures be employed in combination as a framework, in order to develop a holistic perspective. Such a framework has yet to be attempted in this field; once established, the approach may then be used to assess change across the EU's various policy spheres.

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