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EU Climate Policy: New Dimension of Municipal Authorities and National Governments Conflict

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Abstract. The article examines a new dimension of conflict between municipal authorities and national governments in the system of multi-level governance in the European Union within the framework of EU climate policy. The author uses the organizational theory and the multi-level concept to analyze local experience of climate initiatives, problems of organization and financing of such projects for megacities and small towns, interaction between national and municipal authorities regarding financing and control of implementation of these projects. The general trends and country characteristics of this multidimensional political conflict are revealed, based on the specifics of state-territorial organization, model of inter-budgetary relations, political culture and citizens' activity in a particular country. The analysis of key requests from local authorities to national governments and EU institutions for adaptation of territorial communities to climate change is placed in the context of various EU cities associations and networks activities, taking into account the potential of the EU to co-finance municipal "green" plans and programs, as well as the evolution of narratives of the EU energy transition, discussion of the EU Multiannual Financial Plan for 2028–2034. The conclusion drawn is that territorial disparities within the EU are deepening between megacities and small towns, urban and rural cities on adaptation to climate change, about changes in the municipal party landscape due to the growing conflict between local and national governments over climate change and EU climate policy.

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Климатическая политика ЕС: новое измерение конфликта муниципальных властей и национальных правительств

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Аннотация. В исследовании рассмотрено новое измерение конфликта муниципальных властей и национальных правительств в системе многоуровневого управления в Европейском союзе в рамках климатической политики ЕС. С использованием организационной теории и концепции многоуровневого управления проанализированы локальный опыт климатических инициатив, проблемы организации и финансирования такого рода проектов для мегаполисов и малых городов, взаимодействие центра и муниципалитетов по поводу финансирования и контроля реализации этих проектов. Выявлены общие тенденции и страновые особенности этого многоаспектного политического конфликта, исходя из специфики государственно-территориального устройства, модели межбюджетных отношений, политической культуры и активности граждан конкретной страны. Анализ ключевых запросов местных властей к национальным правительствам и институтам ЕС в целях адаптации территориальных сообществ к изменению климата поставлен в контекст деятельности различных ассоциаций и сетей городов ЕС, с учетом потенциала ЕС софинансировать муниципальные зеленые планы и программы, а также эволюции нарративов энергетического перехода ЕС, обсуждения Многолетнего финансового плана ЕС на 2028–2034 гг. Сделан вывод об углублении территориального неравенства в ЕС по линии мегаполисы — малые города, города — сельские поселения по вопросам адаптации к изменению климата, о переменах на муниципальном партийном ландшафте в связи с возросшим ростом конфликтов местных и центральных властей по поводу изменения климата и климатической политики ЕС.

Ключевые слова: Европейский союз, климатическая политика ЕС, энергопереход, многоуровневое управление, местное самоуправление, города, мегаполисы, малые города, ассоциации городов ЕС, локальные климатические проекты, муниципальные выборы, зеленые партии ЕС

Заявление о конфликте интересов. Автор заявляет об отсутствии конфликта интересов.

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Introduction

In the modern world, cities play an important role in the political and economic governance of within states; their significance in the global economy and world politics is growing [Bardin 2025; Tassilo, Newman 2017]. The subjectivity of cities in the system of decentralized multi-level governance in the European Union has not been questioned for a long time, especially taking into account the principle of subsidiarity, which underlies the activities of the EU, when any issue should first be resolved at the local level [Hooghe, Marks 2001]. Municipal authorities have the opportunity for direct and indirect dialogue with EU authorities (through the EU Committee of the Regions and the offices of the regions of the Member States in Brussels, annual meetings of mayors of the capitals of Member States with representatives of the European Commission, annual high-level meetings within the framework of the EU Agenda for Cities, etc.), lobbying for their interests. In most cases, they are responsible for the implementation of pan-European decisions, climate policy, and the tasks of "green" transit are no exception [Kemmerzell 2022; Kern 2019; Hammermeister et al. 2026].

Multi-level governance does not negate conflict relations between different levels of territorial governance. In a single state, with its hierarchical vertical power structure, conflict between municipal authorities and the national government manifests itself primarily in disputes over inter-budgetary relations, the distribution of administrative powers, and party and ideological differences. This same conflict, in the context of a particular area of EU activity, can only partly be explained by local resistance to EU initiatives. It concerns direct access to EU funds and the expansion of direct communication channels with EU institutions, bypassing national governments, direct participation in the development and adoption of national climate strategies to implement the Union's goals, the protection of the most vulnerable groups, and, once again, ideological and political differences. The central government can use financial and bureaucratic instruments to put pressure on opposition mayors (heads of municipal councils); local authorities transmit particularistic sentiments, their own or those of larger territorial entities in federal, regional, or unitary states with varying degrees of decentralization; and branches of leading political parties in regions and cities are forced to take into account the voter sentiment, which can threaten divisions and splits not only among party elites but also among the entire political class of the country [Prokhorenko 2014].

This kind of political and governance conflict in the sphere of EU climate policy attracts the attention of experts and practitioners in the field of studying multi-level governance in the EU and the integration association's response to climate change, given that the European continent is subject to the most widespread negative consequences of global climate change — waves of extreme heat and drought,

including the shallowing of shipping rivers, wildfires and floods, desertification, forest, and biodiversity loss, which leads to excess mortality and damages the economy.[1] However, there are few works directly on the topic of this article [Giacomelli et al. 2025; Kastelein 2024; Haupt et al. 2023; Castán Broto 2017], and the conflict itself is not actually conceptualized.

Despite the common features characteristic of the entire European Union, the country-specific and macro-regional specifics of this conflict are evident due to the territorial diversity of a unified Europe. Using structural-geographical parameters, one can distinguish Northern Europe and the Baltic states, Southern Europe, Western/Central Europe (Germany, France, Benelux, Ireland), and Eastern Europe. The contours of these macro-regions, divided along North — South and West — East (Central and North) lines, are also evident in the results of Eurobarometer sociological surveys — in differences in citizen engagement and attitudes toward energy and energy conservation, the stability of hydrocarbon supplies, environmental protection, and the fight against climate change [Prokhorenko 2022].

To organize the research and identify the nuances of the conflict under consideration, a typology of municipalities was necessary. There are currently almost 86,000 of them in the European Union,[2] including metropolitan areas, large, medium-sized and small towns. Rural settlements are not particularly prominent, but should be kept in mind. The largest number of municipalities in Central and Southern Europe are in France (34,995), Germany (10,789), Spain (8,133), and Italy (7,904), with the average population being 1,928 in France, 5,824 in Spain, 7,715 in Germany, and 7,535 in Italy. The most successful typology of municipalities seems to be based on population size, dividing them into urban and rural, keeping in mind territorial inequality and contradictions between the city and the countryside. The author has structured the article in accordance with this typology to study individual aspects of the conflict under consideration, taking into account megacities, small towns, and rural settlements.

Resources and Megacities' Ambitions

The European Union's statistical service does not define uniform, clear criteria for classifying large cities as megacities. National statistics, which vary among themselves, typically define these as capitals and centers of regions and federal subjects, large cities with over a million residents forming a metropolitan area, typically with a commuting zone, or functional urban centers with a population of over 50,000. Such urban agglomerations have a special financing model and possess the necessary resources to rebuild infrastructure, energy, and transportation to achieve complete climate neutrality.

[1] Europe Remains the Fastest-Warming Continent: New Climate Records Recorded in the Region. Retrieved August 9, 2026, from UN News: https://news.un.org/ru/story/2026/04/1467806

[2] European Local Government Report 2025. Structures, Finances and Functions of Local Governments in the European Union. *KDZ Center for Public Administration Research*. Retrieved August 9, 2026, from https://www.kdz.eu/en/knowledge/studies/european-local-government-report-2025

Megacities manage to bypass national governments to receive EU funding and grants by participating in EU framework programs (for example, Horizon Europe), obtaining the status of "pilot cities" (*EU Mission Cities*) and the creation of independent public-private consortia. *EU Mission Cities* program (the EU mission to create 100 climate-neutral and smart cities by 2030, with the goal of reaching the pan-European target in 2050) was developed by the European Commission as part of the EU's Horizon Europe research and innovation funding program for 2021–2027. It allows municipalities to engage directly with the EU, receive expert support, and receive targeted funding, bypassing national governments.[3] Cities with a population of over 50,000 (for smaller EU countries, the threshold is lowered to 10,000) can participate in the program based on an official resolution by the municipal council or a letter of guarantee from the mayor, an argument for the permanence of climate commitments even in the event of failure in the next municipal elections, and by signing a "climate contract", which includes a strategic and investment plan developed with the participation of citizens, local businesses, and scientists.

For example, Paris received direct EU grants for the ecological transformation of its urban environment under the "15-Minute City" program, which prioritizes pedestrian accessibility, including the improvement and greening of the Seine embankments, the elimination of thousands of parking spaces, and the creation of hundreds of kilometers of new bike paths. The capital's city hall submitted applications for the European Urban Initiative program competitions[4] and "Horizon Europe", whose jury evaluates urban projects not based on national quotas, but on their level of innovation. Meanwhile, Dijon, the capital of the French region of Burgundy, created a public-private partnership, *SEM Énergies*, which brings together dozens of urban eco-projects. For this package of projects, the city authorities managed to attract funding from the European Investment Bank (EIB), which (co-) finances projects related to EU priority goals, primarily climate and environmental sustainability.

Barcelona, the capital of the Spanish autonomous community of Catalonia, where separatist sentiments are traditionally strong, has become a participant in the *EU Mission Cities* program and signed the so-called Climate Contract with the European Commission. It has also received pilot city status and grants from the EU-funded *NetZeroCities* consortium to create "super-quarters" — inner-city areas with large-scale green spaces that are completely closed to cars.

A telling example was the appeal at the end of 2019 by the mayors of Budapest, Warsaw, Prague, and Bratislava, all members of the Free Cities Pact, to the European Commission, declaring that their governments were blocking the distribution

[3] EU Mission: Climate-Neutral and Smart Cities. *Research and Innovation*. Retrieved August 9, 2026, from https://research-and-innovation.ec.europa.eu/funding/funding-opportunities/funding-programs-and-open-calls/horizon-europe/eu-missions-horizon-europe/climate-neutral-and-smart-cities_en#events

[4] The European Urban Initiative (*EUI*) is an instrument of EU cohesion policy for 2021–2027. The program helps cities, regardless of population size, implement sustainable development goals, apply best urban planning practices, and test innovative solutions.

of EU climate funds for political reasons.[5] As a result, funding was made available to these cities through the *European City Facility* program for the development of energy efficiency investment plans.

The aggregation and lobbying of their interests at the EU level are carried out by associations of large network-type cities, such as *Eurocities*, *POLIS Network*, *Climate Alliance,* and *Local Alliance*. In the discussions on the new EU Multiannual Financial Framework for 2028–2034, the demands put forward by large cities primarily concern direct financing of cities and the formalization of their direct participation in the development of climate plans by Member States.[6] Financing that bypasses national governments entails not only the allocation of direct subsidies to cities for climate goals, the simplification and acceleration of bureaucratic procedures, and reduced reporting on urban projects, but also the introduction of a mandatory earmarking rule, under which at least 11–15% of the European Regional Development Fund's spending must be strictly on sustainable urban development. The transition from formal consultations to a joint decision-making process in national government climate planning implies social guarantees within the "just transition" paradigm — targeted use of the Social Climate Fund and full control over the distribution of funds locally, as well as the protection of vulnerable segments of the urban population during the "green transition" to avoid increases in utility tariffs and public transport prices. The European Commission is being asked to link strict environmental restrictions with programs to develop affordable social housing and expand public transport. Municipalities, for example, cannot ban older vehicles from entering low-emission zones unless the EU supports them in the mass procurement of electric buses.

On the other hand, one cannot help but see the obvious desire of the EU authorities, given the role of cities in promoting the "Green Deal", to use climate projects and city initiatives and the instruments of their direct financing by the European Union to put pressure on those national governments that, for one reason or another, are slowing down the implementation of the EU climate goals or even blocking European "green" initiatives [Brulle, Timmons, Spencer 2024]. In fact, the European Parliament, which, incidentally, consistently defends the interests of cities in the conflict between local authorities and national governments in the logic of adherence to the principle of subsidiarity, and the European Commission, which, due to its institutional status, is more inclined to compromise, are becoming active participants in the political process in member states [Bulmer, Lequesne 2020; Toygür, Sojka 2026].

[5] Islands in the Illiberal Storm: Central European Cities Vow to Stand Together. *Guardian*. Retrieved August 9, 2026, from https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/dec/16/islands-in-the-illiberal-storm-central-european-cities-vow-to-stand-together

[6] Empowering Cities through the Next EU Budget a Call for an Inclusive and Sustainable MFF. *Eurocities*. Retrieved August 9, 2026, from https://eurocities.eu/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/Empowering-Cities-through-the-Next-EU-Budget_Eurocities.pdf ; Cities and Regions Call on EU Leaders to Keep Local Governments at the Heart of the Next EU Budget. *POLIS*. Retrieved August 9, 2026, from https://www.polisnetwork.eu/news/cities-and-regions-call-on-eu-leaders-to-keep-local-governments-at-the-heart-of-the-next-eu-budget/

Small Towns: The Struggle for Territorial Justice against Marginalization

Small towns with populations under 50,000 in the EU are disproportionately numerous compared to megacities, and they are truly critical in terms of achieving EU climate goals. Unlike the latter, which also require subsidies, small towns are effectively financed by national governments on a residual basis, as central authorities primarily focus on capital cities, industrial centers, and large-scale, media-relevant projects. However, unlike megacities, which find access to EU grants and budgetary funds, they lack the necessary human and organizational resources to properly prepare the relevant financial and project documentation in English and qualify for competitions for green funding under various EU programs and initiatives. Sometimes, they simply cannot overcome the population barrier.

However, the European Union offers the ELENA (*European Local ENergy Assistance)*, technical assistance program to small cities that are willing to pool their small-scale climate projects, which is supervised by the European Investment Bank.[7]

In Spain, a key problem for small municipalities is the inability to obtain loans for housing renovation due to strict limits imposed by the national Ministry of Finance on municipal debt. However, the government of Navarre, which, incidentally, enjoys financial autonomy from the center along with the Basque Country and retains taxes collected in its territory in its budget, acted as an aggregator for dozens of small towns and rural communes in the autonomous community in 2021 and received an *ELENA grant* to create an umbrella project office, which combined applications from small towns for the thermal modernization of approximately 1,900 residential buildings into an investment pool worth over €40 million.[8] A similar project under the ELENA program is being implemented in Poland, where the national government's priority is large-scale projects by major state-owned energy companies. The state-owned National Fund for Environmental Protection (*NFOŚiGW*), the EIB's partner in implementing the program, acted as aggregators. *ELENA* and EU-certified private engineering companies have implemented two projects worth nearly €300 million, bringing together applications from 65 small municipalities in the country's coal-mining regions. These projects involve the thermal modernization (a set of energy efficiency measures) of at least 80 schools and hospitals and the modernization of municipal district heating systems (replacing old coal-fired boilers with energy-efficient biogas and cogeneration units) between 2026 and 2029.[9]

In small towns facing funding shortages and lacking government support for energy transition, grassroots co-financing (crowdfunding and the creation of local

[7] Renewed Momentum in Poland's Green Transition. *Politico*. Retrieved August 9, 2026, from https://www.politico.eu/sponsored-content/renewed-momentum-in-polands-green-transition/

[8] Spain: EIB Grants Support to the Navarre Region to Improve the Energy Efficiency of around 1,900 Housing Units. *EIB*. Retrieved August 9, 2026, from https://www.eib.org/en/press/all/2021-190-eib-grants-support-to-the-navarre-region-to-improve-the-energy-efficiency-of-around-1-900-housing-units

[9] ELENA — European Local Energy Assistance. *The Horizon Europe Network*. Retrieved August 9, 2026, from https://horizoneuropencpportal.eu/sites/default/files/2025-02/factsheet-elena.pdf

cooperatives) offers a way out of the impasse, for example, to purchase solar panels for installation on the roofs of public buildings. Such local initiatives offer the possibility of co-financing from the EU — a non-repayable grant or an EIB loan on preferential terms. Organizing a cooperative allows for the creation of a virtual energy distribution network, bypassing national electricity suppliers, and the use of specialized software with smart meters, thereby reducing the high risk of non-payment when the cooperative acts as a guarantor for the payment of electricity bills for its members.

A successful example of such a cooperative is the Spanish renewable energy cooperative *GoiEner*, which united residents of the town of Ordizia in the province of Gipuzkoa in the Basque Country in 2012, when the central government discouraged the development of private energy. The cooperative accumulated the residents' personal savings and attracted EU co-financing through the technical assistance program for the construction of a local power grid, which also stimulated population growth; today, over 10,000 people live there. Now, the cooperative has nearly 20,000 partners and signed nearly 25,000 electricity supply contracts.[10]

Adaptation to climate change requires not only solidarity among residents of a single small town, but also the unification of small town mayors into professional associations, networks, and consortia to lobby for their interests at the national and European levels. Pioneers in this area were Austria's small Alpine communes (up to 10,000 residents), which united in 2003 to form the regional network *Klimabündnis Altheim,* as part of *Climate Alliance Austria*.[11] They hired experts and lawyers and secured the enshrinement of a provision in national legislation for the automatic allocation of green heating subsidies to small municipalities without the need to participate in complex tenders. Their example was followed by mayors of small towns in Emilia-Romagna (Northern Italy), municipalities in Sweden, small municipalities in France, and the French network for inter-municipal cooperation of small municipalities, *Établissement public de cooperation intercommunale (EPCI)*, even opened a permanent office in Brussels, similar to the subnational regions of the Member States, seeking grants for the development of climate projects and investment plans for municipalities with a population of less than 20,000 inhabitants.

National governments in some EU countries, recognizing the problem of financial and personnel shortages in small municipalities, decided to implement a "reform from above" to consolidate them. Such a structural reform to strengthen the financial and administrative base of local government was carried out in Denmark in 2007–2009 and was considered highly successful by experts: the number of municipalities was reduced threefold — from 271 to 98, their minimum population was set at 20,000 residents, and five regions,

[10] La Cooperativa. *GoiEner*. Retrieved August 9, 2026, from https://www.goiener.com/es/la-cooperativa/

[11] Klimadashboard Altheim. *Klimadashboard Altheim*. Retrieved August 9, 2026, from https://klimadashboard.at/en/regions/altheim#emissions

including the capital, were created instead of 14 counties (Vrangbæk 2010). Similar forced mergers of municipalities are being carried out in Belgium, although not as quickly and primarily in Flanders [Hennau, Steyvers 2026].

An alternative reform option was proposed by Spain, where the vast majority of municipalities are small, with populations of fewer than 5,000. Amid the negative impact of the global crisis in 2013 and the austerity regime, the Law on the Rationalization and Sustainability of Local Administrations was passed.[12] If a municipal council is unable to provide necessary services at a weighted average cost and accumulates debt, the mayor and councilors' powers to manage the budget and utilities infrastructure are forcibly transferred to the provincial council (an intermediate level of governance between the municipality and the autonomous community). While the municipal council formally continues to function, it has no real authority. While this law protects small municipalities from bankruptcy, it also leads to duplication of functions and the de facto destruction of local self-government, leading to ongoing legal disputes between the national government and the regions, which view it as an infringement on their constitutionally guaranteed autonomy.

Rural Settlements: Factors of Civil Protest

EU climate policy has not only complicated the relationship between national governments and rural areas, but has further exacerbated the contradictions between city and countryside, between large cities and rural settlements. Megacities are acknowledged leaders and likely beneficiaries of the EU's energy transition, while sparsely populated rural areas are no less affected by climate change and the environmental consequences of the "green" transition. However, they may rightly consider themselves losers and sometimes feel marginalized, objects of the "green" colonialism of urban elites. Spatial development as part of climate change adaptation does not include the placement of wind turbines within urban areas, and the terms for purchasing or leasing land for the installation of wind turbines and solar panels are sometimes more attractive to landowners than leasing it or using it for agricultural purposes themselves.

Generational and value shifts in rural areas are accompanied by an aging and shrinking rural population, leading to the threat of depopulation, as is currently occurring in central Spain (the "emptying Spain" phenomenon). Meanwhile, EU-co-financed national and regional rural development programs are failing to produce immediate results and are failing to reverse negative demographic trends.

Rural communities are eligible for EU financial assistance for the implementation of small, often micro-local, climate change adaptation projects through the EU's dedicated rural development fund under the *LEADER/CLLD program (Community-*

[12] Law 27/2013, of December 27, on the Rationalization and Sustainability of Local Administrations. Official State Gazette. *BOE*. Retrieved August 9, 2026, from https://www.boe.es/buscar/act.php?id=BOE-A-2013-13756

Led Local Development). To receive targeted grants, a local initiative group must be formed, including mayors, local farmers, entrepreneurs, and activists from several rural communities, who must develop a simple Local Development Strategy. Projects may include the creation of rural energy cooperatives to purchase solar panels and biogas plants to convert agricultural waste into clean energy; the restoration of peatlands, small rivers, shelterbelts, and wetlands to sequester carbon and protect areas from droughts and floods; the recycling of organic waste into fertilizer or secondary raw materials; the thermal modernization of old municipal buildings, the implementation of smart energy management systems, and the conversion of street lighting to autonomous renewable sources.[13]

At the same time, the transition of some farms to organic farming, the experience of eco-villages, and successful "green" projects do not eliminate the increasingly active politicization and deepening conflict between the city and the countryside. Farmers' protest movements in various EU countries have been fueled by restrictions on the use of diesel fuel for agricultural machinery, nitrogen fertilizers, and pesticides, as well as initiatives to reduce livestock numbers to reduce methane emissions.

Rural discontent is being translated into changes in the party landscape. While large EU cities regularly vote for the Greens and center-left, support for right-wing parties is growing in rural areas, including right-wing populists and radicals — for example, the National Movement in France, Vox in Spain, Alternative for Germany, and Brothers of Italy. New right-wing political parties and movements are also emerging: for example, in 2019, the agrarian right-wing populist party Farmers' and Citizens' Movement was founded in the Netherlands, opposing the EU's strict environmental measures against farms and uniting protest voters in rural areas traditionally home to dairy farming (Upham et al. 2025). However, left-wing parties also find supporters in the countryside — "Free Voters" in Germany, "Oath and Motorists" in the Czech Republic, "Voice — Social Democracy" in Slovakia — which actively exploit counter-narratives to energy transition in the EU. At the same time, against the backdrop of declining trust among rural residents in leading political parties, the popularity of non-partisan local activists and non-partisan local (neighborhood) lists is growing in small rural municipalities. Their slogans advocate for the survival of the individual village, the preservation of rural schools and hospitals, the protection of the internal combustion engine car as the only means of rural transportation, and the protest against the destruction of the rural way of life in Europe.

Social discontent and protests in the rural periphery of the EU, the risk of radicalization of rural residents' electoral preferences, as well as challenges related to food security and agricultural exports to third countries, explain the European authorities' reconsideration of the strict requirements and restrictions of the Green Deal and a shift toward pragmatism regarding the timeframes

[13] LEADER/CLLD. *EU CAP Network*. Retrieved August 9, 2026, from https://eu-cap-network.ec.europa.eu/networking/leader_en

for achieving carbon neutrality for rural municipalities and strict restrictions on traditional agriculture. The Strategic Dialogue on the Future of EU Agriculture, launched by the European Commission in January 2024, and the final report presented in September of that year, adjusted the priorities of EU authorities' interactions with farmers. In the final version of the report, these included protecting agricultural producers' incomes, abandoning harsh administrative pressure in favor of measures stimulating "green" transit, and reducing the bureaucratic burden on the agricultural sector.[14]

Conclusion

Conflict between national governments and local authorities over EU climate policy carries the risk of diminishing governance within the European Union, weakening solidarity, deepening territorial inequalities, and creating national and macro-regional cleavages within the Union. The situation is exacerbated by systemic economic and social challenges facing the integration association, rising military expenditures amid geopolitical uncertainty, and planned EU enlargement, primarily involving the Western Balkans. Further expansion "in breadth" will necessitate reforms and innovations for growth "in depth", as demonstrated by previous experiences with European integration. It will strengthen pan-European identity, especially a developmental identity.

This political and governance conflict cannot be considered separately from an analysis of the dynamics of the multi-level governance model in the European Union, the fluid configuration of vertical, horizontal and diagonal links, disagreements between EU institutions and bodies regarding ways to mitigate this conflict and the limits of concessions and compromises.

This conflict directly impacts the achievability of climate targets, the EU's leadership in advancing the global climate agenda, and the international image of the European Union.

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