trans4DEMO

Contentious Politics and Democratic Renewal in Sustainability Transitions

Policy Brief #1

Beyond Climate Ambition

Strengthening Democratic Legitimacy, Participation and Trust for Europe's Green Transition



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About TRANS4DEMO

This policy brief has been produced within the framework of Trans4Demo (Contentious Politics and Democratic Renewal in Sustainability Transitions), a Horizon Europe Research and Innovation Action coordinated by Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań and bringing together 11 partners from nine countries.

Trans4Demo investigates the growing political contestation surrounding sustainability transitions and develops evidence-based strategies, participatory approaches and policy recommendations to strengthen democratic governance and support just, inclusive and resilient climate transitions across Europe. It has received funding from the European Union's Horizon Europe research and innovation programme under Grant Agreement No. 101178267.

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Policy Brief

Beyond Climate Ambition: Strengthening Democratic Legitimacy, Participation and Trust for Europe's Green Transition

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Introduction

Europe’s green transition presents environmental, political and democratic challenges. Climate neutrality will require technological innovation, sustained investment and effective regulation, alongside governance arrangements that address social justice, economic resilience and democratic legitimacy. Climate policies increasingly reshape livelihoods, local economies and territorial identities. Participation, trust and inclusive decision-making therefore play a central role in building public support and sustaining action over time.

Drawing on research and case studies from the Horizon Europe Trans4Demo (Contentious Politics and Democratic Renewal in Sustainability Transitions) project (Grant Agreement no. 101178267), this policy brief explores how democratic governance can strengthen the implementation of climate policies by recognising and constructively managing political contestation. It argues that disagreement is not an obstacle to the green transition but an inherent feature of democratic societies that, when channelled through inclusive institutions and meaningful participation, can improve the legitimacy and durability of climate action.

This brief is intended for policymakers, regional and local authorities, practitioners and stakeholders involved in designing and implementing Europe's green transition. It brings together evidence from research, policy and practice to demonstrate how democratic governance can translate climate ambition into locally legitimate and socially supported action. Its central argument is simple: Europe's green transition will succeed not only through more ambitious climate policies, but through governance that enables institutions and communities to navigate competing interests, build trust and shape the transition together.



Photo by tatyanakorenyugina

Europe's Green Transition at a Crossroads: Understanding the Democratic and Governance Challenge

Through the European Green Deal and the legally binding objective of climate neutrality by 2050, the European Union has committed itself to reshaping energy systems, industrial production, transport, agriculture and urban development while strengthening economic competitiveness and resilience. Achieving climate neutrality requires technological innovation and effective regulation, as well as democratic processes capable of balancing environmental ambition with economic security, social justice and public legitimacy.

Recent years have demonstrated that the transition is becoming increasingly contested. While climate science provides overwhelming evidence for urgent action, public debates surrounding renewable energy deployment, land use, agricultural reforms and energy prices reveal that climate governance has evolved into a highly politicised field. Citizens, governments, businesses, civil society organisations and political parties increasingly disagree not only about the policies required, but also about the pace, priorities and governance of the transition. Climate action is therefore no longer defined simply by scientific consensus but by competing political visions of Europe's future.

Research undertaken within the Trans4Demo project argues that understanding these dynamics requires moving beyond the traditional assumption that climate governance is either facilitated or obstructed by democracy. Instead, democratic politics should be understood as the arena within which competing interpretations of urgency, crisis and political responsibility are negotiated. Climate governance succeeds not when political disagreement disappears, but when democratic institutions are capable of managing contestation while maintaining legitimacy, trust and public participation.

A. The politicisation of climate governance

Climate governance has undergone a profound transformation over the past two decades. Deeply embedded within broader debates concerning economic competitiveness, social justice, national sovereignty and democratic accountability, climate policy has become one of Europe's most politically salient issues.

"The recent surge in political contention and contestation within climate governance has coincided with a diversification of these repertoires, introducing increasingly variegated forms of action and resistance."

Trans4Demo *Working Paper: Urgency, Crisis and Repertoires of Action (D2.1)*

This politicisation reflects a changing climate politics, shaped by a widening range of actors, claims and forms of mobilisation. Environmental movements such as Fridays for Future and Extinction Rebellion have built transnational campaigns around demands for rapid climate action. At the same time, farmers' protests, demonstrations against the Green Deal and the growing involvement of populist parties point to competing interpretations of the transition and its social, economic and territorial consequences.

These developments illustrate that climate politics is no longer defined by a

simple division between supporters and opponents of climate action. Instead, political actors increasingly contest how climate problems should be understood, who should bear responsibility for addressing them and which governance arrangements are considered legitimate. Politicisation therefore reflects democratic pluralism rather than democratic failure.

The challenge for policymakers is to channel this contestation into constructive democratic deliberation instead of allowing it to deepen political polarisation.

B. Competing narratives of crisis and transition

Climate change framing sits at the centre of these political debates. Scientific assessments consistently stress the need for rapid reductions in greenhouse gas emissions, yet the political implications of urgency remain contested. Different actors invoke urgency to advance and legitimise particular priorities, interventions and forms of political action.

The climate crisis should be seen both as a discursive strategy and as an objective condition. Political actors construct crises by identifying particular societal problems, defining their causes and proposing corresponding solutions. Crisis narratives therefore perform both a diagnostic function, explaining what the problem is, and a prognostic function, indicating what should be done about it. Different actors consequently construct different climate crises, each associated with distinct political priorities and repertoires of action.

Rather than viewing these positions as mutually exclusive, the project proposes an urgency spectrum, demonstrating that different degrees of perceived urgency generate different forms of political mobilisation. At one end of the spectrum, low-urgency narratives minimise the need for climate governance or prioritise domestic environmental concerns. At the opposite end, high-urgency narratives advocate immediate intervention but diverge over whether solutions should remain technocratic or involve deeper political transformation. Between these poles lie conditional positions that support climate action while subordinating it to concerns such as affordability, energy security or industrial competitiveness.



Figure 1: Urgency spectrum of discourses on climate crisis

This perspective carries important implications for policymakers. Political conflict around climate action also stems from competing understandings of urgency, responsibility and appropriate political action. These differences shape how climate challenges are understood and how proposed solutions are assessed.

Effective climate governance therefore requires engaging with these competing narratives rather than assuming that scientific evidence alone will generate political consensus.

C. Multi-level governance temporal challenges

The complexity of the European green transition is further intensified by its multi-level governance structure. Climate objectives are established at European Union level, translated into national legislation, implemented through regional and local authorities and ultimately experienced by citizens and communities. While this system enables coordination across multiple policy domains, it also creates tensions between different institutional priorities, political timescales and territorial interests.

The European Union provides strategic direction through legislative initiatives such as the European Climate Law, the Fit for 55 package and the Green Deal. National governments must reconcile these commitments with domestic political priorities, while regional and municipal authorities are responsible for planning and implementing many of the measures that directly affect citizens. Consequently, climate governance depends upon continuous coordination across institutions operating under different political mandates and administrative capacities.

Temporal challenges identified by Trans4Demo

1. Fast politics, slow transitions
Elections arrive quickly; transitions evolve slowly.

2. Uncertainty as a political fault line
Climate transitions inherently involve technological, economic, and social uncertainty.

3. Many actors, many speeds
Sustainability transitions involve an array of actors—governments, cities, industries, unions, farmers, communities, activists—each operating on different temporal registers.

4. Slow-changing institutions in a rapidly shifting world
Core democratic institutions are inherently slow-moving.

Sustainability transitions unfold over decades, requiring policy continuity and long-term investment. Democratic systems, however, operate through electoral cycles, changing governments and evolving public preferences. These distinct temporalities create structural tensions between the need for consistent long-term policy direction and the democratic imperative to remain responsive to citizens' immediate concerns.

These tensions should not be interpreted simply as institutional shortcomings. Democratic governance necessarily accommodates changing political preferences, public deliberation and electoral accountability.

The challenge lies in designing institutions capable of sustaining long-term transition strategies without undermining democratic responsiveness.

D. Bridging the Democratic Gap: Trust, Legitimacy and Public Ownership

Despite broad public recognition of climate change as a significant challenge, support for specific climate policies remains uneven. This apparent contradiction highlights what may be described as a democratic gap within the green transition: the disconnect between ambitious policy objectives and citizens' perceptions of fairness, participation and political representation. Public opposition rarely stems from rejecting climate action itself. More often, it arises from concerns about how decisions are made, how costs and benefits are distributed and whether local communities have a meaningful voice in shaping the transition.

Trans4Demo's findings suggest that this democratic gap is reinforced when climate governance is framed exclusively through technocratic or emergency narratives. While urgency can effectively mobilise political attention, it may also limit democratic deliberation, increase public anxiety and create the perception that decisions are imposed rather than collectively negotiated. As a result, resistance often reflects concerns about governance and legitimacy rather than the goals of climate policy.

Bridging this gap requires moving beyond consultation towards genuine participation throughout policy design and implementation. Citizens are more likely to support ambitious climate action when decision-making is transparent, inclusive and responsive to local knowledge and lived experience. Democratic participation should therefore be understood as a strategic asset that strengthens both policy quality and public legitimacy.

Ultimately, the success of Europe's green transition will depend not only on technological innovation or regulatory ambition, but on the capacity of democratic institutions to build trust, manage disagreement constructively and foster a shared sense of ownership.

The challenge is not to eliminate contestation, but to govern it in ways that make the transition more legitimate, more inclusive and more resilient.



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Trans4Demo Insights
Sardinia: transition, territory and contestation

Sardinia shows how the green transition depends on democratic legitimacy, territorial governance and public trust alongside ambitious climate targets. While the island possesses one of Italy's greatest renewable energy potentials, the rapid expansion of wind and solar projects has generated intense political and societal debate over who benefits from the transition, who bears its costs and who should participate in shaping it. The case highlights how conflicts around renewable energy frequently reflect competing claims about fairness, territorial identity and democratic participation.

Legislative Decree 199/2021, which transposed the EU Renewable Energy Directive (RED II), provided the national regulatory framework for expanding renewable energy. Under Italy's national targets, Sardinia is expected to install an additional 6.2 GW of renewable capacity by 2030. The scale of proposals far exceeded this target: by 2024, Terna, the national electricity transmission grid operator, had received connection requests amounting to roughly 54 GW. This gap between planned capacity, speculative applications and local energy needs became a major source of concern across the island.

Back then, Sardinia's governor Christian Solinas, elected in a coalition backed by the League (Lega) party, a right-wing populist political party in Italy led by Matteo Salvini, never openly questioned the projects set in motion by Meloni's administration. On the other hand, several mayors from the provinces of Oristano and Nuoro organised meetings and approved municipal resolutions to voice their opposition to wind farms in their municipalities. This movement of opposition grew into marches, demonstrations, and symbolic protests that found the political representation of the local Five Star Movement.

Alessandra Todde, the Five Star Movement candidate supported by a wider centre-left coalition, was elected president of Sardinia in February 2024. Her administration adopted Regional Law 5/2024, which introduced an 18-month moratorium on new renewable-energy projects while the region prepared rules for identifying suitable areas. The Constitutional Court later declared the moratorium provision unconstitutional, reaffirming the primacy of national rules governing renewable deployment. In December 2024, the regional government adopted Law 20/2024 on suitable and unsuitable areas for renewable



Wind turbines on mountain, Castelsardo, Sardinia, Italy

installations. The national government challenged the law, arguing that parts of it conflicted with state and EU law; the Constitutional Court subsequently invalidated several provisions. These disputes brought the conflict over renewable deployment into the institutional arena, exposing tensions between national decarbonisation targets, regional autonomy and landscape protection.

Protests were driven by narratives of "energy colonialism," where local actors accused the government and large corporations of exploiting local land and resources without allowing adequate local participation. The most recurrent narrative focused on wind turbines being polluting or degrading to the beauty of the otherwise unspoilt Sardinian landscape. Big energy corporations were often pit against local energy communities. At times, the conflict felt forced as energy communities were foreseen in the Legislative Decree 199/2021.

Environmental organisations, university professors, and energy experts found themselves at public meetings explaining the most common mistakes behind anti-renewables arguments. For instance, they argued that newer generations wind farms can be installed 25 km from the coasts without producing negative externalities for the marine environment nor for tourists enjoying the Sardinian beaches. These debates took place on an island threatened by drought and desertification due to climate change yet powered by two major electrical plants running on coal.

To better understand these dynamics, Trans4Demo analysed **2,564 entries from newspaper articles** published in *Corriere della Sera* and *La Nuova Sardegna*, identifying **155 political claims** that were systematically coded to map actors, narratives, forms of mobilisation and references to urgency and legitimacy. These findings informed qualitative interviews conducted with key stakeholders across Sardinia, providing a richer understanding of how political actors, institutions and communities framed the renewable energy debate.

The Sardinian case offers broader lessons for climate governance across Europe. It demonstrates that renewable energy transitions become more resilient when local communities are recognised not simply as consultees but as partners in decision-making. Building public trust requires governance arrangements that balance climate ambition with territorial identity, procedural fairness and meaningful participation. As such, Sardinia represents not an exception but a valuable illustration of the democratic challenges that increasingly accompany Europe's green transition.



Wind turbines on mountain top against dramatic orange sky, Castelsardo, Sardinia, Italy

From Local Experiences to Systemic Action: Governance Lessons from Trans4Demo

The findings emerging from the Trans4Demo project demonstrate that the democratic challenges associated with the green transition cannot be addressed through communication strategies or regulatory reforms alone. They require governance approaches capable of managing political contestation, recognising territorial diversity and strengthening public trust throughout the policy cycle.

Drawing together evidence from the project's conceptual work, empirical research and case studies, five governance lessons emerge that can inform climate policymaking across Europe.

A. Democratic Contestation is a Governance Resource

Political contestation should not automatically be interpreted as resistance to climate action or evidence of policy failure. Democratic disagreement is an inevitable feature of sustainability transitions because climate policies redistribute costs, benefits and responsibilities across society.

The Sardinian case illustrates this clearly. Public debate surrounding renewable energy deployment was driven not only by different views on decarbonisation but by competing understandings of territorial identity, procedural fairness, energy sovereignty and local development. These disagreements revealed concerns that might otherwise have remained invisible within conventional planning processes.

For policymakers, contestation should therefore be viewed as a source of democratic intelligence rather than an implementation obstacle. Understanding why communities disagree provides opportunities to identify governance shortcomings, anticipate conflicts and improve policy design before disputes become entrenched.

B. The politicisation of climate governance

Public legitimacy is established long before infrastructure is built or policies are implemented. Communities rarely judge climate projects solely on their environmental objectives. Instead, they assess whether decision-making processes are transparent, inclusive and responsive to local concerns.

Opposition frequently reflects dissatisfaction with governance processes rather than rejection of climate action itself. When citizens perceive that decisions have already been taken before consultation begins, trust declines and implementation becomes more difficult.

Legitimacy should therefore be understood as an ongoing process rather than the outcome of a single consultation exercise. **Building trust requires early engagement, clear communication of trade-offs and genuine opportunities for communities to influence decisions before policy choices become fixed.**

C. Climate Transitions Must Reflect Local Contexts

Although European climate objectives are shared across Member States, the conditions under which they are implemented differ considerably. Economic structures, territorial identities, governance traditions and historical experiences all influence how communities perceive climate policies.

The Sardinian case demonstrates that renewable energy projects were interpreted through local concerns relating to landscape, identity, procedural fairness and regional development. These factors shaped public responses as much as the technical characteristics of the projects themselves.

This finding highlights the importance of place-based governance. **Climate policies cannot simply be replicated across territories using identical approaches.** Instead, implementation strategies should recognise local priorities, institutional capacities and community aspirations while remaining aligned with broader European objectives.

D. Participation is a Governance Strategy, Not a Communication Tool

Participation should extend beyond informing citizens about decisions that have already been made. Effective participation enables communities to contribute to defining problems, identifying priorities and shaping solutions throughout the policy process.

Structured dialogue can help policymakers, researchers, practitioners and citizens explore uncertainty together and develop shared understandings of desirable futures. Rather than seeking immediate consensus, these participatory processes create space for collective learning and more informed decision-making.

Participation should therefore be recognised as a core governance function rather than an accompanying communication activity. Institutions that invest in co-creation strengthen legitimacy, improve policy quality and build long-term public ownership of climate action.

E. Governing Uncertainty Rather Than Eliminating It

Climate transitions unfold over decades while democratic institutions operate through shorter political cycles. Technological developments, economic conditions and societal expectations continue to evolve, making uncertainty an inherent feature of climate governance rather than a temporary challenge to overcome.

Effective governance depends less on predicting every future outcome than on developing institutions capable of learning, adapting and responding to changing circumstances. Flexibility, continuous dialogue and regular policy review become essential components of resilient governance systems.

Rather than presenting climate transitions as linear implementation processes, **policymakers should recognise them as adaptive journeys requiring continuous collaboration between institutions, experts and citizens.**

Towards an Integrated Policy Framework

The findings of the Trans4Demo project demonstrate that delivering Europe's green transition requires more than ambitious climate targets. It demands governance systems capable of managing democratic contestation, strengthening institutional trust and ensuring that communities become active partners in shaping sustainable futures. The following recommendations outline practical actions for European, national, regional and local decision-makers.

European Union Level

Strengthening Democratic Legitimacy in the Green Deal

The European Green Deal should continue to embed democratic legitimacy alongside environmental ambition by systematically integrating participation, transparency and procedural fairness into policy development. European institutions should complement legislative objectives with guidance and tools that help Member States engage citizens throughout the implementation process.

Supporting Place-Based Transition Strategies

European climate policies should provide greater flexibility for regions to adapt implementation to their territorial, economic and cultural contexts while maintaining common climate objectives. Funding instruments should encourage locally tailored solutions that recognise regional diversity rather than promoting uniform implementation models.

Building Participatory Governance Mechanisms

The European Commission should expand support for deliberative and participatory governance approaches, including citizens' consultations and assemblies and co-creation processes. These mechanisms should become integral components of climate governance, enabling citizens and stakeholders to contribute to shaping transition pathways rather than simply responding to predetermined policies.

National Level

Aligning Climate Ambition with Social Cohesion

National governments should ensure that climate policies are accompanied by measures addressing affordability, employment, territorial inequalities and social justice. Integrating social considerations into climate planning will strengthen public confidence and reduce the risk of political polarisation.

Reducing Institutional Fragmentation

Effective climate governance requires stronger coordination across ministries, agencies and all levels of government. National frameworks should promote coherent decision-making, clear responsibilities and continuous dialogue between environmental, economic and social policy actors to minimise conflicting priorities during implementation.

Supporting Local Implementation Capacity

National governments should provide local and regional authorities with the financial resources, technical expertise and institutional support needed to deliver climate policies effectively. Strengthening local administrative capacity will improve implementation while enabling more meaningful engagement with communities.

Regional and Local Level

Community-Centred Transition Governance

Regional and local authorities should place communities at the centre of climate decision-making by engaging citizens from the earliest stages of policy development. Recognising local knowledge and lived experience improves both policy quality and democratic legitimacy.

Participatory Planning and Co-Ownership Models

Authorities should move beyond traditional consultation towards co-creation and collaborative planning processes that allow communities to shape projects and share their benefits. Supporting community energy initiatives and other co-ownership models can strengthen local ownership and long-term acceptance of climate action.

Building Trust Through Local Engagement

Trust should be developed through continuous dialogue rather than one-off consultation exercises. Transparent communication, accessible information and sustained engagement with residents, businesses and civil society organisations can help build lasting relationships that support the successful implementation of climate policies.



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