POLITICAL RESEARCH EXCHANGE
PRX

Political Research Exchange
An ECPR Journal

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/prxx20

The 'European Green Deal' – a paradigm shift? Transformations in the European Union's sustainability meta-discourse

Simon Schunz

To cite this article: Simon Schunz (2022) The 'European Green Deal' – a paradigm shift? Transformations in the European Union's sustainability meta-discourse, Political Research Exchange, 4:1, 2085121, DOI: 10.1080/2474736X.2022.2085121

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/2474736X.2022.2085121

© 2022 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group

Published online: 15 Jun 2022.

Submit your article to this journal

Article views: 2108

View related articles

View Crossmark data

Full Terms & Conditions of access and use can be found at
https://www.tandfonline.com/action/journalInformation?journalCode=prxx20

POLITICAL RESEARCH EXCHANGE
2022, VOL. 4, 2085121
https://doi.org/10.1080/2474736X.2022.2085121

RESEARCH ARTICLE

OPEN ACCESS Check for updates

The 'European Green Deal' – a paradigm shift? Transformations in the European Union's sustainability meta-discourse

Simon Schunz

College of Europe, Bruges, Belgium

ABSTRACT

In December 2019, the European Commission released its strategy for the European Union (EU), the European Green Deal (EGD), which perceives the 'commitment to tackling climate and environmental-related challenges' as 'this generation's defining task'. It intends to 'transform [the EU's] economy and society to put it on a more sustainable path', and has been hailed for its potential to durably change European societies. This contribution examines if the EGD offers a discursive paradigm shift regarding environmental sustainability. To this end, it performs a critical discourse analysis on the meta-discourse embodied in the EGD and its predecessors, Europe 2020 and the Lisbon Strategy. It finds that the EGD marks a significant discursive break, moving the EU's meta-discourse from a negligence of environmental sustainability in the 2000s, and the idea that sustainability as an attribute to growth can support a 'jobs and growth' agenda during the 2010s, to centre-stage. By empowering pro-environmental forces, it provides unseen overtures towards a paradigm shift of practical consequence for European – and via an example-setting effect – global sustainability policies. The article concludes by explaining the meta-discursive shift and discussing its implications for EU sustainability policies.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 2 December 2021
Accepted 27 May 2022

KEYWORDS
discourse analysis; environment; European Green Deal; European Union; sustainability

Introduction

In December 2019, the European Commission released its 'European Green Deal' (EGD) strategy, positing the 'commitment to tackling climate and environmental-related challenges [as] … this generation's defining task' in the European Union (EU) (European Commission 2019, 2). It requires mobilizing the 'collective ability to transform its economy and society to put it on a more sustainable path' via a 'set of deeply transformative policies' (ibid., 2, 4). With its holistic roadmap of cross-sectoral policy proposals primarily aimed at net-zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2050, the EGD represents the 2019–24 Commission's top priority.

CONTACT Simon Schunz simon.schunz@coleurope.eu College of Europe, Dijver 11, 8000, Bruges, Belgium

© 2022 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group
This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

With its aim to transform the EU's economy *and* society to reach enhanced environmental sustainability, the EGD proposes *prima facie* a fundamental modification of earlier strategies. For multiple commentators, it therefore marks a 'historic breakthrough with its ambitious, challenging, and feasible plan' that is 'a powerful beacon of hope' (Sachs 2019) and 'has the potential to be a political revolution … its narrative can change Europe's identity' (Tubiana 2021). By placing environmental sustainability at the heart of the EU's integration project, it may represent a 'change of paradigm' (Guégen 2020).

Yet, even if some environmental non-governmental organisations (ENGOs) acknowledge the EGD's 'language … full of promise – echoing calls made by [us] and our allies' (Friends of the Earth Europe 2020), others (e.g. Pontecorvo 2019) as well as academic analysts do not consider it to contain – even rhetorical – novelty regarding environmental sustainability. The few existing analyses of the EGD's discourse argue that it 'would be far-fetched to suggest that [it] communicates an integral transition … beyond green capitalism' (Ossewaarde and Ossewaarde-Lowtoo 2020, 11) and rather represents 'an attempt to extend the neoliberal hegemonic formation within European climate politics' (Samper, Schockling, and Islar 2021, 8). Moreover, it is found to not fully conform to the insights of sustainability scholarship (Eckert and Kovalevska 2021). In short, these critics consider the EGD to be 'old wine in new wineskins'.

Against this backdrop, the puzzle this contribution addresses is whether or not the EGD constitutes a paradigm shift regarding the EU's approach to sustainability, understood as the continuous co-existence of human societies and nature ('the environment'). Rather than operating with normative benchmarks assessing if the EGD conforms to an ideal-typical sustainability transformation, as done in the abovementioned works, the article offers a problem-driven longitudinal analysis centred on the notion of a paradigm as 'concepts, values, perceptions and practices shared by a community, which form … a particular vision of reality that is the basis of the way the community organizes itself' (Capra 1996, 6). To assess the novelty of the EGD in search of a 'paradigm shift', this analysis establishes the EU's past 'vision of reality' on the society/economy-nature relation before determining if the EGD transcends this 'old paradigm'.

The EU has regularly adopted long-term discursive frames via multi-annual political strategies: the EGD 'supersede[s]' the 2000 'Lisbon Strategy' (LS) and the 2010 'Europe 2020' (E2020) strategy (Becker et al. 2020, 100075; Bongardt and Torres 2020; Copeland and Papadimitriou 2012; Joao Rodrigues 2002). These strategies constitute crucial 'meta-discourses' guiding EU action, often for an entire decade: during this period, derivative legislative and policy proposals must be framed within the strategies. Given a high level of 'intertextuality' of EU discourse, manifold 'thematic chains … relate texts [i.e. the meta-discourse and subordinate proposals] to each other via underlying assumptions' (Reisigl and Wodak 2001, 185).

By examining if the EGD embodies a discursive paradigm shift, the paper contributes to both the academic and policy debates about the EU's approach to sustainability. Academically, its longitudinal approach overcomes the 'presentism bias' of the abovementioned discourse analyses of the EGD. By tracing change over time, it allows for better understanding and explaining how framings of sustainability have evolved in a major developed region often perceived as a global 'green leader'. Through its macro-historical perspective on EU discourse, the article places the literature on EU sustainability policies

– with its focus on alternative sectoral policy/governance choices, policy-making processes and actors (e.g. Dobbs, Gravey, and Petetin 2021; Fernandez et al. 2021) – into a broader context, in line with the assumptions of critical discourse analysis (CDA). CDA argues that policy choices are made within – and limited by – an overarching discourse that informs and predetermines policy action 'both through providing meanings … and … setting the limits of a meaningful and legitimate policy' (Diez 2014, 28). When depicting policy options as (il)legitimate, certain interpretations of sustainable development (SD) can – and have in the past – become 'akin to an invisible "glass ceiling" … inhibiting any … transformation' towards sustainability (Hausknost and Hammond 2020, 17). Vice-versa, interpretations that give more relative weight to the environment than to the economic or social dimensions of SD can break that glass ceiling, paving the way for durable sustainability transformations. By exposing long-term trends regarding the EU's meta-discourse, the article elicits if the EGD as a frame for the Union's sustainability policies constitutes or breaks such a glass ceiling. This is not only relevant for studies of the EGD's implementation, but can also inform policy-making. Rather than scrutinizing the EGD against normative benchmarks it can hardly satisfy, the analysis reveals the distance EU discourse has travelled, indicating if and how this evolution allows for a durable transformation, empowering 'change agents' to advocate practicable policies aimed at higher levels of sustainability.

The article first develops a conceptual-methodological framework grounded in environmental discourse-analytical approaches. To trace the EU's sustainability-related discourse across time, it then performs a CDA on the 'visions of reality' of the LS, the E2020 and the EGD. In search of a paradigm shift, it specifically asks *how and to what extent the EU strategies' meta-discourse on the relative weight of the economic, social and environmental dimensions of sustainable development has evolved over time*. It argues that despite some continuity, the EGD represents a major discursive break. Cracking the abovementioned 'glass ceiling of sustainability transformation', it offers overtures towards a paradigm shift of practical consequence for the future of European – and through example-setting – global sustainability policies. Pro-environmental policy entrepreneurs are empowered to seize this discursive shift by comprehensively matching it with ambitious practice. The article explains the meta-discursive shift and concludes by considering future EU sustainability discourse and policies.

Conceptual and methodological framework

To assess if the EU has undergone a meta-discursive shift regarding sustainability via a recalibration of the three dimensions of SD (economic, social and environmental), this section develops a framework rooted in environmental discourse-analytical approaches. It defines the notions of meta-discourse, sustainability and sustainable development in an EU context as well as discursive 'paradigm shift', before discussing the methodological bases of the study.

Meta-discourse and intertextuality in the EU

With its multi-annual strategies, the EU has regularly given itself a structuring narrative, a meta-discourse, that is, 'an ensemble of ideas, concepts and categorisations that are

produced, reproduced and transformed … and through which meaning is given to physical and social realities' (Hajer 1995, 44). This meta-discourse guides its action for a given number of years, typically a decade. As the promoter of the EU's general interest, the Commission is tasked with 'initiat[ing] the Union's … multiannual programming' (Article 17.1 Treaty on European Union – TEU) and thus the design of such strategies. They then have to be endorsed by the members states (typically at heads of state-level in the European Council) and the European Parliament. Occasionally, the European Council can provide the impetus, as was the case for the 2000 LS.

During the period of applicability of these strategies, legislative proposals and policy initiatives, but also any EU information material, need to be framed within the boundaries of this meta-discourse. Subordinate political discourse in official documents thus uses elements of that meta-discourse, resulting in a high level of intertextuality. As EU policy-makers must systematically frame individual initiatives within the overarching narrative, such strategies embody highly impactful meta-discourses pre-determining not only specific aspects of EU discourse but – importantly – also courses of action. Any new strategy may enable change via meta-discursive shifts preparing the ground for novel forms of action. Depending on its scope and depth, such change can be paradigmatic. Before discussing when it is, the key subject of this analysis – sustainability – requires introduction.

Sustainability and sustainable development in an EU context

Sustainability pertains to the capacity of human societies to perdure within biospherical limits. In the EU, it has regularly been subsumed under the broader concept of sustainable development, which constitutes both a guiding principle and an ultimate treaty objective. The former meaning is contained in the TEU's preamble expressing the EU's and its members' determination 'to promote economic and social progress for their peoples, taking into account the principle of sustainable development'; the latter meaning can be found in article 3.3(1) TEU:

> The Union … shall work for the sustainable development of Europe based on balanced economic growth and price stability, a highly competitive social market economy, aiming at full employment and social progress, and a high level of protection and improvement of the quality of the environment.

The Treaty on the Functioning of the EU (TFEU) only mentions SD once, namely in relation to the 'environmental policy integration principle' that foresees the integration of environmental concerns into all Union policies (Art. 11 TFEU). Though widely used as a frame of reference in legal and policy discourse, commentators have lamented the 'lack of a definition of sustainable development in EU law' (Van Hees 2014, 61).

As a result, SD remains a contested concept in the EU (as elsewhere). Its interpretations vary (Hopwood, Mellor, and O'Brien 2005).[1] The most well-known definition regularly alluded to by the EU depicts it as being about 'meeting the needs of present generations without jeopardizing the ability of future generations to meet their own needs – in other words, a better quality of life for everyone, now and for generations to come' (European Union 2021). Beyond this intergenerational justice focus, the EU offers little more guidance than to highlight that SD comprises three, somehow interrelated – economic,

social and environmental – dimensions whose relationship must be 'balanced'. What this balance should entail is left to policy-makers' interpretations when they design policy frameworks aimed at a 'better quality of life' (Van Hees 2014, 67). Different weightings of the three SD dimensions could, for instance, imply greater emphasis on its economic (growth), social (cohesion, equality) or environmental aspects (biosphere protection), as well as on combinations of any two of these dimensions. How to assess if a change in the EU's meta-discourse regarding SD is paradigmatic is discussed next.

Analysing change in EU sustainability meta-discourse: when is it paradigmatic?

If a paradigm is understood as 'concepts, values, perceptions and practices shared by a community, which forms a particular vision of reality' (Capra 1996, 6), detecting a paradigm shift entails tracing fundamental change relating to the *concepts*, *values* and *perceptions* as key components of any such 'vision'.[2] *Values*, as standards about what is appropriate behaviour in a society, derive – in the EU – from its treaties. Article 2 TEU lists a.o. 'freedom', 'democracy' and 'the rule of law'. A probe into the EU meta-discourse under study reveals that these values are only broadly referred to across the different strategies, without any indication of change. A paradigm shift thus needs to relate to altered understandings of *concepts* and/or *perceptions*.

Perceptions depict 'the quality of being aware' of aspects of reality based on our senses (Cambridge Dictionary 2021). In a meta-discourse (embodied in political strategies), such perceptions transpire from policy-makers' problem diagnosis, which provides the *raison d'être* for a given strategy. Based on their observation of reality, policy-makers become aware – and want to raise others' awareness via their discourse[3] – of what constitutes the main challenge of a 'community' like the EU. The analyst of EU discourse must thus unveil the 'vision of reality' embodied in this problem diagnosis. It includes deciphering the causes for and effects of the problem that policy-makers identify. Concretely, in the framework of this analysis policy-makers' perceptions about the relative weight of the economic, social and environmental aspects of SD need to be uncovered. Altered perceptions pointing towards a paradigm shift would entail fundamentally modified visions of the present, emphasizing novel problems, e.g. language that would suddenly depict social inequality as *the* major societal challenge.

Concepts represent 'generalizations and abstractions of empirical events and phenomena' (Toshkov 2016, 83–84). They help grasp the solutions advocated to address the EU's perceived challenge(s). In the context of a strategic meta-discourse, they offer a tool-box of abstract ideas about desired outcomes. Whereas perceptions allow for articulating the status quo – the 'vision of the present reality' – and its 'problematic' nature requiring political action, concepts enable policy-makers to imagine and formulate the gist of the 'vision of the future reality'. This vision comprises two aspects. For one, with the help of concepts, the meta-discourse formulates an idea of the envisaged end state a given strategy aims to attain. In the context of the EU's sustainability meta-discourse, the end state could be expressed in specific interpretations of SD embodied in concepts such as 'social market economy' or 'environmental state'. Second, this 'vision of the future reality' encompasses an idea of the form of change needed – in terms of the concrete steps and pace – to get from the status quo to the status desideratus. Steps can be captured in concepts that express preferences for specific (economic, social, environmental)

policy solutions (e.g. 'primacy of the market'; 'stronger regulation'), and involve considerations of the public's role in policy-making. The pace of change can be grasped through concepts such as 'transition' or 'transformation'. Transition embodies an 'evolutionary', incremental change, whereas transformation implies a disruption exposing 'the conflicting aspects of change' (Göpel 2016, 19). Conceptual changes indicative of a true paradigm shift would, e.g., be the emergence of 'biophysical primacy' as a guiding concept, arguing that 'ecological systems host sociocultural systems and that economic systems are subordinate means in … structuring nature-human relations' (ibid., 9).

In synthesis, to respond to this article's intention to trace change – and detect a potential paradigm shift – in the EU's sustainability-related meta-discourse, a longitudinal analysis has to be performed that focusses on policy-makers' perceptions of the problem(s) of a community, its causes and effects, and the proposed solutions in the form of concepts of the desired end state, steps and the pace needed to attain it. Central to this analysis is an attention to the calibration of the three SD dimensions, notably the importance the meta-discourse affords to nature. Major discontinues would point to a paradigm shift. How to perform such a longitudinal analysis via a critical discourse analysis is discussed next.

Designing a critical discourse analysis

To implement the analysis of the EU's meta-discourse, discourse-analytical approaches offer a suitable methodological tool-kit. From the broad range of approaches applied to sustainability matters – from discourse theory to critical, deliberative or argumentative discourse analysis (Leipold et al. 2019, 447) – critical discourse analysis seems well-suited to trace change in perceptions and concepts transpiring from political strategies.

For one, CDA is helpful when tracing change, as it argues that discourse is centrally concerned with 'social change': it perceives modifications in language use as powerful means to alter practices (Fairclough 1995) because it 'provides the context in which individual policy articulations are set' (Diez 2014, 28). This implies that a meta-discourse – for instance on sustainability – 'sets the boundaries of what can be legitimately articulated … , [setting] the limits of what can be said' and – subsequently – done (ibid., 33). CDA thus offers a critical perspective by helping to reveal and problematize long-term discursive bias. An example would be a penchant for the economic in a SD discourse, which can indeed limit what may be said about the social or environmental aspects of SD, and would overly draw from but also empower some policy-makers and experts (e.g. economists) while excluding others. Inversely, CDA argues that fundamental alterations in 'words' can empower other actors and subsequently enable them to advocate for transformative 'deeds'. In this sense, language does not only gain power by the use powerful people make of it (Reisigl and Wodak 2001), but also empowers novel actors to effectuate change. The discourse analysis performed here thus not only pays attention to transformed 'wordings', but also to the thinking informing that wording and those who are empowered by it. Another reason why CDA offers a suitable method for the purpose of this analysis is its focus on discourses 'constituting and regulating the social and political world' (Antaki 2008, 432). It typically concentrates on significant official texts and speeches by major political figures – such as multi-annual, society-wide political strategies adopted at EU level as well as the narratives powerful policy-makers develop around them (ibid.). Finally, CDA acknowledges the importance of 'intertextuality' and the assumptions

that interrelate texts (Meyer 2009, 15), supporting the argument made in this contribution that EU meta-discourse structures subordinate discourses.

CDA can be deployed in many ways: there is 'no accepted canon of data collection' and its 'operationalization and analysis is problem oriented' (Meyer 2009). To limit the scope of this analysis, it is primordial to clearly define the 'problem' under study, the texts to analyse, and how exactly they are analysed. First, the studied problem is outlined above as the evolution of EU meta-discourse regarding its 'sustainability paradigm', operationalized as consisting of problem perceptions and concepts relating to the relative weight of the economic, the social and the environmental aspects of SD. Second, the study focuses on the major multi-annual political strategies proposed by the European Commission or European Council and endorsed by the other EU institutions since the start of the millennium: the LS and Europe 2020, which 'is superseded by … the Green Deal' (Becker et al. 2020, 100075). In line with CDA's focus on major political strategies and intertextuality, emphasis is placed on those texts to the detriment of subordinate documents (e.g. legislative proposals). To corroborate that analysis, documents with which the Commission or the European Council endorsed the strategies and speeches by Commission Presidents presenting them were equally scrutinized (see Table 1).

Finally, CDA typically relies on hermeneutics as a 'text-reducing' method (Meyer 2009, 16; 17–28). In its interpretive exercise, the analysis relied on two sets of pre-specifications. First, it freshly – that is, without passing by existing interpretations – examined the above sources to reveal policy-makers' discursive constructions of the policy problem (*What language do they use to depict the main problem of the EU as a community in a given strategy? What language do they employ to present its causes and effects?*), the concepts advanced to identify the solution to that problem (*What words do they use to outline the desired end state of a strategy?*) and the ways to reach that end state (*What terminology do they deploy to depict the concrete steps towards that end state? Which terms describe the pace at which to advance towards it?*). Second, this original critical analysis of the sources was thematically focussed on the relative weight of the economic, social and environmental aspects of the EU's meta-discourse on SD. While remaining a hermeneutic

Table 1. Critical discourse analysis – sources.

Period	EU strategy	European Commission	European Council	Key policy-makers' speeches and texts
2000–2009	**Lisbon Strategy**	Communication, 15 May 2001 (European Commission 2001) Communication, 2 February 2005 (European Commission 2005)	Conclusions, 23–24 March 2000 (Lisbon), 23–24 March 2001 (Stockholm) and 15–16 June 2001 (Göteborg) (European Council 2000, 2001a, 2001b)	Commission President Barroso, European Parliament, 2 February 2005 (Barroso 2005)
2010–2019	**Europe 2020**	Communication, 3 March 2010 (European Commission 2010)	Conclusions, 26 March 2010 (European Council 2010)	Preface of Commission President Barroso to the Europe 2020 Strategy (Barroso 2010)
2019-present	**European Green Deal**	Communication, 11 December 2019 (European Commission 2019)	Conclusions, 12 December 2019 (European Council 2019)	Commission President von der Leyen, European Parliament, 11, 18 December 2019 (Von der Leyen 2019a, 2019b)

Source: author's compilation.

exercise, it paid particular attention to the use and definition of key words typically associated with the economic ('competitive/ness' 'economy/ic', 'finance', 'growth', 'investment', 'jobs', 'market'), the social ('care', 'cohesion', 'equity', 'poverty', 'welfare', 'well-being') and the environmental ('biodiversity', 'climate change', 'emissions', 'green', 'environment/al', 'pollution', 'sustainable/sustainability') as well as to their prevalence, i.e. the frequency with which they are used, in each document.[4]

Discourse analysis: from the Lisbon Strategy to the European Green Deal

This section engages in a critical discourse analysis unveiling the meta-discourses of the three major EU strategies of the past 20 years before extracting and discussing cross-time patterns.

The 'Lisbon Strategy' and the 2000s

The Lisbon Strategy emerged from a special meeting of the European Council held on 23–24 March 2000 in Lisbon and aimed at agreeing on 'a new strategic goal for the Union' (European Council 2000, 1). To include its environmental dimension into the analysis, complementary documents had to be considered: the 2001 Stockholm and Göteborg European Council conclusions alongside the 2001 Commission 'Strategy for Sustainable Development' (SDS).

Vision of the present reality: problem perceptions

In the – rather short – Lisbon European Council conclusions, two entry paragraphs concisely outlined the heads of state and governments' perceptions of the EU's main problem: a 'quantum shift resulting from globalisation and the challenges of a new knowledge-driven economy' (European Council 2000, point 1). Processes of globalization 'affecting every aspect of people's lives' were seen to create competition for innovation through knowledge (ibid.). These external pressures were perceived as exposing the 'weaknesses' of the Union and its citizenry, namely a low employment rate, structural long-term unemployment and a 'skills gap' (ibid., points 3 and 4). Given these weaknesses, the key difficulty, necessitating the adoption of a new EU strategy, was seen in the inaptitude of the European work force to meet the competitiveness challenges posed by globalization. Rather than justifying this – comparatively brief – 'vision of the present reality' with further evidence, the LS quickly turned to the solutions discussed below.

Considerations relating to the environment did not explicitly figure in the LS but were, according to the planning of the European Council, to be addressed at a later stage (Pallemaerts 2013, 354–355). A year after the Lisbon summit, EU leaders met in Stockholm to observe that 'Lisbon has successfully integrated economic and social matters. The sustainable development strategy, including the environmental dimension, to be adopted at the Göteborg European Council ... will complete and build on the political commitment under the Lisbon strategy' (European Council 2001a, point 50). Their problem analysis relating to the environmental dimension of SD was limited to a three-sentence annex 'recognising climate change as a global threat to future well-being and economic progress' (ibid., Annex II).

In May 2001, the Commission issued the EU's first Sustainable Development Strategy. This document focused on the environmental dimension of SD and outlined key challenges, from climate change to biodiversity loss. It argued that '[u]rgent action is needed: Now is the time to confront the challenges to sustainability' (European Commission 2001, part I). The Göteborg European Council took inspiration from this when it agreed upon 'a strategy for sustainable development which completes the Union's political commitment to economic and social renewal, and *adds* a third, environmental dimension' to the LS (European Council 2001b, 20, emphasis added). The exact wording is telling here: although the heads of state and government observed that in relation to SD a '[f]ailure to reverse trends that threaten future quality of life will steeply increase the costs to society or make those trends irreversible' (ibid., 19), the SDS was indeed conceived as an 'add-on', adopted more than a year later and kept siloed from the LS as such.

Vision of the future reality: desired end state and paths

The above problem diagnosis led the European Council to argue for 'a radical transformation of the European economy' (European Council 2000, point 1). 'The rapid and accelerating pace of change means it is urgent for the Union to act now' (ibid., point 2). For the heads of state and government, 'the time is right to undertake both economic and social reforms as part of a positive strategy which combines competitiveness and social cohesion' (ibid., point 4). The desired end state aimed at by these socio-economic reforms was captured in '*a new strategic goal* for the next decade', namely '*to become the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world capable of sustainable economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion*' (ibid., point 5, italics in original).

By 2010, the EU was thus to make the 'transition', a term used five times in the LS (always in relation to the 'knowledge-based economy'), to become the world's most competitive continent and 'knowledge leader'. The LS's 'vision of the future reality' was thus quantifiable: taking first place globally in terms of competitiveness, research and development. This envisaged end state was however merely a vehicle to deliver on the real objectives of creating more 'jobs and growth' and greater 'social cohesion' in Europe. The terms 'growth' (used 15 times) and 'job(s)' (11 times) then also permeated the document.

With its frequent references to a 'transition' through 'socio-economic reforms', the LS sketched a vision of an incremental change at a pace that somewhat contradicted the urgency of a 'radical transformation' identified in its introductory paragraphs. In terms of concrete steps to attain the status desideratus, the EU was to improve the structures that should enable its workforce to better cope with global competition. The '*overall strategy*' guiding that path included 'better policies for the information society and R&D', 'structural reform for competitiveness and innovation', 'completing the internal market', 'modernising the European social model', and 'an appropriate macro-economic policy mix' (ibid., points 5 ff.). Each step was outlined in detail and complemented with a 'more coherent and systematic approach', which centrally included the 'open method of coordination', a form of loose networking inviting EU member states to compare best practices (ibid., point 35).

The Stockholm European Council conclusions provided more details to refine the LS's general objectives, offering quantifiable reform targets exclusively focussed on the socio-economic dimensions of SD (e.g. 'increasing the average EU employment rate among

older women and men (55–64) to 50% by 2010'; European Council 2001a, point 9). Regarding the environmental dimension of SD, although the May 2001 SDS did include specific targets and measures, notably in relation to the EU's climate commitment under the Kyoto Protocol, and the Göteborg summit conclusions briefly picked up on those, the follow-up process was described in much less detail. For the EU leaders meeting in Göteborg, investing in 'sustainable development will present significant economic opportunities … the potential to unleash a new wave of technological innovation and investment, generating growth and employment' (European Council 2001b, point 21). Given this utilitarian vision of the environmental dimension of SD, there was then also de facto no concrete follow-up to the environmental add-on to the LS in subsequent years (Pallemaerts 2013, 354–356).

Shortly after its new President Barroso had taken office, the Commission published 'Working together for growth and jobs - A new start for the Lisbon Strategy' in February 2005. This communication sustained the original LS discourse and its utilitarian view of the environmental dimension of SD as enabling 'eco-innovation' in support of growth and jobs creation (European Commission 2005, 23). The gist of this LS relaunch was captured in Barroso's presentation of the 'new start' to the European Parliament in February 2005:

> Sustainable development remains the overarching goal … It is as if I have three children – the economy, our social agenda, and the environment … – if one of my children [i.e. the economy] is sick, I am ready to … drop everything and focus on him until he is back to health. That is normal and responsible. (Barroso 2005)

And indeed, the discourse transpiring from the renewed document indicated that everything else was dropped, as Barroso's 'new start' 'served only to narrow its focus on economic matters even further' (Pallemaerts 2013, 357). The renewal of the SDS in 2006, with a strong environmental focus, was entirely kept separate from the LS (ibid., 359). It was not until 2010, still with Barroso at the Commission's helm, that the EU introduced novel aspects into its meta-discourse.

Europe 2020 and the 2010s

On 3 March 2010, the Commission released its Europe 2020 proposal, 'A European strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth' (European Commission 2010). The European Council agreed on its main elements on 25–26 March 2010 (European Council 2010).

Vision of the present reality: problem perceptions

The problem analysis policy-makers offered in E2020 was very much embedded into its time, marked by a major economic and financial crisis (Lundvall and Lorenz 2012). Lauding the 'steady gains in economic growth and job creation over the last decade', the Commission observed that these had been 'wiped out' by this 'crisis' (European Commission 2010, 5). Its continuation 'makes the task of securing future economic growth much more difficult' so that 'many investment plans, talents and ideas risk going to waste' (ibid.). This diagnosis was grounded in an analysis of 'Europe's structural weaknesses' 'exposed' by the crisis – a 'productivity gap', low employment rates, demographic pressures – as well as on the observation that '[g]lobal challenges intensify' (ibid.). These latter included competitiveness pressures, 'global finance' that 'still needs fixing' and – as

the only novel aspect compared to the LS – 'climate and resource challenges' (ibid., 6). Apart from a brief paragraph on the risks of 'bubble-driven growth', the Commission did not undertake an analysis of the origins of the crisis, but ultimately considered its symptoms – depicted as a 'moment of transformation'[5] – as Europe's main problem and justification for a new strategy (ibid., 5). It portrayed this transformation as an event the EU undergoes, forcing it to react 'to avoid decline' (ibid., 6).

While the Commission's problem analysis included the observation that '[c]limate and resource challenges require drastic action', this was primarily the case because they 'expose our consumers and businesses to harmful and costly price shocks, threatening our economic security' (ibid.). Though recognized as a challenge, climate change was thus predominantly linked to 'economic security': its effects could further exacerbate the problem that 'our growth potential has been halved during the crisis' (ibid., 5).

In his introduction to E2020, Barroso confirmed the problem diagnosis in relation to unemployment and 'pressures on our social cohesion' by depicting the crisis as a 'wake-up call' and 'Europe's moment of truth' (ibid., preface). The European Council (2010, 1) conclusions reiterated this problem analysis: 'the world's worst economic crisis since the 1930s … has reversed much of the progress achieved since 2000'. It had led to 'excessive levels of debt, sluggish structural growth, and high unemployment' (ibid.).

In synthesis, the main agenda-setting institutions thus converged on a 'vision of the present reality': the EU's major problem was the threat to economic growth posed by 'the crisis', whereas limited attention was paid to social and ecological challenges.

Vision of the future reality: desired end state and paths

To counter the identified problem, the Commission presented three possible scenarios: 'sustainable recovery', 'sluggish recovery' and 'lost decade' (European Commission 2010, 6–7). It recommended that the EU should embrace the first option to enter 'into a new economy … [f]or our own and future generations to continue to enjoy a high-quality of healthy life, underpinned by Europe's unique social models' (ibid., 8). Pursuing this path towards offering 'a vision of Europe's social market economy for the 21st century' required economic growth with three interrelated attributes: smart, sustainable and inclusive (ibid.). 'Growth' was indeed the ubiquitous term in E2020, appearing in total 83 times on 32 pages; the term 'job(s)' appeared 21 times.[6] Smart growth was related to 'an economy based on knowledge and innovation'; sustainable growth was defined as 'a more resource efficient, greener and more competitive economy'; finally, inclusive growth referred to 'a high-employment economy delivering … cohesion' (ibid.). All three were – with the partial exception of the emphasis on resource efficiency and being 'greener' – very much reminiscent of the Lisbon Strategy. Despite references to 'a new economy' and a 'vision for the 21st century', E2020 thus essentially embodied a status quo perspective of the desired end state: by 2020, the EU's 'social market economy' should have been stabilized via steady growth.

The strategy translated the three-fold growth concept into five interrelated 'headline targets for 2020' – on employment, R&D investment, greenhouse gas emissions reductions linked to energy efficiency and renewable energy, education attainment and poverty reduction (ibid., 8–9) – and into seven 'flagship initiatives'. These were broken down into 'an ambitious range of actions at EU level' paired to a technocratic

governance system with extensive monitoring, binding in various stakeholders, but barely mentioning the Union's citizens (ibid., 9, 26–28).

To attain those targets, the smart and inclusive growth sections of the strategy offered few updates to the LS. Only two novel areas received attention: digitalization and, in the 'sustainable growth' section, climate change (but not the environment more generally). For the Commission, sustainable growth was to be about 'building a resource efficient, sustainable and competitive economy' with specific emphasis on ensuring EU competitiveness by 'exploiting Europe's leadership in the race to develop new processes and technologies, including green technologies, … and reinforcing the competitive advantages of our businesses' (ibid., 12). Three action points were identified, starting with 'competitiveness': as a 'first mover in green solutions', the 'EU should maintain its lead in the market for green technologies as a means of ensuring resource efficiency … , thereby boosting our industrial competitiveness' (ibid., 12–13). This eco-efficiency focus also permeated the other action points: 'combating climate change' and 'clean and efficient energy'. On the former, efficiency via 'new technologies' would 'save money and boost economic growth' while – almost as a by-product – help 'limit emissions' (ibid., 13); on the latter, meeting EU energy aims should lead to 'not only financial savings', but also 'energy security' (ibid.). Altogether, by decoupling growth from energy use and becoming more resource-efficient, the EU was to become durably more competitive.

The limited attention to climate change as anything but an economic opportunity for fostering 'growth and jobs' also characterized the flagship initiative 'Resource-efficient Europe'. The only exception concerned the 2050 horizon, by which the EU was to attain its 'emissions reduction and biodiversity targets' (ibid., 14). The '20-20-20 by 2020' target stated as part of this flagship initiative (20% emission cuts from 1990 levels, 20% renewables share in EU energy mix, 20% energy efficiency increase) were to contribute to jobs and growth creation, whereas the reverse link, that is, how the activities for smart and inclusive growth were to help attain climate objectives, was not made.

The Commission's discursive construction of the solutions, which are to be reached via incremental change, were mirrored in other key documents. In his presentation of E2020, Barroso described its key purpose as follows: 'It's about more jobs … to offer a sense of direction to our societies' (ibid., preface). For the European Council (2010, 1), too, E2020 was unequivocally a 'New European Strategy for Jobs and Growth'. Both documents endorsed the headline targets and flagship initiatives. In both, the environment played a subordinate role – to the extent that the 20-20-20 targets were referenced in the European Council conclusions, but not explicitly linked to another section of the same conclusions dealing with 'Climate Change: Refocusing our Efforts After Copenhagen' (ibid., 7), reinforcing the impression that the environmental SD aspects – again – lived an isolated life in the EU's meta-discourse.

During the second half of the 2010s, the Commission led by Jean-Claude Juncker (2014–2019) fully situated its action within the E2020 meta-discourse. The first three of Juncker's ten priorities were related to 'A new boost for jobs, growth and investment' (reminiscent of the LS), 'A connected digital single market', 'A resilient energy union with a forward-looking climate change policy', which absorbed climate policy under a new 'Energy Union' project that de facto focussed on energy security and neglected other environmental challenges (Bassot and Hiller 2019). Other priorities concerned the single market, trade and migration. Altogether, the EU's meta-discourse for the 2010s

had thus 'effectively … reduced' the 'environmental dimension of sustainability … to energy and resource efficiency' (Pallemaerts 2013, 361).

The European Green Deal and the (first half of the) 2020s

This section focuses on the European Green Deal alongside the way Commission President von der Leyen presented it in speeches to the European Parliament, both upon releasing it and after the European Council's endorsement (European Council 2019; Von der Leyen 2019a, 2019b).

Vision of the present reality: problem perceptions

The EGD's diagnosis of the central problem the EU as a community faces in the 2020s is short but unequivocal: it observes 'urgent' 'climate and environmental-related challenges' that are 'complex and interlinked', touching upon multiple sectors of the economy and society and requiring systemic thinking (European Commission 2019, 2–3). They are so significant that tackling them is 'this generation's defining task' (ibid., 2).

The EGD is structured in such a way that it offers this diagnosis right at the outset, and then comes back to specific environmental challenges in its sub-sections by discussing the findings of natural science, notably regarding global warming, species loss, pollution of the oceans and deforestation. In its section dedicated to the 'circular economy', for instance, trends related to the 'global extraction of materials' are seen to pose 'a major global risk' (ibid., 7). Similarly, the section on biodiversity highlights the importance of 'ecosystem services' and uses the analyses of authoritative international scientific bodies (in this case the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services) to justify the 'need to halt biodiversity loss' (ibid., 13). Moreover, in the section on the 'EU as a Global Leader', climate change is depicted as a 'threat multiplier' to call for greater 'resilience' (ibid., 20–21). The EGD then links the observation of these environmental challenges, as symptoms of the problem that the EU must address, to deeper socio-economic causes when highlighting the necessity 'to transform its economy and society to put it on a more sustainable path' (ibid., 2).

This problem analysis focussed on the threats to human livelihood and root causes was reiterated by the Commission President. Emblematically, von der Leyen argued that '[f]or too long, global growth has been based on predatory ideas. Humanity took away resources from the environment, and in exchange, produced waste and pollution. This has to change' (Von der Leyen 2019b). The European Council (2019, point 1) supported this problem analysis when acknowledging the 'latest available science' and endorsing the EGD and its 2050 target.

The European Commission and the heads of state and government in the European Council thus share the vision that the main problem that the EU's strategy for the (first half of the) 2020s should address is 'tackling climate- and environmental-related challenges'.

Vision of the future reality: desired end state and paths

To address the challenges, the EGD proposes – as the end goal of the efforts undertaken via this strategy – that the EU should become a 'climate-neutral continent' (Von der Leyen 2019a). In somewhat more specific terms, the EGD 'aims to transform the EU into a fair and

prosperous society, with a modern, resource-efficient and competitive economy where there are no net emissions of greenhouse gases in 2050' (European Commission 2019, 2). Linked to this, it 'also aims to protect, conserve and enhance the EU's natural capital, and protect the health and well-being of citizens from environment-related risks and impacts' through a transition that 'must be just and inclusive. It must put people first' (ibid.).

This objective becomes even clearer when considering how von der Leyen presented the EGD as being 'about reconciling our economy with our planet, reconciling the way we produce, the way we consume with our planet and respecting the environment we live in. That is the core' (Von der Leyen 2019a). By designating the EGD as her overarching strategy, she places climate action at the heart of the EU's, the Commission's and her personal political programme (Von der Leyen 2019a). To depict the ultimate outcome of this effort after the European Council had endorsed the EGD, von der Leyen coined the term 'competitive sustainability' (Von der Leyen 2019b), which is an expression of the idea that the EU must 'put sustainability and the well-being of citizens at the centre of economic policy, and the sustainable development goals at the heart of the EU's policymaking and action' (European Commission 2019, 3). This met the expectations of the European Council, which underscored that the ultimate aim of 'climate neutrality … needs to be achieved in a way that preserves the EU's competitiveness' (European Council 2019, point 7).

When it comes to the paths towards attaining this objective, it is striking how often the EGD uses the terms 'transition' (52 times on 23 pages), at times preceded by the attributes 'ecological' (6 times), 'green' (3) or 'clean energy' (4), but also linked to 'just' (9), as 'this transition must be just and inclusive' (ibid., 2). Simultaneously, the terms 'transformation', 'transform', 'transformational', 'transformative' are used 12 times, prominently including several (sub-)headings.[7] The two terms seem to be employed interchangeably. Variants of 'transform' are used in relation to the economy and society per se, e.g. when the strategy points to the need to 'transform the EU' (ibid., 2), argues that 'the EU has the collective ability to transform its economy and society to put it on a more sustainable path' (ibid.), or claims that 'the EU has already started to … transform the economy with the aim of climate neutrality' (ibid., 4). References to 'transition' are more frequent in relation to specific sub-systems of the economy (energy, industry). Only the terms 'climate', 'green', 'sustainability', 'environment' and 'energy' are used more often than 'transition' and 'transformation' in the EGD (Eckert and Kovalevska 2021, 9).

Centrally, the EGD argues that 'transforming the EU's economy for a sustainable future' requires 'designing a set of deeply transformative policies', primarily in areas that contribute most to its greenhouse gas emissions (ibid., 4). This 'transformational change is most needed' when it comes to 'increase[ing] the value given to protecting and restoring natural ecosystems' (ibid.). The strategy goes on to discuss the measures sector by sector, from 'increasing the EU's climate ambition for 2030 and 2050' to energy security, industrial and circular economy policies, energy efficiency in buildings, mobility, agriculture, land use and food policies, ecosystem and biodiversity as well as pollution. The discussion of each of these sections offers a series of justified steps, which in some cases (e.g. circular economy, mobility, 'farm to fork') are more elaborate than in others (e.g. buildings).

Woven into the EGD are the notions of 'just' and 'fair', underscoring the social dimension of the strategy. The notion of a 'deal' itself is reminiscent of US President Roosevelt's

'New Deal', a package of measures rolled out in the 1930s to reform the US economy with specific attention for citizens' social needs. This rationale is omnipresent in the EGD, which abounds with references to a 'just transition'. In her presentation of the strategy, von der Leyen frequently referred to the importance of social inclusion and her willingness to 'leave no one behind' (Von der Leyen 2019a). The European Council, in confirming the objective of climate neutrality, also recognized that it comes with 'serious challenges' that need to be addressed via an 'enabling framework … to ensure a cost-effective, just, as well as socially balanced and fair transition' (European Council 2019, point 3). It emphasized in particular 'significant public and private investments' as well as the need to be coherent across policies (ibid., points 4, 5).

To concretize the pathways for its implementation, the EGD comes with a 'Roadmap' that puts timelines on each of its numerous policy proposals. A striking feature that runs through the proposed policies are frequent references to 'legislative measures', coupled to the intention 'to step up the EU's efforts to ensure that current legislation and policies relevant to the Green Deal are enforced and effectively implemented' (ibid., 4). This conveys a renewed determination and appetite for effective regulation on the part of the Commission.

In addition to rolling out transformative proposals in various sectoral policies, the EGD underscores its holistic nature when expressing the need for 'mainstreaming sustainability in all EU policies' (ibid., 15). To ensure this, 'green finance and investment' as well as 'greening national budgets' are singled out as areas of attention (ibid., 15–18). Further facilitators are research and innovation as well as education and training, which are characteristic of the 'systemic approach needed to achieve the aims of the Green Deal' (ibid., 18).

Finally, a central aspect of the path towards becoming the first climate-neutral continent relates to citizen involvement. In its first sentence already, the Commission clarifies that the EGD is for the EU 'and its citizens', an idea that also constantly comes back in von der Leyen's speeches. Only by acting 'together', notably via a 'European Climate Pact', can the EU achieve its aims (ibid., 22). The inclusion and participation of citizens and stakeholders is thus, at least discursively and contrary to the more top-down, elite-focussed LS and E2020 approaches, considered as central to delivering the status desideratus of the EGD.

Altogether, the EGD thus sets out a clear vision of the future and identifies a target-based and check-list type of approach that holds climate and environmental challenges central.

Discussion: comparing the EU's meta-discourse across time

Offering a comparative interpretation of the three strategies, this section capitalizes on the study's longitudinal approach to assess the evolution of the EU's meta-discourse on sustainability in search of a potential discursive paradigm shift.

For the 2000s and 2010s, the Lisbon and Europe 2020 strategies displayed a high degree of discursive continuity. Their interpretation of SD almost exclusively emphasized its economic dimension. The meta-discourse transpiring from the 2000 LS and the complementary documents issued in 2001 and 2005 was unequivocal: both the problem the EU faced and its solution lay in the economic realm. To harness globalization and attain the

desired state of turning the EU into the 'most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world', the LS promoted structural socio-economic reforms aimed at boosting competitiveness and managed by limited governmental intervention. In these reform efforts, attention was to be paid to the social dimension of SD. Its environmental dimension, by contrast, featured merely as an add-on, relegated to separate documents. Unequivocally, policy-makers wanted to keep it siloed. The adoption of the LS thus 'had a significant pre-emptive impact on the … subsequent policy debate: … it meant that the parallel policy process on [the environmental dimension of SD] was doomed to be little more than a sideshow' (Pallemaerts 2013, 354).

In E2020's meta-discourse, the three aspects of SD seem at first sight to be discursively represented in a more balanced fashion via the three attributes to the central objective of sustaining growth. A closer textual analysis reveals however that the notion of 'sustainable growth' – like in the LS's formula 'sustainable economic growth' – was primarily about steadying growth rates by ensuring the EU's medium-term competitiveness, not about environmentally sustainable economic development mindful of planetary boundaries. Like its predecessor, E2020's textual structure isolated the climate-related considerations of the '20-20-20 by 2020' package from the remainder of the strategy. By emphasizing only resource efficiency, it de facto reduced their significance for the EU's meta-discourse. In contrast to the LS, which did formulate a desired end goal for 2010, E2020 set forth a 'jobs and growth' agenda without a clear vision of European society in 2020. Finally, due to their shared focus on 'the economy', both the LS and E2020 were strikingly impersonal documents paying limited attention to European citizens and their needs. 'The people' seemed to be predominantly viewed as consumers or job-holders. Rather than building on a mandate anchored in public support and democratic decision-making, both strategies tended to operate with bureaucratic, elitist 'social engineering' approaches to deliver on their economic growth aims.

For two decades, these one-sided discursive choices to the detriment of the environmental (and social) dimension(s) hollowed out the notion of SD in the EU. Given that environmental sustainability featured only marginally in the EU elites' central strategies, important ecological policy options were removed from the realm not just of the desirable (what EU policy-makers operating on the grounds of this meta-discourse would wish to pursue) but also of the realizable (that is, even if they had wanted to pursue alternative policies, they could not have legitimately proposed them because this would have been seen as falling outside the meta-discourse). In that sense, the interpretations of SD that the LS and E2020 offered indeed amounted to a 'glass ceiling' of sustainability transformation (Hausknost and Hammond 2020), disempowering proponents of stronger environmental measures.

As of 2019, the EGD almost completelyreverses this meta-discursive trend. Suddenly, the environmental aspect of SD moves centre-stage, as the EU's entire meta-discourse gravitates around medium- to long-term climate change aims. Following the status quo-oriented, largely visionless E2020, the EGD again offers a vision of the future EUropean society, namely that of becoming the first 'carbon-neutral continent' (Von der Leyen 2019a) or, more broadly, a 'fair and prosperous society, with a modern, resource-efficient and competitive economy where there are no net emissions of greenhouse gases in 2050' (European Commission 2019, 2), whose objective it is 'to protect, conserve

and enhance the EU's natural capital' through a transition that 'must be just and inclusive' (ibid.). It outlines a systemic approach to attain that objective.

Although the EGD's meta-discourse does feature references to growth, depicting it as a 'new growth strategy', these have been considerably toned down compared to their omnipresence in the LS and E2020. To be sure, the EGD is not a 'degrowth' plan (Ossewaarde and Ossewaarde-Lowtoo 2020), nor does it advocate biophysical primacy. Yet, its problem analysis begins with considerations for the planet and for people, not with the economy; its priorities are related to climate change and environmental protection even if it does not downplay the importance of the social and economic dimensions of SD; and the policies it prescribes are to serve climate and environmental objectives (e.g. industrial policies) and promote their mainstreaming. Sectoral policies (e.g. trade) are to contribute to attaining environmental objectives (European Commission 2019, 21) – and not the other way round, as stipulated by the LS and E2020 when referring to eco-efficiency as a driver of growth. Not in the least, the EGD also provides a more accessible, people-focussed discourse, which attempts to bind EU citizens into the transformation processes, notably via the 'European Climate Pact'. This contrasts sharply with its two predecessors' impersonal approaches.

In synthesis, with its fundamentally altered problem *perceptions* and *concepts* depicting a vision of the future and the pathways towards it, the EGD provides a profound meta-discursive break with the past. This qualifies it as a discursive paradigm shift that causes important cracks in the glass ceiling of sustainability transformation. Before emphasizing the potentially significant repercussions of this shift, it is useful to reflect on its reasons.

Each of the analysed strategies must be understood from the perspective of the historical context – in terms of a specific political constellation and a dominant *zeitgeist* – from which it emerged. At the turn of the millennium, the EU's power centre gravitated around centre-left governments in key EU member states, with leaders like UK Prime Minister Blair and Germany's Chancellor Schröder promoting a 'third way' combining centre-right economic recipes with aspects of centre-left welfare programmes. The LS was heavily influenced by this economic thinking (Bongardt and Torres 2020; Lundvall and Lorenz 2012). It propagated supply-side policies and the benefits of the 'knowledge economy', whose key concepts – from competitiveness to a more educated workforce and lifelong learning – permeated its discourse (ibid.; Joao Rodrigues 2002). The environment clearly did not feature in this thinking. E2020 was then conceived at the height of the economic-financial crisis leading to numerous EU-internal conflicts tackled through fiscal and economic policies promoted by centre-right member-state governments from north-western Europe, led by Germany and supported by the Commission (Copeland and Papadimitriou 2012). They converged on economic ideas that prescribed public debt limits. This political constellation resulted in E2020s pragmatic 'jobs and growth' agenda, whose main idea was to preserve the status quo by harnessing the EU's social model and eco-efficiency to foster growth (Begg et al. 2010).

By contrast, the EGD emerged when the *zeitgeist* was visibly undergoing change. Fuelled by an increasing global awareness about environmental degradation, youth-driven transnational environmental movements like 'Fridays for Future' forcefully reminded policy-makers of the gap between their self-set global climate targets under the Paris Agreement and their limited political action. The growing strength of this

movement in Europe, alongside the relative success of parties with strong environmental agendas in elections across Europe, contributed to the re-framing of the EU's meta-discourse (Kenny 2021; Tendero 2022). This effort was informed by alternative economic thinking. While preserving some of the economics tropes of the LS and E2020, the EGD's systemic focus indicates that its authors took cues from ecological economics and various 'Earth system science' disciplines, combining insights from the natural sciences, system science and transformation research. From these, it notably adopted the idea – repeatedly expressed by von der Leyen herself – 'about reconciling our economy with our planet … and respecting the environment we live in' (Von der Leyen 2019a).

A more detailed study examining policy-makers' motives for the discursive paradigm shift would have to confirm this plausible explanation rooted in evolving political and ideational constellations. Particularly the changing credibility and importance that policy-makers awarded, due to a changing *zeitgeist* emanating also from global policy discussions, to the insights of different scientific (sub-)disciplines appear as key explanatory factors for the paradigm shift, confirming the starting assumptions inspired by CDA. The implications of the observed change are discussed in the conclusion.

Conclusion: can a transformed discourse change practice?

This contribution examined whether the European Green Deal provides for a discursive paradigm shift regarding sustainability by analysing the meta-discourse the EGD and its predecessor strategies, Europe 2020 and the Lisbon Strategy, embody to unveil their evolving problem diagnoses, visions of and pathways towards the future. It finds that the EGD provides a significant discursive break. It transforms the EU's meta-discourse from a negligence of the environmental dimension of SD, treated as an add-on in the LS, and the idea that environmental sustainability as an attribute to growth can – in a utilitarian fashion – support a 'jobs and growth'-focussed innovation agenda (E2020), to centre-stage. Whereas in the LS and E2020, environmental policies were to serve economic growth, the EGD inverses this logic by calling on other policies to serve environmental, notably climate, aims, which in turn sustain human living conditions on earth. In so doing, the EGD reframes the human-nature relationship, underscoring the need of 'reconciling our economy with our planet' (Von der Leyen 2019a).

This observation is novel and to a certain extent unexpected: after 20 years of growth-focussed continuity, the EU leaves well-trodden paths and opens up to alternative (economic) thinking. It has numerous academic and policy implications. Academically, in exposing EU sustainability-related meta-discursive change from a macro-historical perspective, the contribution provides a useful contextualization of the growing number of studies examining the EGD-specific politics and governance choices. By taking a step back to consider the societal trend of an idea whose 'time has come' (Tendero 2022), it offers 'the broader picture' of the EU's major societal transformation project. To analyse if the novel meta-discourse indeed enables change towards greater sustainability, future research should – next to further explaining the discursive change – focus on 'change practices', and the role of agency in translating discourse into practice: how do actors exploit – or resist – the novel opportunities the EGD offers? Which concrete policy designs do they propose? Which structural constraints do they face? And how successful

are they in overcoming hurdles by systematically drawing on the EGD's meta-discourse to advance progressive views of sustainability?

In terms of policy implications, the significance of this radical discursive break is not to be underestimated. Sceptical voices – from ENGOs to academia – rightly point out that elements of the EU's 'traditional' discourse, notably related to certain visions of economic growth, remain present in the EGD (Eckert and Kovalevska 2021; Ossewaarde and Ossewaarde-Lowtoo 2020; Samper, Schockling, and Islar 2021). Their scepticism is warranted when the benchmark to assess the EGD are normative positions such as conceptions of 'degrowth'. However, if the past forms the benchmark, as this study's longitudinal perspective unveils, the EGD brings about a monumental change compared to earlier EU meta-discourse. Interpreted from a CDA perspective that highlights how discourses (dis)empower different societal forces, the LS and E2020 made it very difficult, if not impossible, for EU policy-makers and civil society actors to justify and implement comprehensive environmental sustainability-focussed policies. This article's findings suggest that the EGD now has the opposite effect: it *mandates* policy-makers to work towards environmental and climate protection. Given its authoritative nature in a political system characterized by high levels of intertextuality, the new meta-discourse thus empowers pro-environmental action forces – from within the EU institutions to national governments and civil society – to legitimately insist on the pursuit of strongly sustainability-oriented policies in the EU. This entirely shifts the argumentative burden in relation to sustainability-related initiatives from those who tried – in vain – to challenge narrowly economy-focussed status quo policies in the past to those who wish to deviate from the EGD's socio-ecological transformation path in the name of narrowly understood economic objectives today.

Evidently, a discursive paradigm shift does not automatically result in practical policy change. However, if discourses are considered as constitutive of social reality, transforming them creates possibilities for action that were hitherto unimaginable. By breaking the glass ceiling of sustainability transformation, the EGD underscores that there is no longer a lack of scientific knowledge nor of awareness about environmental degradation processes, but rather an – urgent – need to act upon that knowledge. It thus discursively paves the way for corresponding action, which is required to affirm the paradigm change and solve the identified challenges. The EU's leadership is very much aware of this, as expressed by the Commission President: 'as institutions that serve the Europeans – we must also walk the talk' (Von der Leyen 2019a). Concretely, completing the paradigm shift requires the effective action of advocates – policy entrepreneurs – channelling relevant public and civil society demands into the EU's political system by formulating and seeing through policy proposals that correspond – in their urgency, level of ambition and foci – to the discursive paradigm shift.

Are there signs that this has been happening since the EGD was first proposed? Do EU initiatives embody a 'set of deeply transformative policies' pointing towards systemic change? Since December 2019, efforts have been concentrated on translating the meta-discourse into subordinate discourse via sectoral policy proposals. While it is at this stage challenging to assess to what extent the proposals are enacted, current trends point into the direction of confirming the paradigm shift in practice. The Covid-19 crisis has slowed down, but not halted the momentum. The EGD remains widely supported by EU elites, as exemplified by the 'Next Generation EU' recovery funding, which

allocates 37% of its 723.8 billion euros to policies supporting Green Deal objectives (European Commission 2021a). Another indicator of the degree to which the ambition of its discourse is matched by practice are the targets adopted under the EGD. While the 2050 net-zero emissions goal is fully aligned with the global scientific consensus and Paris Agreement obligations, the EU's new 2030 emissions reduction target of 55% from 1990 levels is judged to be 'almost sufficient' to reach this Agreement's 2°C target (Climate Action Tracker 2021). A further step-up in the mid-2020s is envisaged both by the Paris Agreement architecture and corresponding governance processes at EU level.

More important than pledges are concrete initiatives. The proposals revealed to date point to a strong likelihood that words may be followed by deeds to attain EGD objectives. The most prominent example is arguably the 'European Climate Law' that entered into force in July 2021. Enshrining the 2050 target in EU law, it empowers the EU institutions to monitor its implementation, sending an unequivocal signal, especially to the private sector, about the Union's long-term decarbonization agenda. Also in July 2021, the Commission issued its 'Fit for 55' proposal aimed at enabling the EU to achieve the 2030 target (European Commission 2021b). With its numerous ambitiously worded legislative proposals, ranging from revisions of existing directives (e.g. on energy efficiency, renewables) to novel initiatives like the creation of a 'Climate Social Fund' delivering on 'just transition' promises, the package is fully aligned with the EGD's meta-discourse. Multiple other examples point in the same direction. The EU's October 2021 Arctic policy calls for the first time for a multilateral negotiation on a moratorium on the extraction of Arctic fossil fuels (European Commission and High Representative 2021). This initiative benefitted from the overtures provided by the EGD: when presenting it, the EU's Arctic Envoy explained that it would be intellectually inconceivable to adopt highly ambitious climate targets under the EGD and to then *not* follow the scientific advice about leaving Arctic fossil fuels in the ground (Brzozowski 2021). In 2012, the same proposal by the European Parliament had still met widespread resistance. Similarly, the November 2021 Commission proposal of a deforestation regulation was strongly inspired by the EGD (European Commission 2021c). Its aim to reduce the EU's contribution to forest loss globally by placing strict conditions on the import of beef, coffee, soy or wood clashes with the 2019 EU-Mercosur free trade agreement. Leaked documents from the Commission's DG Trade indicated the Union's free-trade advocates' resistance, which did not stop its proponents from invoking the EGD's meta-discourse to nonetheless publish the proposal (Rankin 2021).

Of course, not all initiatives confirm this trend: proposals to include gas into the EU's provisional taxonomy for sustainable activities can hardly be considered as matching the EGD's ambitions. Similarly, current EU plans regarding biodiversity provide an 'evident mismatch' with EGD goals (Paleari 2022). However, the fact that advocates of greater sustainability can and do use the EGD as a benchmark to place EU policymakers in front of shortfalls of their implementing proposals, provides for a sea change with the past. The EGD-induced cracks in the glass ceiling of sustainability transformation can truly make the difference, as the discursive grounds for the 'political revolution' that Laurence Tubiana (2021) sees in the EGD are laid. Rather than lamenting the EGD's ambiguities and imperfections, pro-environmental forces are well-advised to capitalize on the novel meta-discourse to enact practical transformations. They will inevitably face resistance from powerful vested interests. Yet, where the EUs meta-discourse played in

favour of change-averse actors beforehand, it now empowers those wanting to overcome the status quo. This may well be the essential insight from the analysis of the EGD's meta-discourse for the future of European – and through an example-setting effect that perceives changing discourse as a necessary precursor to changed practice – global efforts to counter environmental degradation.

Notes

1. It is not the purpose of this contribution to engage in the discussion of the multifarious interpretations of SD.
2. Given the recent nature of the EGD and the focus on discourse, 'practices' are only considered briefly in the conclusion of this article.
3. Another meaning of 'perception' is 'someone's ability to notice and understand things that are not obvious to other people' (Cambridge Dictionary 2021).
4. The LS and E2020 tended to be written in a rather compartmentalized fashion, with parts explicitly focussed on 'the economy' and 'the social', significantly facilitating their interpretation.
5. 'Transformation' is used five times in E2020, twice in headings, but without providing any details. The notion of transition(s) appears four times in relation to specific economic sectors.
6. By contrast, the term 'sustainable development' was not mentioned once.
7. Where the notion of 'transformation' was hardly used in the LS and E2020, the EGD uses it more frequently and in a different sense, pointing to the active shaping of that transformation by the EU. By contrast, it employs the terms 'growth' and 'job(s)', which were omnipresent in the LS and E2020, much less: 'growth' appears eight times, 'jobs' six times.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Data availability statement

Not applicable.

ORCID

Simon Schunz http://orcid.org/0000-0001-7794-004X

References

Antaki, C. 2008. "Discourse Analysis and Conversation Analysis." In *The SAGE Handbook of Social Research Methods*, edited by P. Alasuutari, L. Bickman, and J. Brannen, 431–446. London: Sage.

Barroso, J. 2005. *Working Together for Growth and Jobs: A New Start for the Lisbon Strategy*. Speech at the European Parliament. Brussels, February 2.

Barroso, J. 2010. *Preface to EUROPE 2020*. Brussels, March 3.

Bassot, E., and W. Hiller. 2019. *The Juncker Commission's Ten Priorities*. Brussels: European Parliamentary Research Service.

Becker, W., H. Norlén, L. Dijkstra, and S. Athanasoglou. 2020. "Wrapping Up the Europe 2020 Strategy: A Multidimensional Indicator Analysis." *Environmental and Sustainability Indicators* 8: 100075. doi:10.1016/j.indic.2020.100075.

Begg, I., A. Bongardt, L. Csaba, C. Egenhofer, K. Lannoo, P. Pochet, L. Soete, and F. Torres. 2010. "Europe 2020 – A Promising Strategy?" *Intereconomics* 45 (3): 136–170. doi:10.1007/s10272-010-0332-9.

Bongardt, A., and F. Torres. 2020. "The Lisbon Strategy and Europe 2020." *Oxford Research Encyclopedias – Politics*. Accessed April 4, 2022. https://oxfordre.com/politics/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228637.001.0001/acrefore-9780190228637-e-1040.

Brzozowski, A. 2021. "We Don't Want to See Any Flash Points in the Arctic, EU Envoy Says." *Euractiv*, October 17.

Cambridge Dictionary. 2021. *Perception*. Accessed November 15, 2021. https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/perception.

Capra, F. 1996. *The Web of Life: A New Synthesis of Mind and Matter*. New York: HarperCollins.

Climate Action Tracker. 2021. *European Union*. September 15. Accessed November 15, 2021. https://climateactiontracker.org/countries/eu/.

Copeland, P., and D. Papadimitriou. 2012. *The EU's Lisbon Strategy – Evaluating Success, Understanding Failure*. Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Diez, T. 2014. "Speaking Europe, Drawing Boundaries: Reflections on the Role of Discourse in EU Foreign Policy and Identity." In *EU Foreign Policy Through the Lens of Discourse Analysis: Making Sense of Diversity*, edited by C. Carta, and F. Morin, 27–41. Abingdon: Routledge.

Dobbs, M., V. Gravey, and L. Petetin. 2021. "Driving the European Green Deal in Turbulent Times." *Politics and Governance* 9 (3): 316–326. doi:10.17645/pag.v9i3.4321.

Eckert, E., and O. Kovalevska. 2021. "Sustainability in the European Union: Analyzing the Discourse of the European Green Deal." *Journal of Risk and Financial Management* 14: 80. doi:10.3390/jrfm14020080.

European Commission. 2001. *A Sustainable Europe for a Better World: A European Union Strategy for Sustainable Development*, COM(2001) 264 final. Brussels, May 15.

European Commission. 2005. *Working Together for Growth and Jobs: A New Start for the Lisbon Strategy*, COM(2005) 24 final. Brussels, February 2.

European Commission. 2010. *EUROPE 2020 - A Strategy for Smart, Sustainable and Inclusive Growth*, COM(2010) 2020. Brussels, March 3.

European Commission. 2019. *The European Green Deal*, COM(2019) 640 final. Brussels, December 11.

European Commission. 2021a. *The Recovery and Resilience Facility*. Website. Accessed November 17, 2021. https://ec.europa.eu/info/business-economy-euro/recovery-coronavirus/recovery-and-resilience-facility_en.

European Commission. 2021b. '*Fit For 55': Delivering the EU's 2030 Climate Target on the Way to Climate Neutrality*, COM(2021) 550 Final. Brussels, July 14.

European Commission. 2021c. *Regulation on the Making Available on the Union Market as well as Export from the Union of Certain Commodities and Products associated with Deforestation and Forest Degradation*, COM(2021) 706 final. Brussels, November 17.

European Commission and High Representative. 2021. *A Stronger EU Engagement for a Peaceful, Sustainable and Prosperous Arctic*, JOIN(2021) 27. Brussels, October 13.

European Council. 2000. *Presidency Conclusions*. Lisbon, March 23-24.

European Council. 2001a. *Presidency Conclusions*. Stockholm, March 23-24.

European Council. 2001b. *Presidency Conclusions*. Göteborg, June 15-16.

European Council. 2010. *Conclusions of the Meeting of 25-26 March*. Brussels, March 26.

European Council. 2019. *Presidency Conclusions*. Brussels, December 12.

European Union. 2021. *Sustainable Development*. Website. Accessed July 25, 2021. https://ec.europa.eu/environment/eussd/.

Fairclough, N. 1995. *Critical Discourse Analysis*. London: Longman.

Fernandez, R., J. J. Schoenefeld, T. Hoerber, and S. Oberthür. 2021. "Europe's Transition to Sustainability: Actors, Approaches and Policies (Special Issue)." *The International Spectator* 56 (3): 1–137.

Friends of the Earth Europe. 2020. *Principles for Transformation: How the European Green Deal Can Achieve System Change*. April 30. Accessed July 25, 2021. http://www.foeeurope.org/Principles-for-transformation.

Göpel, M. 2016. *The Great Mindshift. How a New Economic Paradigm and Sustainability Transformations Go Hand in Hand*. Cham: Springer.
Guégen, D. 2020. "Green Deal: The Long Battles Lying Ahead." *EurActiv*, June 19.
Hajer, M. 1995. *The Politics of Environmental Discourse: Ecological Modernization and the Policy Process*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Hausknost, D., and M. Hammond. 2020. "The Environmental State and the Glass Ceiling of Transformation." *Environmental Politics* 29 (1): 17–37. doi:10.1080/09644016.2019.1680062.
Hopwood, B., M. Mellor, and G. O'Brien. 2005. "Sustainable Development: Mapping Different Approaches." *Sustainable Development* 13 (1): 38–52. doi:10.1002/sd.244.
Joao Rodrigues, M., ed. 2002. *The New Knowledge Economy in Europe*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar.
Kenny, J. 2021. "The Evolution of Environmental Concern in Europe." In *Research Handbook on Environmental Sociology*, edited by A. Franzen, and S. Mader, 79–96. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar.
Leipold, S., P. H. Feindt, G. Winkel, and R. Keller. 2019. "Discourse Analysis of Environmental Policy Revisited: Traditions, Trends, Perspectives." *Journal of Environmental Policy & Planning* 21 (5): 445–463. doi:10.1080/1523908X.2019.1660462.
Lundvall, B.-A., and E. Lorenz. 2012. "From the Lisbon Strategy to EUROPE 2020." In *Towards a Social Investment Welfare State?*, edited by N. Morel, B. Palier, and J. Palme, 333–351. Bristol: Policy Press.
Meyer, M. 2009. "Critical Discourse Analysis: History, Agenda, Theory, and Methodology." In *Methods of Critical Discourse Analysis*, 2nd ed, edited by R. Wodak, and M. Meyer, 1–33. London: Sage.
Ossewaarde, M., and R. Ossewaarde-Lowtoo. 2020. "The EU's Green Deal: A Third Alternative to Green Growth and Degrowth?" *Sustainability* 12: 9825. doi:10.3390/su12239825.
Paleari, S. 2022. The Impact of the European Green Deal on EU Environmental Policy. *The Journal of Environment & Development*. Accessed April 4, 2022. https://doi.org/10.1177/10704965221082222.
Pallemaerts, M. 2013. "Developing More Sustainably?" In *Environmental Policy in the EU*, edited by A. Jordan, and C. Adelle, 346–366. Abingdon: Routledge.
Pontecorvo, E. 2019. "Europe's 'Green Deal' Doesn't Live Up to Its Name, Critics Say." *Grist*, December 13. Accessed July 21, 2021. https://grist.org/politics/europes-green-deal-doesnt-live-up-to-its-name-critics-say/.
Rankin, J. 2021. "Trade Officials 'Taking A Chainsaw' to EU Forest Protection Plans." *The Guardian*, November 12.
Reisigl, M., and R. Wodak. 2001. *Discourse and Discrimination*. London: Routledge.
Sachs, J. D. 2019. "Europe's Green Deal." *Project Syndicate*. December 13. Accessed July 21, 2021. https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/europe-green-deal-is-global-beacon-by-jeffrey-d-sachs-2019-12.
Samper, J. A., A. Schockling, and M. Islar. 2021. "Climate Politics in Green Deals: Exposing the Political Frontiers of the European Green Deal." *Politics and Governance* 9 (2): 8–16. doi:10.17645/pag.v9i2.3853.
Tendero, M. 2022. "The Time has Come! The Development of the European Environmental Conscience: Evidence from the Eurobarometer Surveys from 1974 to 2020." In *The European Environmental Conscience in EU Politics*, edited by T. Hoerber, and G. Weber, 156–184. Abingdon: Routledge.
Toshkov, D. 2016. *Research Design in Political Science*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
Tubiana, L. 2021. *The Green Deal is the New Social Contract*. Groupe d'Etudes Géopolitiques. September. Accessed October 10, 2021. https://geopolitique.eu/en/2021/09/28/laurence-tubiana-green-deal/.
Van Hees, S. 2014. "Sustainable Development in the EU: Redefining and Operationalizing the Concept." *Utrecht Law Review* 10 (2): 60–76. doi:10.18352/ulr.269.
Von der Leyen, U. 2019a. *Speech at the Debate on the European Green Deal*. European Parliament, Strasbourg, December 11.
Von der Leyen, U. 2019b. *Speech at the Debate on the Conclusions of the European Council Meeting of 12 and 13 December 2019*. European Parliament, Strasbourg, December 18.