GREEN EUROPEAN FOUNDATION

Political Steps towards Eco-Social Transformations

Matteo Mandelli

Policy Brief
May 2025

This policy brief examines the political feasibility of transforming Europe's welfare states to meet the dual challenges of ecological breakdown and rising social risks. While less transformative eco-social policies, such as those included in the current European just transition framework, have gained traction in recent years, they remain limited in scope, reactive in nature, and rooted in a growth-oriented paradigm. The brief argues that more transformative eco-social policies, grounded in the concept of sustainable welfare, are needed to address both the causes and consequences of the ecological crisis. Drawing on the 'three Is' framework - interests, ideas, and institutions - it identifies barriers to transformative change and outlines strategies to overcome them. Key elements of these strategies include strengthening socio-ecological coalitions and constituencies; promoting rights-based ideas; and creating inclusive, multilevel and silo-breaking institutions. Ultimately, the brief calls for a bold rethinking of European social policymaking to ensure that ecological action reinforces, rather than undermines, democratic legitimacy and social justice.

Introduction

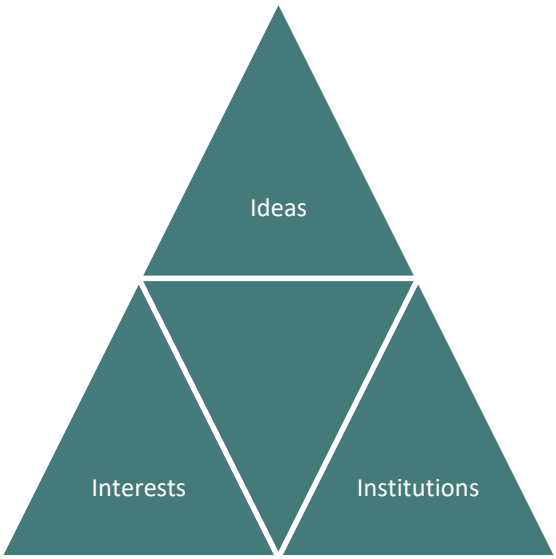
The ecological crisis is not only a wicked problem of devastating proportions threatening our environment, climate and biodiversity, but also an unprecedented social challenge that might jeopardise the already-shaking foundations of European welfare states. Indeed, both the climate emergency and the green transition are bound to generate a new wave of social risks, disproportionally impacting certain societal groups, such as workers undergoing industrial restructurings, low-income households facing higher energy and commodity prices and marginalized communities experiencing environmental disasters (Gough et al., 2008; Galgóczi, 2022). At the same time, the welfare state has a considerable ecological footprint itself, thereby also contributing to the ecological crisis (Ottelin et al., 2018).

This raises complex challenges for European welfare states in the era of the ecological crisis: on the one hand, societies need to be protected against increasing and new risks, and, on the other hand, welfare state infrastructures should be reformed to avoid further creation of risks – and play their part in mitigating the ecological crisis. In light of these two needs, transformative and innovative policy solutions are required (Laurent, 2015). Many have started to advocate for a reform of the welfare state towards 'sustainable welfare', a deeply transformative paradigm entailing redistributive social policies that respect planetary boundaries (Hirvilammi & Koch, 2020). This, researchers argue, can be achieved through transformative eco-social policies that integrate social and ecological goals, aiming to radically change the structural conditions underlying both environmental degradation and inequality (Fransolet & Vanhille, 2023). Although several scholars spend a lot of effort to convincingly justify the desirability of a socio-ecological transformation, much

less is known about its political feasibility. In reality, even less transformative eco-social policies, such as those connected to the EU's 'just transition' agenda for the phase-out of fossil fuels, remain underdeveloped and relatively rare across Europe. This suggests that improved political strategies are needed for a proper and democratic greening of the welfare state. Against this background, this policy brief aims to identify elements for a political strategy that can turn sustainable welfare from a theoretical ideal to a politically successful reality at both the national and European levels. These elements are derived by critically determining the institutions, interests and ideas that drive and hinder progress towards eco-social policies.

Institutions, interests, and ideas, often called the 'three Is' of political economy, are central elements of policymaking in modern democracies (Palier & Surel, 2005). Interests refer to how societal demands are represented by collective actors like political parties and organised interest groups. Ideas show that politics is not just about power, but also about how policy problems and solutions are framed. Finally, institutions indicate the set of established policies and governance structures that constitute the 'rules of the game' for democratic decision-making. It shall be specified that, although for analytical purposes we treat the 'three Is' separately here, in reality, we can expect them to interact.

Figure 1: The 'Three Is' of political economy



For each of these 'three Is', we seek to provide suggestions to strengthen the political feasibility of transformative eco-social policies. We do so in three steps. First, building on empirical research conducted by the author at the EU and national levels, particularly in Spain and Ireland (Sabato & Mandelli, 2024; Mandelli, 2025), the political brief reconstructs which institutions, ideas and interests have led to the emergence of non-transformative, or incremental, eco-social policies. Second, it critically identifies the limits of incremental eco-social policy efforts and exposes the barriers to transformative eco-social policies along these 'three Is'. Third, and finally, it suggests ways to overcome these barriers to render sustainable welfare politically feasible.

Europe's eco-social accomplishments

The emergence of just transition policies in Europe

In the last few years, we have witnessed a growing emergence of a particular kind of eco-social policy aiming at addressing the social implications of decarbonisation and relying on a just transition framework. The transition from carbon-intensive to zero-carbon economic systems indeed brings about significant risks - aside from its benefits - especially for the workers, citizens and communities who are most dependent on decarbonising activities and assets. Just transition policies offer tools to tackle these new risks, seeking to

make the green transition fair and, consequently, also more socially acceptable.

In the EU context, just transition policies have surfaced more and more frequently since the publication of the 2019 European Green Deal, a strategy that strives to achieve decarbonisation by 2050 through green growth and technological modernisation (European Commission, 2019). The advent of the European Green Deal signified not only an acceleration in the EU's fight against climate change but also the emergence of an EU-wide just transition framework, with flagship initiatives including the 2021 Just Transition Fund and the 2023 Social Climate Fund. Similarly, just transition policies have also been adopted by a few EU countries (Mandelli, 2022), including Spain and Ireland, particularly as measures to complement national efforts in the phase-out of coal or other fossil fuels through social investments or compensation.

Box 1: Just transition policies and politics in the EU, Spain and Ireland

EU: The European Green Deal seeks to ensure that "no one is left behind" in the green transition. To this end, the EU introduced several policies, two of which stand out. The 2021 Just Transition Mechanism, supported by a €17.5 billion Fund, fosters economic diversification and reskilling in carbon-intensive regions. The 2023 Social Climate Fund should mobilise €86.7 billion to mitigate rising energy and mobility costs through green investment and support for vulnerable consumers. These policies emerged early during the first von der Leyen Commission, building on major social mobilisations – e.g. Fridays for Future, Extinction Rebellion, Yellow Vests – and the 2019 European elections, which brought climate change and its social implications to the centre of the EU political agenda. While just transition ultimately secured broad political support, as illustrated by the creation of the European Alliance for a Just Transition, it initially faced some resistance. The Just Transition Mechanism, in particular, stemmed from contentious negotiations, with the Commission securing buy-in from fossil-fuel-dependent countries, especially Poland, through financial compensation (for more information, see Sabato & Mandelli, 2024).

Spain: In 2019, Spain launched a Just Transition Strategy to address the opportunities and risks connected to the green transition. An accompanying Urgent Action Plan, financed through national and EU funds, focused on coal phase-out by providing early retirement schemes, severance payments, job-search assistance, vocational training, and green job creation in coal areas. A Just Transition Institute was established to implement the strategy via dedicated Just Transition Agreements, negotiated with regional and local authorities, as well as non-governmental stakeholders. These policies emerged under Pedro Sánchez's first socialist government, with Teresa Ribera as the responsible minister. Addressing the long-standing decline of the domestic coal sector, these policies resulted from the construction of a political coalition uniting progressive and green forces. Central to their development were negotiated agreements between the state, social partners, and coal regions (for more information, see Mandelli, 2025).

Ireland: Ireland's just transition framework, introduced with the 2019 Climate Action Plan, aims to ensure fair burden-sharing in decarbonization. An €11 million Just Transition Fund – later complemented by the EU's namesake fund – was established to support sustainable projects, retraining, and community engagement during the phase-out of peat in the Midlands region. Stakeholder consultation is also fostered, for instance, through the newly formed Just Transition Commission. Civil society played a pivotal role in the Irish politics of just transition: since 2018, trade unions and green NGOs – forming a Just Transition Alliance – as well as local actors in the Midlands influenced left-wing and green opposition parties, which in turn pressured the centre-right government to adopt a just transition framework. Compared to Spain, Ireland's policies were developed in a less participatory manner, which resulted in their formulation being contested (for more information, see Mandelli, 2025).

Interests, Ideas and Institutions

Existing just transition policies bring us closer to overcoming conflicts between social and environmental policy goals. Their adoption is in itself an interesting development, given how difficult it usually is for new policy instruments to surface in the European context, and even more so for these 'special' types of public policies that by definition break entrenched policy silos through socio-ecological integration. It is therefore imperative to understand what made the establishment of these policies possible. Beyond context-specific dynamics, some key aspects remain constant across different case studies (see the box above and, for more information, see Sabato & Mandelli, 2024; Mandelli, 2025). We present them using the 'three Is'.

Starting from **interests**, a crucial first impulse for the development of just transition policies appears to be the convergence between green and labour interests. In practical terms, this convergence manifests in political entrepreneurs putting just transition on the map through their advocacy work and ultimately succeeding in mobilising support for just transition policies. Political entrepreneurs can be found in governments, typically when ruling parties adopt an eco-social agenda, as it has happened, for instance, with the Spanish government bridging old left with new green demands. Alliances between parties with working-class roots and parties promoting green instances may also be key to facilitating the advancement of a just transition agenda. Beyond the partisan arena, green-labour coalitions can also be created by powerful interest groups, typically trade unions and green NGOs, which may come together to demand socially conscious climate policies. In some cases – like the Irish Just Transition Alliance or the European Alliance for a Just Transition at the EU level – these societal coalitions manage to successfully exert an influence on the government's policy agenda and drive some policy changes.

Turning to **ideas**, evidence shows that the discursive diffusion of the just transition narrative has been a fundamental driver in the emergence of eco-social policies, since it brought unprecedented attention to the social risks of climate change and decarbonisation. Historically, trade unions have been at the forefront of the global just transition discourse, and so they are in the European context. However, the just transition narrative has gathered the support of a wider range of socio-political actors, including the already-mentioned green parties and NGOs, but also energy companies and even, to some extent, conservative centre-right political parties. In this sense, the just transition idea has served as a coalition magnet, broadening the small green-labour alliances and ultimately ensuring wide political support for the eco-social agenda.

Finally, although **institutions** are normally resistant to change, the emergence of just transition policies shows that this is not always the case. Indeed, some policy change can occur when established institutions are under pressure, opening new windows of opportunity. The accelerated phase-out of fossil fuel brought forward by the European Green Deal has arguably put pressure on several member states, particularly those with carbon-intensive energy mixes, which feared significant socio-economic losses. When this pressure is coupled with an institutional gap – that is, when existing policies or governance structures are not suited to properly respond to the new social risks of the green transition – an institutional opportunity arises for decision-makers to adopt innovative just transition policies. Exploiting these pressures and opportunities, policymakers in the EU, Spain and Ireland were propelled to address the social risks of fossil fuel phase-out with innovative policy solutions.

Table 1: The politics of just transition policies in Europe

The three 'Is'	*The politics of just transition policies in Europe*
Interests	Convergence between green & labour interests
Ideas	Discursive diffusion of the just transition idea as a coalition magnet
Institutions	Institutional pressures & opportunities allowing policy changes

Barriers to transformative eco-social policies

Just transition and sustainable welfare

Although existing just transition policies in Europe represent innovative tools, drawing attention to the previously disregarded socio-ecological nexus, they are still rather modest examples of eco-social policies, as they mostly aim at adjusting the status quo at the margins. The European approach to just transition shows two main characteristics that prevent it from being more transformative (Sabato & Mandelli, 2024; Crespy & Munta, 2023):

1. Firstly, by allocating limited financial resources to address only the most urgent impacts of the green transition, and especially those connected to industrial decarbonisation, the EU and its member states are endorsing a narrow, hence insufficient and reactive, interpretation of just transition.

   A transformative eco-social just transition paradigm would require expanding the scope of the policy targets beyond the 'low-hanging fruits' of decarbonization, allowing for a preventive approach to carefully plan the long-term ecological transformation of the socio-economic system as a whole.

2. Secondly, European just transition policies are designed to be in line with the economic growth imperative, and do not fundamentally question this paradigm, which is known to often lead to negative ecological impacts. They are meant to contribute to greening growth through productivist social investment, e.g. by emphasising active labour market policies or green jobs creation.

   This productivist approach to just transition arguably focuses too heavily on human capital development, leaving little space for more protective policy instruments – such as public insurance, income support schemes or universal public services – which are needed to properly take care of the new social risks connected to environmental transformations.

Instead of marginally and incrementally reinforcing existing paradigms, transformative eco-social policies address the common root causes behind social and ecological issues (Fransolet & Vanhille, 2023). This transformation is best described through the lens of sustainable welfare, which 'is oriented towards satisfying human needs within ecological limits, from an intergenerational and global perspective' (Koch et al., 2016: 704), safeguarding a safe and just space for human socio-economic activities (Raworth, 2017) yet moving beyond growth (Bohnenberger, 2020). The transformative rationale of sustainable welfare does not just lie in its critical take on growth, but implies expanding and transforming the public sphere and, specifically, the European social model (Pochet & Van Melkebeke, 2024). Instead of just focusing on the most urgent risks connected to decarbonization, transformative eco-social policies should enable individuals to make more sustainable choices and reduce the ecological footprint of the welfare state (Gough, 2017), thereby mitigating the development of new risks. Furthermore, transformative eco-social policies often also rely on feminist or intersectional perspectives criticising systems of oppression, for instance by shifting social investment away from the market towards care and social reproduction (Murphy, 2023). Examples of such transformative policies include universal basic services (Büchs, 2021) and participation income (Murphy, 2023).

In summary, unlike existing just transition policies, transformative eco-social policies on the one hand contribute to preventing the formation of new social risks and, on the other hand, protect individuals from these risks. Despite their relevance, these transformative policies do not yet represent actual empirical realities. In the next section, we explore whether certain dynamics pertaining to the interests, ideas and institutions linked to the emergence of just transition policies can be identified as barriers for more transformative eco-social policies.

Interests, ideas and institutions

As set out above, one can argue that existing just transition policies in Europe came about as a result of a well-functioning democratic policy process, a process that is capable of responding to new social risks, that allows potentially conflicting actors to find common ground, and that ensures broad societal consensus. However, these three elements also conceal some possible barriers for a more transformative paradigm shift.

Starting from the first of the 'three Is' – **interests** – as mentioned above, green-labour coalitions have been key to bringing attention to the socio-ecological nexus. However, these alliances have often been the result of ad-hoc strategic political negotiations oriented towards receiving political support for decarbonization in exchange for a promise of economic compensation to impacted groups. This is, for instance, what happened in Spain, where tripartite agreements between the Sanchez government seeking to phase out coal on the one hand and affected social partners and regions demanding compensation on the other hand led to the introduction of a Just Transition Strategy in 2019 (Mandelli, 2025). It is also what happened the same year at the EU level, where the European Commission had to engage in difficult negotiations with coal-dependent member states like Poland, which were threatening to block the European Green Deal if proper compensation was not guaranteed (Kyriazi & Miró, 2023).

Political exchange is a form of strategic policymaking, whereby actors form coalitions only when this is convenient for them to achieve a certain goal. This makes just transition coalitions potentially unstable and hence unfit to promote more transformative eco-social policies. If we take a closer look at some pioneering alliances between green and labour actors, we can predict that these actors may not always find it convenient to coalesce with one another and, in certain circumstances, they might even turn against each other and form alternative coalitions. This might occur, for instance, when labour interests coalesce with industrial actors to defend brown industries, or if the interests of vulnerable social groups are ignored by green entrepreneurs.

A complicating factor is the current political climate, where environmental movements are shrinking and face increasing criminalisation, while older civil society actors and trade unions get more and more marginalised. This coincides with a growing backlash against climate policies being fuelled by far-right rhetoric and capitalist interests. The 2024 EU elections revealed an escalating polarisation over climate action in the European electorate (Abou-Chadi, 2024). As a result, the green-labour coalitions that successfully drove the phase-out of fossil fuels in many EU countries might not replicate in other key areas of the green transition – such as agriculture or car manufacturing – possibly because of internal divisions within these green-labour coalitions coupled with the suppression of these progressive actors individually. These factors might explain recent attempts to put the brakes on several environmental policy reforms in the EU.

With respect to **ideas**, as mentioned above, just transition policymaking in Europe has often been characterised by a consensus-seeking approach. Although the just transition concept originated within the trade union movement and was further developed by the green movement, it is now embraced by a wide variety of heterogeneous actors. On paper, nearly all political parties in Europe, left to right, and the most powerful stakeholders, including business organisations and big companies, have shown support for the idea of a just transition. However, notably, each of these actors tends to assign a different meaning to the same concept. For instance, while some actors refer to the ILO principles and hence emphasise the (re)distributional implications of climate change and decarbonisation, others instead view just transition as just an opportunity for further economic growth, enabling the continuation of a productivist approach.

Indeed, the reason why vastly different actors are able to coalesce around just transition might have to do with the very nature of this idea, which is vague enough to allow for alternative meanings. At the EU level, this peculiar feature of the just transition idea was instrumental for Commission President von der Leyen to build a broad winning coalition around her European Green Deal, making sure that many states, parties and

interests groups felt that they could gain something from supporting her initiative (Crespy & Munta, 2023). However, we can argue that such a quest for consensus has ultimately watered down the original transformative rationale of the just transition idea, creating a mismatch between what the initial advocates of just transition wanted and the final policy outcomes. Consensus-seeking policymaking inevitably forces to reconcile conflictual interests, leading to policy changes that might be more symbolic than substantial. For this reason, just transition is starting to raise some eyebrows, as it is often embraced by climate-laggard countries that use it as a justification to slow down climate mitigation. This is what happened in Germany and Poland, both of which delayed coal phase-outs in the name of a just transition (Mandelli, 2022).

The pursuit of moderation when it comes to socio-ecological goals has continued in recent months, as illustrated by many green and progressive actors supporting the EU's recent pivot towards the mantra of "competitiveness". While efforts are taken to centre just transition thinking into this paradigm, thereby continuing the agenda in a difficult political context, this approach also entails important risks. First, progressive platforms risk alienating several parts of their historical electorate, especially lower-middle-income people, who often bear the biggest burdens of green transition policies (e.g. the carbon tax) (Beaussier et al., 2024); and second, subscribing to a "competitiveness" paradigm can ultimately result in a free pass to prioritization of the market over social and environmental protection.

Finally, in the European politics of just transition, **institutional** pressures and opportunities have been key to pushing governments to act. Simply put, we would not have had a Just Transition Fund at the EU level if there were no new social risks, generating a societal demand for innovative eco-social policymaking (Kyriazi & Miró, 2023). The European Green Deal and the connected net-zero commitment created an immediate threat for extractive fossil fuel sectors in many EU countries, accelerating their decay in a way that made it inevitable. Thus, institutions influence policymaking in a functionalist way, giving signals when change is needed and, in this case, when just transition policies should be adopted. This functionalist logic, however, leads governments to concentrate only on the most urgent and easily detectable social challenges. For more transformative eco-social policy changes, such as measures promoting fundamental behavioural shifts, institutions would have to allow for more long-term planning and problem prevention. For that, the representation and meaningful participation of stakeholders are key. However, despite some innovations like climate citizens' assemblies or multistakeholder platforms, intermediary institutions are getting increasingly sidelined while vested interests are overrepresented, exerting a disproportionate influence on policymaking. The ultimate result is an underdeveloped influx of new ideas or, at best, the maintenance of the status quo.

Furthermore, also from an institutional perspective, just transition policies develop in a path-dependent way, perpetuating already-established policy legacies. This inevitably leads to incremental eco-social policymaking, reinforcing the predominant paradigm in European politics that typically frames economic growth as an unquestionable imperative. An example of this is the emphasis on active labour market policies in the EU just transition framework, which is very much in line with previous neoliberal developments in European social policies. Such a path dependence has also impacted policy implementation. An analysis of the allocation of the Just Transition Mechanism reveals that available financial resources were often not used to foster social objectives or carbon neutrality, as European countries were supposed to do, but rather to pursue economic growth, which was not among the specific objectives of the Mechanism (Siderius, 2025). Transformative eco-social policies, we may argue, require a paradigm shift of systemic proportions, breaking path dependence.

Table 2: Barriers to transformative eco-social policies

The three 'Is'	*Barriers to transformative eco-social policies*
Interests	Strategic policymaking, based on political exchanges, makes green-labour coalitions unstable
Ideas	Consensual policymaking waters down ideas, making them contested
Institutions	Functionalist & path-dependent policymaking leads to reactive and growth-oriented changes

Overcoming barriers – elements for an eco-social political strategy

The functionalist, consensus-seeking and strategic patterns of decision-making witnessed in the study of the three I's in European just transition experiences are arguably unfit to deliver the systemic transformation envisaged by sustainable welfare. This might explain why more transformative eco-social policies are still missing. In the following section, we advance proposals on how to overcome the identified barriers and build sufficient political support for the enactment of transformative eco-social policies. In particular, we reflect on the possibilities to overturn interest-based, ideational and institutional barriers into drivers.

Bridging social and ecological interests through coalitions and constituencies

From an **interest**-based perspective, stronger socio-ecological coalitions are needed to break the entrenched silos that have traditionally separated the governance of welfare and ecological spheres. This approach strives to reinforce and unite the different social constituencies and collective actors that support policies in the respective spheres. It means making sure that these two sides politically stick together instead of preferring alternative coalitions.

Practically, this might start with fostering socio-ecological partisan platforms and stabilising alliances between trade unions, social and environmental NGOs. **Strengthening** these **socio-ecological coalitions** – for instance by financing (at local, regional, national and European levels) grassroots initiatives aimed at engaging people and fostering dialogue – would make them less fragile in politically challenging times, ensuring a durable convergence of green and social interests. However, we can also argue that socio-ecological coalitions should expand beyond the usual suspects and the ad-hoc strategic partnerships witnessed in the politics of just transition. As the ecological crisis and the green transition intensify, new social risks will appear, shifting the political debate from the current narrow emphasis on job impacts in very carbon-intensive sectors, to other risks, such as those arising from extreme weather events, or risks related to food, housing and healthcare. These shifts of focus might propel new actors to form or join socio-ecological alliances across various policy sectors, including old left and centrist parties; anti-poverty and social NGOs; energy communities or other forms of ecological commons; public service unions and service providers; feminist groups and other civil rights movements; as well as local governments of territories particularly exposed to climate change. Socio-ecological platforms and organisations must welcome these new actors and proactively open their doors for them. An important role might also be played by some business actors, not only those already involved in the green economy, but also those operating in sectors that are crucial to meet human needs, such as energy, waste, transport and food, whose practices shall be reoriented towards socio-ecological goals.

Top-down coalition-building will not be sufficient to enact eco-social transformations. A solid popular support for socio-ecological collective actors is crucial. Efforts are therefore needed to **mobilise broader voter bases.** Essential here are people and communities whose lives and work align strongly with eco-social activities. For instance, workers in the care sector and in the social economy can be key groups of a new **ecological working class**, a concept that departs from the one of ecological class (Latour & Schultz, 2022) by integrating environmentalism with workers' interests (Barca & Leonardi, 2018). In this view, people who take up care duties and who are not formally recognised as workers (often due to gendered and racially discriminatory norms in the labour market) also deserve more political attention. These groups of people already operate to a large extent within a sustainable welfare paradigm, providing need-satisfying services within ecological boundaries. Yet, they often lack political voice, both in party and interest-group systems, and they end up disengaging from electoral politics.

Beyond the care sector, the ecological working class has the potential to include some lower-middle-income households, even those who currently oppose the green transition. Studies demonstrate that much of their opposition stems from their perceived unfairness of bearing higher costs than others (Beaussier et al., 2024). Thus, the collective actors seeking to represent these communities should work to ensure this fairness. A prime example is European farmers, who may currently voice concerns over the costs of the transition but would actually gain significantly from protective and preventive measures against extreme weather events affecting agriculture.

In this sense, the growing polarisation around climate policies might not entirely be bad news, since it underscores that it is possible to politicise constituencies around these topics. This sentiment can hopefully provide an incentive for progressive actors to gain new ground, which may occur if these actors are able to build a viable political alternative that is more electorally appealing than neoliberal green growth and conservative anti-green offers. Contrary to the backlash discourse, survey data shows that a majority of Europeans still support ambitious climate policies, yet these policies risk becoming unpopular when they are not properly offset by social measures making them fair (Abou-Chadi et al., 2024). Therefore, for socio-ecological coalitions to appeal to both long-lost and new key constituencies, better ideas are needed.

From compensation to the rights-based ideas of sustainable welfare

As stated, transformative eco-social policies entail both preventing the further occurrence of risks associated with the ecological crisis and green transition, as well as protecting individuals from these risks. We argue that, if duly safeguarded, sustainable welfare can become a politically powerful concept. To mobilise the – as argued above - necessary political support, it is key to present it as a positive and actionable narrative, which creates more winners than losers and centres around fairness.

This could be done by adopting **a rights-based approach**, specifying the normative criteria for a just and fair sharing of costs and benefits within socio-ecological transformations. This approach implies that eco-social policies will no longer be compensatory and reactive tools, as with the current European just transition policies, but rather genuine manifestations of social rights and duties, which are empowering and emancipatory in that they are anchored to individuals' entitlements as members of a society. This means shifting the conversation from the margins of the population (i.e. only the most vulnerable and most affluent) to a universal and proportional paradigm.

This rights-based approach was prominent during the 'golden age' of the welfare state, when social policies were considered key to building a 'social citizenship'. From this perspective, there is a collective interest in protecting individuals from the risks they face over their life courses, because doing so enhances the welfare of society as a whole. Just as a universal right to healthcare provides guaranteed protections to all via progressive taxation, eco-social policies envision lifting the heaviest burdens of the ecological crisis for the most at-risk, with contributions that should be larger for the most affluent. These rights and duties can stand the test of time because of their universal and guaranteed nature – which provides carrots to all and fairly-

redistributed sticks – and because they reinforce individuals' sense of belonging to a collective, unlike other rights in the EU context that are currently understood mostly in the framework of the single market and economic competition.

Sustainable welfare can provide just the right narrative to shift away from ad-hoc and residual compensation and establish new rights and duties fit for the age of the ecological crisis. While the principles of sustainable welfare are already clear, more efforts are needed to make them concretely applicable. First, more data is needed to understand what the new risks originating from growing environmental hazards and regressive climate policies are, who is most at risk, and who is most responsible for carbon emissions and environmental degradation. This data should take into account people's socio-economic status, gender, age, ethnicity, geographic location, dependency on a carbon-intensive lifestyle, etc. Based on this data, a rights-based framework can be established and can serve as a baseline to design transformative eco-social policies that provide proper protection to individuals at risk, as well as a fair distribution of responsibilities. At the EU level, already-existing measures and governance structures can be reinforced or amended to better align with the principles of sustainable welfare, including the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights, the European Pillar of Social Rights, the European Semester, the Governance of the Energy Union and the conditionality attached to the Multiannual Financial Framework.

Furthermore, to safeguard the transformative potential of the sustainable welfare ideas, political forces should move beyond consensus-seeking policymaking and **not shy away from discursive conflict**, at least in the agenda-setting phase (since some compromises might be inevitable in other phases of policymaking). This would help avoid the 'concept capture' seen in Europe's just transition discourse, where conservative and neoliberal actors have sometimes co-opted and diluted ambitious socio-ecological goals, ultimately leading to the widely supported but watered-down policy changes. We need to accept that any transformative paradigm shift will likely not enjoy the same level of support as the just transition did, but rather face some strong resistance. Nevertheless, as already stated, the recent politicisation of ecology is to be seen as an opportunity. When environmentalism is framed as a valence issue that has nothing to do with distributive struggles or people's material conditions, but rather with ethical principles, then we run the risk of treating environmental problems as technical matters with obvious consensual solutions. Under this illusion, environmental policies would always end up favouring the interests of some social groups – typically the upper-middle class working in the service sector, while leaving others behind, such as the industrial-sector working class, carers and cared-for, especially women, and rural or marginalised communities. Instead, by politicising environmentalism to uphold the transformative power of sustainable welfare, we can help shift the balance between the winners and losers of the ecological crisis, moving toward a fairer redistribution.

Adapting democratic institutions for a resilient socio-ecological future

From an institutional perspective, transformative policy changes require a reform of democratic institutions at both the EU and national levels to facilitate socio-ecological transformation and prevent authoritarian or technocratic alternatives. Indeed, a new European socio-ecological contract (Pochet & Van Melkebeke, 2024), expanding the constitutional scope of political rights and responsibilities, is needed to clearly define the set of eco-social rights and duties underlying sustainable welfare. However, the engines of representative democracy, including party systems and governance structures for interest representation, are now arguably weakened and unfit to deliver on such a paradigm shift.

First, to allow for long-term planning and transformative eco-social change, existing institutions must be made more inclusive. This entails setting up **multi-stakeholder governance processes** that provide equitable decision-making powers to citizens and social groups. In this view, social and civil dialogue, institutions that have been key for the expansion of the welfare state, need to be revamped. Through the formal involvement of membership-based societal organisations – typically trade unions, civil society organisations, and business

groups – social and civil dialogue have enabled inclusive policymaking for decades, making sure that nobody was left behind. These institutions should be brought back and reinforced. Moreover, multistakeholder dialogue should also be adapted to today's context and new reality, for instance by including green interests and by making sure not to disproportionally favour economically powerful actors. Expanding existing multi-stakeholder just transition platforms and reinforcing them with proper decision-making powers could be an effective tactic to implement eco-social policies. With this in mind, the recent call for a European Fair Transition Observatory by the European Commission, as well as similar governance structures set up at the national level (e.g. Just Transition Institute in Spain or the recent Just Transition Commission in Ireland), represent potentially positive developments. However, for these experiments to lead to meaningful change, multistakeholder platforms need to be granted a permanent mandate, as well as legally binding decision-making powers.

Second, state and supranational institutions should also become socio-ecological through **multilevel institutional coordination**. It would be important to strengthen the competencies of local governments to deal with socio-ecological challenges, which are now problematically confined almost exclusively to the remit of the national government. Furthermore, the EU should play a bigger role in fostering multilevel governance, connecting local, national and supranational initiatives. This could be done, for instance, through an increasing role of the Committee of the Regions. Finally, at both national and supranational levels, more efforts are needed to break the silos that have traditionally separated the governance of social and environmental policies. This could be done at the EU level by fostering the coordination between bodies responsible for social and environmental affairs within the Council, Parliament and Commission. Creating new inter-institutional bodies specifically responsible for socio-ecological transformation would also encourage the emergence of eco-social policy measures and boost their stability. Indeed, the path-dependent literature teaches us that institutions are self-reinforcing and, so, they actively work to prevent the dismantling of existing policies. For this reason, initiatives like the new European Fair Transition Observatory within the European Commission should be saluted as positive developments.

Summarising points a., b. and c., we identify the following opportunities to drive more transformative eco-social policies in Europe.

Table 3: Drivers of transformative eco-social policies

The three 'Is'	*Drivers of transformative eco-social policies*
Interests	Strengthening socio-ecological coalitions and politicising the ecological working class (care class)
Ideas	Reintroducing democratic conflict through rights-based sustainable welfare ideas
Institutions	Creating inclusive, multilevel and silo-breaking socio-ecological institutions

Conclusion

This policy brief has argued that, although the politics of just transition in Europe marked a notable and innovative convergence of green and social agendas, it simultaneously reveals profound limitations that risk undermining the development of more ambitious and transformative eco-social policies. Although these policies have begun to occupy a more central place in the European policy landscape, they remain largely fragmented, marginal, and constrained by reactive logic and a growth-oriented paradigm. This is due to the specific characteristics that underscored the development of existing incremental eco-social policies. Strategic policymaking has enabled temporary green-labour coalitions to successfully advocate for eco-social changes; yet, such alliances often lack long-term stability, as they are built on precarious compromises rather than shared commitments to structural change. The persistent pursuit of consensus – though politically pragmatic – tends to dilute the transformative content of eco-social initiatives, reducing their capacity to address the root causes of socio-ecological crises. Finally, existing institutional configurations tend to prioritise short-term reactions over long-term planning and reproducing existing policy patterns that give priority to economic growth despite its consequences for ecological degradation and social inequality.

As a result, current just transition efforts adjust the status quo at the margins rather than meaningfully reconfiguring it. The scale and urgency of the ecological crisis require preventive and protective eco-social policies, mitigating the formation of new risks, while also safeguarding individuals, especially vulnerable ones, from existing risks. This is deeply problematic because the political vacuum left by the absence of a compelling socio-ecological vision is increasingly being filled by conservative forces. Across Europe, discontent with the perceived social costs of green transition policies is fuelling a 'green backlash,' which targets the European Green Deal as an illegitimate agenda that leaves many behind. Without a more transformative eco-social approach, this opposition is likely to gain further ground, threatening ecological ambition, social inclusion and, ultimately, democratic stability.

To overcome these intertwined ecological and political challenges, this policy brief has proposed a strategic framework grounded in the alignment of interests, ideas, and institutions. This framework, adaptable to diverse contexts and institutional levels, is intended to inspire progressive actors across Europe in their initiatives to turn transformative eco-social policies from a distant utopia to a politically feasible reality. While paradigm shifts in democratic systems rarely occur overnight, accelerating progress towards a more equitable and sustainable socio-ecological model is both necessary and possible.

Three strands are essential to this task. First, with respect to interests, it appears not only imperative to strengthen and widen socio-ecological coalitions among collective actors, but also actively politicise key constituencies, particularly the ecological working class and the care class, to provide the durable support base needed for bold policy shifts. Second, advancing rights-based ideas – specifying the allocation of costs and benefits based on universal and proportional sustainable welfare principles – and promoting these ideas by embracing democratic contestation rather than avoiding it, can help defend the transformative potential of just transition. Third, reforming institutional architectures to support inclusive, multilevel, and cross-sectoral governance, fostering equitable representation is vital to embed socio-ecological objectives into the policymaking process, breaking path-dependence and ensuring preventive planning. Taken together, these recommendations can drive political action to effectively move eco-social transitions from the margins to the mainstream of European policymaking. They represent not only a path to successfully reverse the green backlash but also an opportunity to reimagine welfare and democracy in the age of ecological crisis. Table 4 summarises our analysis and proposals.

Table 4: Towards transformative eco-social policies - Turning barriers into drivers

The three 'Is'	*The politics of just transition policies in Europe*	*Barriers to transformative eco-social policies*	*Drivers of transformative eco-social policies*
Interests	Convergence between green & labour interests	Strategic policymaking, based on political exchanges, makes green-labour coalitions unstable	Strengthening socio-ecological coalitions and politicising the ecological working class (care class)
Ideas	Discursive diffusion of the just transition idea as a coalition magnet	Consensual policymaking waters down ideas, making them contested	Reintroducing democratic conflict through rights-based sustainable welfare ideas
Institutions	Institutional pressures & opportunities allowing policy changes	Functionalist & path-dependent policymaking leads to reactive and growth-oriented changes	Creating inclusive, multilevel and silo-breaking socio-ecological institutions

References

Abou-Chadi, T., Jansen, J., Kollberg, M. & Redeker, N. (2024). Debunking the Backlash Uncovering European Voters' Climate Preferences. Policy Brief. 07 March 2024. Hertie School – Jacques Delors Centre.

Barca, S. & Leonardi, E. (2018). Working-class ecology and union politics: a conceptual topology. Globalizations 15(4) : 487–503.

Beaussier, A.L., Chevalier, T. & Palier, B. (2024). Qui supporte le coût de la tran-sition environnementale ? Penser les inégalités face aux risques sociaux liés au changement climatique. Revue francaise des affaires sociales. 1, 207-230.

Bohnenberger, K. (2020). Money, vouchers, public infrastructures? A framework for sustainable welfare benefits. Sustainability (Basel, Switzerland) 12(2): 596.

Büchs, M. (2021). Sustainable welfare: How do universal basic income and universal basic services compare? Ecological Economics, 189, 107152. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ecolecon.2021.107152.

Crespy, A. & Munta, M. (2023). Lost in transition? Social justice and the politics of the EU green transition. Transfer: European Review of Labour and Research, 29(2), 235-251. https://doi.org/10.1177/10242589231173072.

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

Fransolet, A. & Vanhille, J. (eds.) (2023). Just Transition in Belgium: Concepts, Issues at Stake, and Policy Levers. Scientific report on behalf of the High Committee for a Just Transition, Brussels: November 2023

Galgóczi, B. (2022). From a "just transition for us" to a "just transition for all." Transfer: European Review of Labour and Research, 28(3), 349–366. https://doi.org/10.1177/10242589221125066.

Gough, I. (2017). Heat, Greed and Human Need: Climate Change, Capitalism and Sustainable Wellbeing. Edward Elgar.

Gough, I., Meadowcroft, J., Dryzek, J., Gerhards, J., Lengfeld, H., Markandya, A. & Ortiz, R. (2008). JESP symposium: climate change and social policy. Journal of European Social Policy, 18 (4), 325-344. https://doi.org/10.1177/0958928708094890.

Hirvilammi, T. & Koch, M. (2020). Sustainable welfare beyond growth. Sustainability (Basel, Switzerland), 12(5), 1824. https://doi.org/10.3390/su12051824.

Koch, M., Gullberg, A. T., Schøyen, M. et al. (2016). Sustainable welfare in the EU: Promoting synergies between climate and social policies. Critical Social Policy 36(4), 704–715. https://doi.org/10.1177/0261018316654614

Kyriazi, A. & Miró, J. (2023). Towards a Socially Fair Green Transition in the EU? An Analysis of the Just Transition Fund Using the Multiple Streams Framework. Comparative European Politics 21, 112–132.

Latour, B. & Schultz, N. (2022). On the Emergence of an Ecological Class - a Memo : Subject: How to Promote the Emergence of an Ecological Class That's Self-Aware and Proud. Cambridge Hoboken: Polity Press.

Laurent, E. (2015). Social-Ecology: Exploring the missing link in sustainable development. Documents de Travail de l'OFCE, n. 2015-07. Observatoire Francais des Conjonctures Economiques.

Mandelli, M. (2022). Mapping eco-social policy mixes for a just transition in Europe. Working Paper 2022.15. The European Trade Union Institute.

Mandelli, M. (2025). The comparative politics of just transition policies: building green-red winning coalitions in Spain and Ireland. Journal of European Public Policy, 1–26.

https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2024.2446364

Murphy, M. (2023). Creating an Ecosocial Welfare Future. Policy Press.

Ottelin, J., Heinonen, J. & Junnila, S. (2018). Carbon and Material Footprints of a Welfare State: Why and How Governments Should Enhance Green Investments. Environmental Science & Policy 86, 1–10.

Palier, B. & Surel, Y. (2005). The "Three I's" and the Analysis of the State in Action. Revue française de science politique 55, 7-32. https://doi.org/10.3917/rfsp.551.0007.

Pochet, P. & Van Melkebeke, T. (2024). Climate Emergency and Welfare States. February 2024. Green European Foundation.

Raworth, K. (2017). Doughnut Economics: Seven Ways to Think Like a 21st Century Economist. Chelsea Green Publishing.

Sabato, S. & Mandelli, M. (2024). Towards an EU framework for a just transition: welfare policies and politics for the socio-ecological transition. European Political Science 23, 14–26. https://doi.org/10.1057/s41304-023-00458-1.

Siderius, K. (2025). Who benefits from public sustainable finance in the EU? Journal of European Public Policy 1–26. https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2025.2452276.

About GEF's Policy Hub

The Green European Foundation (GEF) is a European-level political foundation whose mission is to contribute to a lively European sphere of debate and to foster greater citizen involvement in European politics. GEF strives to mainstream discussions on European policies and politics both within and beyond the Green political family. The foundation acts as a laboratory for new ideas and offers cross-border political education and a platform for cooperation and exchange at the European level.

GEF's Policy Hub is centred on a Knowledge Communities methodology, fostering networks for knowledge production, exchange, and dissemination. It tackles key European issues, particularly related to the intersecting domains of energy, climate, social, and economic affairs. Ultimately, our Policy Hub aims to deliver ideas and proposals that can inform and incentivise policies for an equitable and systemic green transition.

About the author

Matteo Mandelli is a postdoctoral research fellow at the Centre for European Studies and Comparative Politics, Sciences Po Paris. He currently collaborates with the Green European Foundation (GEF) and is a board member of the Sustainable Welfare and Eco-social Policy Network. He holds a PhD in political studies from the University of Milan.

GEF coordination and editing by Taube Van Melkebeke, GEF Head of Policy.

Acknowledgements

Matteo Mandelli and Taube Van Melkebeke would like to wholeheartedly thank all participants of the Knowledge Community meetings that were held in Lyon and Brussels in March, July and November of 2024, during which earlier versions of this policy brief were discussed. Your generous and insightful input and the lively discussions between the participants allowed us to further develop our thinking and identify the final political opportunities in this publication. We would also like to thank GEF's Friederike Möller and Laurent Standaert, the Director of the foundation, for their support and contributions to this work.

Proofreading by Matthew Jones

Layout and design by Klär.graphics

This policy brief is published by the Green European Foundation with the financial support of the European Parliament to the Green European Foundation. The European Parliament is not responsible for the content of this publication. The views expressed in this publication are solely those of the authors and contributors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the European Parliament or the Green European Foundation.