GREEN EUROPEAN FOUNDATION

THE GREENS AT 50

A Reflection Paper on the Future of European Green Politics

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Introduction

After five decades and unprecedented success – reaching government in 9 of 27 EU member states – European Greens face not just an electoral reversal but an identity crisis. Their surge catalysed the European Green Deal; yet both that agenda and broader progressive commitments have since been dismantled. The question is no longer whether Greens can win elections, but whether they know *who* they are and *what* they stand for in a world that has fundamentally changed.

This reflection paper, written from the vantage point of an independent observer of European political dynamics, argues that the Greens' current predicament stems from neither external circumstances alone nor from ecological concerns becoming a less important political fault line. Rather, it reflects a profound failure of translation: the Greens' original ideological contribution remains valid and necessary, but they need to rediscover the ability to articulate it in the political arena. Between catchy campaign slogans and impenetrable policy papers, the space for compelling political vision has steadily eroded. This erosion has unfolded against a shifting political economy: a relative decline in the salience of climate concerns; a cost-of-living crisis intensified by Russia's invasion of Ukraine and further exacerbated by the US-Israeli war with Iran and the unprecedented energy price shock it unleashed; and, finally, a growing national backlash against green policies, mobilised by right-wing populist parties that made significant gains in the 2024 European elections.

The path forward requires more than electoral tactics, communication strategies, or other quick fixes. It demands a return to deeper foundational questions, a lucid examination of historical choices, and the courage to craft a unifying, transnational vision that speaks to both material anxieties and cross-border challenges. The good news: the answers exist within the Green political tradition. They simply need to be reclaimed, refined, and translated for a Europe whose geopolitical space is being squeezed and whose autonomy is under assault.

I. A World Transformed: Europe's Shrinking Space

Born in the late '70s and early '80s, the European Green movement has now been around for a half century. Ecology, peace, women's and LGBT emancipation, grassroots democracy: core fights of the Greens pushed against the strictures of postwar European societies and demanded an alternative to the nuclear-charged militarism that shaped Cold War geopolitics. As borders came down, personal freedoms expanded, and the foundations of a global architecture for environmental cooperation were laid, these currents carried the Greens into the 1990s and early 2000s. Slowly but surely, the Greens moved from movements to parties, professionalising and entering their first national governments while retaining their status as alternatives to the mainstream forces of centre-left and right. But as the hopes of that era faltered – first the rejection of the European constitution, then the financial crisis and its economic and political fallout, and add to that terrorism and the return of geopolitics – the Greens began to falter too. The global climate awakening of the 2010s was in this sense a political victory but also a life belt that came not a moment too late.

Because the environment that enabled the Greens' emergence and expansion has vanished. Greens evolved within post-Cold War stability, Western cultural hegemony, a liberal international order, and a growing European economy that could fund ambitious environmental projects. That world

is gone. What replaces it demands a fundamental rethinking, but also, crucially, creates new openings for ecological politics if the translation can finally be made.

Geopolitical Disorientation

Power now takes shape in Beijing and Delhi far more than in Washington. Yet Europe remains culturally and politically tethered to a US-led liberal order that is itself regressing. Trumpism is not merely an American phenomenon; it represents a cultural backlash that engulfs Europe's self-proclaimed Patriots and far-right movements across member states. A Europe that can no longer assume American protection and that faces assertive Chinese competition, that is thus squeezed between two continental powers with coherent industrial strategies, is a Europe forced to rediscover its own political project. This is the terrain on which Green politics can matter, if it understands the moment.

Energy as a Weapon

Recent US foreign policy reveals oil and gas to lie at the centre of power projection in ways unseen for half a century. This is not about American energy security, as the US is already the world's largest producer. It is about forcing allies into dependence. A Europe dependent on American LNG cannot act independently in crises, sustain rearmament, or absorb economic shocks without asking permission first. When Washington pressures the EU to weaken environmental rules in pursuit of "competitiveness", it is pursuing easier market access, not European prosperity. The paradox should enrage us: the US doubles down on fossil fuels precisely when renewables are becoming cheaper and ensure sovereignty. Because a dependent Europe is a subservient Europe.

Technology as Ungoverned Power

Alongside energy, a second domain of dependence is consolidating with comparable speed and even less democratic scrutiny. The digital infrastructure on which European economies, public services, and democratic discourse now depend is overwhelmingly controlled by a handful of non-European corporations whose market power dwarfs that of most EU member states. Artificial intelligence is being deployed across hiring, credit, healthcare, and public administration with no regulatory framework remotely adequate to the stakes involved. The EU's own legislative efforts – the AI Act, the Digital Services Act, the Digital Markets Act – represent genuine firsts, yet they are already under pressure from trading partners who view tech governance as a barrier to market access rather than a democratic necessity.

For Greens, the technology question is not a separate policy silo but another expression of the same structural problem: who governs the systems that shape how we live, work, and relate to one another? Unregulated algorithmic systems concentrate power as surely as fossil fuel monopolies do. Data extraction degrades privacy and autonomy as surely as resource extraction degrades ecosystems. The current regulatory "wild west" surrounding AI governance is not merely a technical oversight; it is a democratic deficit of the first order. If Greens are serious about sovereignty and self-government, digital sovereignty belongs at the centre of that argument, not at its margins.

The Demographic-Ecological Link

Europe's demographic crisis – fertility at 1.52, well below replacement, with accelerating depopulation in Eastern and Southern Europe – is not separate from ecology. They are expressions of the same systemic failure. The inability of young people to have the families they want is driven by housing costs, precarious work, inadequate childcare, and ecological anxiety: connected failures of a system that prioritises capital accumulation over human flourishing. The care economy, affordable housing, and community redesign are ecological questions dressed in demographic clothes. They constitute perhaps the most powerful terrain for renewed Green politics – connecting abstract ideals to immediate material concerns – yet remain almost entirely absent from Green discourse. The most powerful entry point may be the simplest: the child already here. Not future generations as a philosophical category, but the children breathing polluted air today, absorbing endocrine disruptors in their food today, losing sleep and attention to screens in environments shaped by choices made before they could speak. Whether you are left or right, secular or religious, urban or rural, you care about your children. That is the translation Greens have consistently failed to make: from systemic diagnosis to the realities of children on the ground.

Climate Adaptation: The Emerging Frontline

While mitigation – reducing emissions – has dominated Green politics for three decades, the accelerating reality of climate impacts is forcing an additional, equally urgent agenda onto the table. Southern European cities now routinely exceed 45°C in summer; flash floods devastate communities from Valencia to Thessaly; wildfire seasons lengthen year on year. These are not future projections but present emergencies, and they fall hardest on those with the fewest resources to adapt: the elderly, outdoor workers, low-income households without air conditioning, farmers on marginal land.

Climate adaptation is, at its core, a question of solidarity, welfare, and public health – terrain that connects directly to the Greens' broader social commitments. Who redesigns cities so that heat does not kill? Who ensures that flood defences protect poor neighbourhoods as well as commercial districts? Who funds the transformation of agriculture in regions that can no longer grow what they have always grown? These are political choices about whose suffering counts and whose does not. They are also questions of European cohesion: the member states most exposed to climate impacts are often those with the least fiscal capacity to respond. If Greens do not own this agenda – connecting adaptation to health security, to welfare redesign, to European solidarity – someone else will frame it. Or worse, no one will frame it at all, and communities will be left to cope alone.

Democratic Regression

Across all these trends runs a political thread: the decay of democratic institutions that Greens have always claimed as foundational. In Hungary, Serbia, and beyond, democratic institutions have been hollowed out or captured. In Western Europe, the threat is subtler but real: the normalisation of far-right politics, the erosion of media pluralism, and the de-legitimisation of scientific expertise.

The systematic dismantling of the European Green Deal represents not just a policy reversal but an expression of silent de-democratisation: regulations adopted through legitimate processes rolled back through opaque omnibus procedures that bypass impact assessments and public consultations. This is what "deregulation" means in practice, not freedom, but the substitution of corporate interest for democratic choice.

These structural shifts do not simply create a harsher environment for Green politics; they also **stress-test the movement's strategic and communicative capacity**. When the context changes this profoundly, parties either translate their core commitments into a new governing logic, or their weaknesses become visible, because they can no longer rely on a favourable tailwind, institutional routine, or inherited narratives of old militantism.

II. The Diagnosis: How Greens Lost Their Way

The reversal of Green fortunes swiftly followed their historic pinnacle. Between 2018 and 2022, Green parties entered government in 9 EU member states. Increasing responsibility at the regional and city level and a strong presence in the European Parliament underlined the rise of Green political power. Yes, analysis of these short-lived breakthroughs must acknowledge the constraints that Greens operated under. Everywhere they governed, it was part of complex and fragile multi-party coalitions that limited both ambition and agency. Furthermore, these were years of crisis: Covid-19, the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine, and the energy crisis and inflation that followed meant that crisis management smothered the potential for visionary politics.

Yet contingent factors only get you so far in explaining a reversal so rapid and across the board. To truly grasp how the Greens lost their way, we must consider more fundamental explanations for their strategic drift.

The Abandoned Ideological Axis

Greens originally introduced a third axis to European politics. While the traditional left-right debate concerned how to distribute the benefits of growth, Greens questioned growth itself; challenging not just distribution but the very creation of resources and the meaning of progress. This anti-productivist stance was their distinctive ideological space. Over decades, as Greens accepted the electoral game, they gradually abandoned this position without fully reckoning with what they gave up. Today, they struggle to articulate what differentiates their vision from centre-left parties that also support renewable energy and climate targets. The original cleavage became obscured, leaving Greens without their most powerful source of differentiation.

Six Operational Failures

Recent self-critique from Green leadership reveals breakdowns that compound ideological drift. First, Greens stopped campaigning when they entered government, disappearing from public debate to focus on ministerial work, an ill-fated choice given that electoral cycles are longer than governing periods.

Second, they were unprepared to be attacked. When Russia's invasion of Ukraine shifted the energy debate, the right attacked over high energy prices and nuclear phase-out. Greens had never clearly communicated the economics of their position and appeared dogmatic precisely because they lacked the strategic foresight to anticipate this.

Third, they were not agile, focused on governing competently without explaining what comes next or projecting a vision beyond competent management.

Fourth, there is a need to rebuild the shared vision across European Green parties. A common framework to respond to the contemporary problems of the 2020s and 2030s needs to be not just

updated but reforged. Without a shared European vision extending through party structures from membership up to the leadership, the risk is that each national party operates in isolation.

Fifth, Greens became sociologically distant from the constituencies they claim to represent. As one leader acknowledged: "We became too intellectual and urban, out of touch with people's everyday life concerns." The composition skews heavily toward educated, high-income urban professionals, creating a class and cultural gulf from those who most need environmental justice.

The Green Deal trap

In May 2024, Greens publicly declared they would not back von der Leyen if she made deals with the far right. By July, they voted for her second mandate anyway, without securing effective guarantees on protecting the Green Deal, without alignment on Green political priorities, despite clear signals the Commission would depart from climate commitments, which it already had. Justified by questionable promises to uphold the Green Deal, this decision came with costs, abandoning red lines and giving support without extracting sufficient commitments.

The fundamental question it raises will stalk Green politics: if Greens cannot hold the line when their signature achievement is at stake, what will they fight for? This is why the operational failures and the translation problem are, finally, one and the same failure. Without a unifying political principle, a concept that tells you what to trade and what never to trade, the risk is that every coalition negotiation might come across as improvisation, and every concession being painted as betrayal.

The Translation Problem

Beneath these specific failures lies a deeper pattern. What has disappeared is the articulation of Green ideals in electoral space. Greens haven't abandoned their complexity, but they have renounced translating it into clear political positioning. The party composition lost its scientific culture; there are no longer doctors, epidemiologists, and public health experts alongside environmentalists. The result: ecology has become detached from both science and conscience, the awareness that social misery results from systemic choices, not inevitable fate.

Greens are stuck not because they lack ideas, but because they have failed to find the political sentence that voters can carry with them, repeat to their neighbours, and feel to be true in their daily lives. Part of what makes that sentence so elusive is that Greens have consistently treated politics as a cognitive exercise, speaking to reason while their adversaries speak to feeling and in doing so, have forfeited the emotional register in which most political alignment actually happens. That is the work ahead.

Learning from Central and Eastern Europe and beyond

One crucial lesson for Western Greens comes from their counterparts operating under fundamentally different conditions. For CEE Greens, like Budapest's Green mayor fighting Orbán's autocracy, or the Green-Left Front in Serbia, democracy is a matter of survival, not an abstract value. Their fight is existential, making them inherently more political, more willing to fight, more ideologically and strategically disciplined. Western Greens emerged as an emancipation project in stable post-war democracies. Given the repeated attacks on the rule of law inside the EU, the question an outside observer cannot help but ask is whether Western Greens are ready to

become a resistance movement when democracy itself is threatened. The generation that never had to fight for rights may finally encounter conditions that make politics real rather than abstract. CEE Greens are already there and the distance between the two experiences is one of the Green family's most under-used resources.

III. Four Questions That Define the Future

Having diagnosed the crisis with honesty, a way forward may be charted. But this requires confronting foundational questions that Green politics has repeatedly evaded. These are not policy questions but identity inquiries. They are meant to determine who the Greens are, what coalitions they can build, and how they differentiate themselves politically. What follows are questions more than answers. The answers must be forged collectively by Green parties themselves.

Q1 Health, Environment, and Sovereignty: Can Greens finally speak the sentence that connects them?

Greens understand, in their documents and in their bones, that the environment is a health question, that polluted air shows up in children's lungs, that chemical exposure appears in fertility statistics, that heat kills the elderly who can no longer afford to keep cool. They understand that climate action is an energy question and therefore a sovereignty question: a Europe burning Russian gas or importing American LNG cannot set its own foreign policy, sustain its own defence, or absorb the next economic shock without asking for permission first. They understand that the Green Deal, whatever its policy flaws, represented an act of European self-government: the continent deciding its own economic future rather than having it decided in boardrooms elsewhere. And they understand that renewables are not merely a technical solution to an emissions problem, but a structural path toward a freedom that fossil fuels have always denied: the freedom to answer to no one about the energy that powers our lives.

But understanding something and saying it are not the same thing. These connections exist in Green thinking, yet they remain buried in policy papers, gestured at in parliamentary speeches, never assembled into the political sentence that voters can carry with them. The chain from environment to health to sovereignty to freedom to independence has never been spoken aloud as a single argument. The political translation has not happened. That is the work. Not discovering new ideas, but finally saying clearly what has always been known.

The question for Greens, then, is not whether this argument exists. It is whether this generation of leadership has the courage and discipline to make it, consistently, at every level from local industrial plants, schools, clinics to European summits, in language that speaks to workers, and parents worried about their children's asthma as much as to security analysts worried about energy dependence.

Q2 Force and Law: How do Greens position themselves on violence in an increasingly violent world?

Pacifism made profound sense during the Cold War. It made sense when European integration promised to make war between former enemies "not only unthinkable but materially impossible". But Ukraine faces Russian invasion. Democracies confront authoritarian aggression. Militarisation

accelerates across Europe. The tension is real: force has become morally indispensable in ways Greens must acknowledge, yet unconstrained militarisation threatens both budgets and democratic values.

The answer cannot be reflexive opposition to all military force, nor naive embrace of rearmament rhetoric. But what is the Green distinction between legitimate defence and imperial adventurism? Between necessary deterrence and arms race escalation? Between European strategic autonomy and NATO subordination? Between peace through strength and peace through justice? And how does military spending relate to the care and climate spending Greens champion: are they truly competing, or does energy independence through renewables reduce the security spending that fossil fuel dependence requires? The present reminds us that these are not rhetorical questions. Greens who cannot answer them cannot govern.

Q3 Production and Work: What does an ecological economy actually look like?

Here Greens possess something genuinely distinctive that they have largely abandoned. The debate that has consumed the European left for a generation, from retirement ages, working hours, unemployment benefits, to the length of the working week, is the wrong debate, because it accepts without question the framework it claims to contest. It asks how to distribute the products of a system it never questions.

Greens, at their most intellectually serious, have always understood that the prior question is different: not *how* we share what the economy produces, but *what* the economy should produce, for *whom*, and at what *cost* to the living world that sustains it. What does meaningful work look like when productivity is measured not only in output but in what it costs the atmosphere, the soil, and the body of the worker? What would it mean to build an economy oriented toward human flourishing rather than infinite accumulation, not as a utopian aspiration but as a design principle, applied now, in industrial policy, in procurement, in how we measure what counts?

The 21st century is forcing these questions on every political tradition whether it is ready or not. It is both exhilarating and frustrating to acknowledge that the Greens arrived at them first, and then left them on the table.

Q4 The Community of the Living: Where does our political community end?

Every political tradition answers this question, whether it says so loud or not. The far right draws the boundary around people like them – nation, ethnicity, the familiar. The left draws it around the working class. Liberalism draws it around the rights-bearing individual. Each boundary has generated enormous political energy, because knowing who counts, that is whose interests register, whose suffering demands a response, is the precondition for any political project at all.

Greens have always insisted on a different answer: the boundary extends to the entire living world, to future generations who cannot vote or organise yet whose lives are shaped by decisions we make today about carbon, soil, and biodiversity. No other political tradition has seriously tried to give institutional form to the interests of the unborn, the non-human, the ecosystem as a whole.

The difficulty is not the ethics – as many accept this philosophically – but the politics. What would a legal system look like that took ecosystems seriously? An economic system that valued biodiversity? A democratic system that represented future interests? And critically: how does the

Greens' expanded political community connect to human flourishing, rather than appearing to oppose it? The task is not prohibiting consumption but recognising value in the non-human world and translating that recognition into positive, institutional form. Greens have the philosophy. The political architecture is still missing, but calls to be invented and sold.

IV. The Missing Organising Concept

These questions cannot be answered as four separate debates without producing fragmentation and inconsistent trade-offs across countries and coalition contexts. A **shared framing device,** is therefore necessary: a single-label container may provide the organising principle that links the answers together, disciplines compromises under pressure, and allows diverse policy choices to be defended as expressions of one coherent political project.

The Greens possess all the elements of a compelling political argument. What they lack is a single organising concept that unifies disparate policies into coherent vision, provides strategic discipline when choices must be made, and travels from local municipal halls to European summits without losing its meaning.

The Green Deal served this function for a decade, and its collapse reveals the limits of a policy agenda as a container concept. It was too narrow, essentially limited to climate and environment when the argument needed to encompass health, sovereignty, democracy, work, and care. It became a regulatory brand rather than a mobilising principle: citizens heard targets and directives, not freedom, security, or better lives. And it never cascaded to where most Greens actually govern: national and local parties struggled to explain what it meant for housing, local economies, or families deciding whether to have children.

Most fatally, the politicisation that initially favoured Greens ultimately killed their electoral appeal. In 2019, climate's salience drove Green success. By 2024, adversaries had weaponised the same politicisation process – remember farmer protests, EPP defection, far-right mobilisation – turning the Green Deal into a liability. Because it functioned as a *regulatory* agenda rather than a *political* principle, other forces could claim to support it while emptying it of substance. The next container must be robust enough that when opponents attack, the principle clarifies rather than collapses.

Four concepts deserve serious consideration. Each carries distinct strategic advantages and genuine risks.

Freedom

The most emotionally resonant and politically contested option. Currently weaponised by the far right – freedom from immigrants, EU rules, climate regulations – it could be reclaimed: freedom from fossil fuel dependence, freedom from environmental disease, freedom to decide our collective future. If Greens can successfully argue that *real* freedom means clean air, energy independence, and democratic self-government, they fundamentally alter the terms of debate. The risk is that the far right has deeper ownership of this term, and reclaiming it requires sustained, aggressive reframing. Yet his reclaiming is not without precedent within Green thought itself. Murray Bookchin gave it philosophical depth in *The Ecology of Freedom* (1982), arguing that the domination of nature grows out of the domination of human by human. In this view, freedom is not external to ecological politics but one of its central conditions. The far right did not invent

freedom; it captured and narrowed a concept with a much broader democratic and ecological meaning. The reward is potentially transformative: freedom is the term that speaks across the entire political spectrum, from conservatives anxious about foreign dependence to progressives anxious about corporate power and geopolitical bullying.

Security

Addresses the core anxiety driving European politics without conceding the far right's exclusionary framing. Green security is energy security through renewables, health security through clean air and safe food, social security through care infrastructure, and democratic security against authoritarianism. It bridges left (social security) and right (national security) while grounding abstract ecological concerns in immediate protection. The risk: security politics can slide toward militarisation and fortress Europe, neither of which is a Green signature. The work and discipline required to hold the concept steady across contexts is considerable.

Independence

Most directly addresses the geopolitical argument: independence from American LNG, from Chinese supply chains, from fossil fuel exporters, from authoritarian models. The translation is clean across three levels: personal health independence, strategic energy independence, European political independence. It is concrete enough for local politics and ambitious enough for EU-wide action. The risk is that it sounds cold compared to freedom's emotional resonance, and may not immediately answer the voter's question: "what does this mean for my life?"

Affordability

Proven effective, Mamdani's New York mayoral campaign built an entire coalition around affordability: free public transport, accessible housing, renewable energy reducing costs. In a European context shaped by the cost-of-living crisis, it speaks immediately to material anxieties. The challenge is institutional: EU competences are limited in areas where affordability matters most: housing, transport, social services remain largely national. Used at EU level, it risks promising what Greens cannot deliver, inviting accusations of naivety – as partly experienced by the unfolding, sub-optimal EU Commission's housing strategy..

Choosing the container

What matters is not finding the perfect word but choosing one and building everything around it. Different national contexts may emphasise different containers: Western European Greens facing strong far-right competition may need to reclaim freedom or security; CEE Greens may find independence or sovereignty more resonant; Nordic Greens might pioneer security as a systemic frame. But the European Green movement requires a container, that is a meta-frame, that encompasses these variations while providing coherent identity.

The fatal mistake has been possessing all the elements, from health and sovereignty to democracy and material security, without assembling them into a single political sentence. No, the Green Deal's formula did not do the trick. The container concept must do what Greens have consistently failed to do: translate complexity into clarity, connect abstract ideals to immediate concerns, and provide the strategic discipline to know when to fight and when to compromise. Without it, Greens will continue making ad hoc choices – like the von der Leyen vote – that contradict stated principles because they lack a clear framework to guide decisions.

If the container is to function as more than a rhetorical wrapper, it has to operate as a strategic constraint: a principle that structures priorities, clarifies trade-offs, and makes coalition choices legible under political pressure. The decisive question, therefore, is not whether a term resonates rhetorically, but whether it can consistently coordinate political action across countries, institutions, and electoral coalitions.

In practical terms, this requires a container that travels without loss of meaning, one that remains equally operable in municipal governance and national executive politics, while retaining coherence within the European Parliament and in EU-level negotiations.

It must also touch material life immediately. Voters need to feel the connection within seconds, through prices, housing, work, health, mobility, and personal safety, without needing a seminar in policy design. A label that remains abstract will not survive contact with the cost-of-living agenda that now dominates electoral competition.

Crucially, the container must discipline compromises. If successful, Greens will continue to govern in coalitions; the question is whether compromises appear as improvisation or as principled choices. A suitable unifying vision provides an explicit basis for what the Greens will trade, what they will not, and why, so that coalition decisions strengthen, rather than erode, political credibility.

It must be robust under attack. Greens face predictable lines of criticism, from punitive and naïve to anti-growth and urban elite, and these attacks will intensify whenever transition policies create visible friction. A viable container should not simply withstand these critiques; it should be able to turn them into evidence for the project's necessity (for example, by showing that the real "punishment" is dependency, pollution, and insecurity).

Finally, the container must organise the "full portfolio" of Green politics. It must integrate climate and nature with public health, democracy, peace and security, industrial strategy, and social justice, so that diverse policy choices are understood as expressions of one coherent direction of travel, rather than as a list of separate causes competing for attention. This has historically proven challenging for the Greens.

V. The Work Ahead

At fifty, the Greens stand at a crossroads. One path leads to comfortable irrelevance: becoming a historical artefact of postwar prosperity, ill-equipped to adapt to an era of multipolar disorder. On this path, the force risks settling into a limited role: at best, a protest movement that only occasionally enters government; at worst, a boutique party catering primarily to urban elites.

The other path demands more difficult work and honest self-examination: reclaiming a distinctive ideological contribution, translating complexity into a compelling and shared vision, building coalitions across class and geography, and positioning ecology as the foundation of European autonomy – and of Europeanism itself. The resources for such a renewal already exist within the Green political tradition. The task for this generation of Greens has the courage to fight for these communities consistently, carving out coalitions, and building the political movement – not just the policy competence to navigate the electoral game – that Europe's compounding crises demand.

CEE Greens already know what Western Greens must learn: democracy is not a backdrop but a battleground. Politics is an existential struggle, not comfortable advocacy. Strategic discipline matters more than ideological purity when survival is at stake.

Europe as the Project, Not Just the Arena

If there is one conviction Greens must place at the centre of their renewal, it is this: Europe is not merely the level at which Greens happen to coordinate. It is THE political project that gives Green politics its full meaning.

No single member state can achieve energy independence, govern artificial intelligence, adapt to climate breakdown, or resist authoritarian pressure alone. The nation-state is too small for the crises that define this century. The only framework that can match the scale of the problems is European – and the only political family that has consistently understood this, from the very beginning, is the Greens.

Yet Greens have allowed their Europeanism to become an inherited sentiment rather than an active political strategy. They say they are pro-European, but they rarely explain what kind of Europe they are fighting for, what the European project must become if it is to survive, or why European integration is not a technocratic convenience but the precondition for every other policy Greens care about. An injection of imagination may lead them to argue that energy sovereignty requires European-scale infrastructure. Climate adaptation requires European-scale solidarity. Digital governance requires European-scale regulation (not deregulation). Democratic resilience requires European-scale mutual commitment (not indifference).

The future of Europe should therefore be central to the Greens' political offer, not as an appendix to environmental policy but as the organising principle that connects all of it. What kind of Europe do Greens want to build? A Europe that produces its own energy and governs its own technology. A Europe that adapts to climate impacts through solidarity rather than abandoning its most vulnerable regions. A Europe whose democratic institutions are strong enough to resist both external authoritarian pressure and internal democratic backsliding. Not only Donald Tusk's victory in Poland, but Peter Magyar's reversal of Orbánism show that this is indeed in the realm of possibilities. A Europe that measures progress in the quality of life it enables, not merely in the quantity of output it generates. This is a vision no other political family is offering with any conviction, precisely because it requires the combination of ecological ambition, democratic seriousness, and transnational commitment that has always been the Greens' distinctive contribution.

The European dimension is also what distinguishes the Greens' answer to the geopolitical moment from every other offer. The far right proposes national retreat. The centre-right proposes competitiveness without transformation. The centre-left proposes solidarity without structural reform. The Greens have the intellectual resources to propose what Europe actually needs: a transformation of the economic model, a re-invention of the welfare state around adaptation and care, an energy system that delivers sovereignty, and democratic institutions capable of governing all of this at the scale required. The question is whether they will make this case forcefully, or continue to treat Europe as the background to their politics rather than its beating heart.

VI. What Greens Must Do

Having laid out the diagnosis, I owe the reader – and the Greens – a measure of directness about what follows from it. The analysis points toward six imperatives.

First, **put Europe at the centre, explicitly and unapologetically.** Every major Green policy goal – energy sovereignty, climate adaptation, digital governance, democratic resilience – requires European-scale action. Greens should be the party that makes the case for more Europe, not out of institutional loyalty but because the alternative is impotence. This also means Greens must develop a coherent position on European fiscal capacity, on EU-level investment in adaptation and care infrastructure, and on the institutional reforms needed to make European democracy work at the speed the crises demand.

Second, **choose a container and commit to it with discipline.** The single greatest operational failure of the past decade has been the absence of a unifying concept that tells Greens what to fight for, what to trade, and what never to concede. My own view is that "*freedom*" (from dependencies) offers the most transformative potential – it reclaims the term from those who use it to mean freedom from solidarity, and redefines it as freedom *from* dependence, disease, and decisions made elsewhere about how we live. But the choice must be collective, and whatever is chosen must be enforced with the consistency of a political discipline that Greens have so far lacked. Say it once, say it everywhere, make it the answer to every question.

Third, **name the enemies of freedom and make the conflict visible.** Greens have historically been more comfortable naming planetary limits than political opponents. That reticence must end. The Greens' deepest intellectual resource, that is the republican and socio-ecological insight that freedom requires absence of domination, not merely absence of interference, only becomes politically operative when it identifies *who* dominates and *how*. Fossil fuel corporations that have captured energy systems and subsidised their own impunity. Rentier landlords whose arbitrary power over tenants is a form of unfreedom, not a market outcome. Deregulation lobbies that dress the removal of citizen protections as liberation. Over the past two years, the omnibus agenda that has begun dismantling two decades of hard-won environmental and social standards is not simplification, it is the organised transfer of power from citizens to those who profit from their exposure. Denouncing all of the above requires the courage to say, clearly and repeatedly: you are being dominated, here is by whom, and here is how we propose to set you free.

Fourth, **rebuild the quality-of-life argument as a political weapon.** The distinction between quality and quantity is the Greens' oldest and most radical insight. It is also the one they have been least willing to fight for. In a Europe where GDP grows while life expectancy stalls, where productivity rises while mental health deteriorates, where cities expand while communities dissolve, the argument that we are measuring the wrong things is by now the lived experience of millions. Greens should make this the signature challenge to every opponent: "you promise more; we promise better". It is a sentence voters can carry with them.

Fifth, **make climate adaptation a core pillar, not an afterthought.** Mitigation remains essential, but adaptation is where the politics will be fought in the next decade. Heatwaves, floods, droughts, and wildfire are already here; they will intensify. Greens must own the adaptation agenda before it is neglected altogether or captured by technocrats or even industrial lobbyists. This means

connecting it to welfare, to health, to European solidarity, and to the quality-of-life argument. Adaptation might reveal the practical, caring face of ecological politics, and not its demise.

Sixth, **close the sociological gulf.** A party of urban professionals cannot credibly speak for environmental justice. Greens need to be present in rural communities, deindustrialising regions, and the suburbs where the cost-of-living crisis bites hardest. This requires changing who is in the room, who selects candidates, and whose life experience shapes policy. The demographic agenda – housing, care, family support, regional equity – may offer the bridge, if Greens are willing to walk across it, while bringing a solid scientific baggage with it.

What if the Greens' crisis is their greatest opportunity? That is the chance to become what Europe desperately needs but lacks: the party of independence, health, sovereignty, and democratic self-government, precisely when freedom itself is under assault.

The answers exist. The Greens' family doesn't need new ideas, but finally saying clearly what has always been known – in one word, repeated everywhere, until it is the word that names what Europe is fighting for.

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