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EU Leadership in Climate Diplomacy: Features and Prospects

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Summary

Climate diplomacy within the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) is a unique negotiation arena due to the practical and far-reaching implications of climate action, the broadest possible national representation, and the unprecedented time horizon of the Convention's operation. Therefore, assessing the current status and prospects of climate leadership requires analyzing climate negotiations from the perspective of "small steps" and those aspects of international climate cooperation on issues which demand deep expertise and synchronized work at the technical level. At the annual Climate Conferences of the Parties to the UNFCCC (COPs), there is a growing tension with regard to raising the ambition of Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) and conducting the Global Stocktake (GST). A source of this tension is the increasing activity of developing countries. Their interests – overcoming the consequences of climate change, financing the energy transition, and the risks of relocating carbon-intensive industries – align with common interests. However, the search for compromise positions slows down the negotiation process. As a result, a false impression of a lack of leadership in international climate negotiations is formed.

The article aims to identify the direction of transformation and the features of EU climate leadership based on classical typologies of political leadership, examine the EU's role in the UNFCCC process, and characterize the prospects for the united Europe's leadership in climate diplomacy. Therefore, the article examines the participation of the EU as a party to the UNFCCC at COPs to consider the prospects of climate leadership. It reviews the main negotiating positions of the EU and the outcomes of conferences that influenced the initial dynamics of climate diplomacy (in 1997, 2009, 2011, and 2015) as well as the four most recent conferences that demonstrate current trends and the EU's role as an active participant in negotiations (2021–2025). The results show that the EU's climate diplomacy exhibits characteristics of all four types of leadership. Ideational leadership is evident in its consistent promotion of scientifically grounded climate targets in international negotiations; directional leadership in the EU's pioneering implementation of UNFCCC

mechanisms for energy transition in its internal policy; structural leadership in its aspiration to create a transparent and effective climate infrastructure; and instrumental leadership in combining financial, regulatory, and diplomatic levers to accelerate the global climate transition.

Keywords: Climate Leadership, Climate Diplomacy, EU Leadership, COP UN-FCCC, Energy Transition

1. Introduction

Climate change has become a unique global challenge that, from its very beginning, demanded an unprecedented level of international cooperation. A significant shift was its understanding and acceptance, alongside the declaration of an urgent need for its resolution in the UNFCCC in 1992. Studies of international climate cooperation since the signing of the Kyoto Protocol (1997) demonstrate the EU's leadership in advocating, educating, and popularizing the idea of combating climate change in general, as well as in fostering dialogue and cooperation with other global players. The EU's strategic positioning in the role of a "climate leader" is based on its readiness to propose solutions, implement economic incentive models domestically, demonstrate its pioneering example of energy transition, and encourage other nations toward an energy transition.

However, the current global political context, characterized by the return of geopolitics, intensified great power rivalry, and growing security threats in Europe, is not favorable for EU leadership in the climate sphere. The sensitivity of each country to changes in the globalized economic system is simultaneously the main reason for the reluctant efforts of many states worldwide to accept proportional responsibility. A wide range of issues related to overcoming the consequences of climate change and implementing the energy transition have become politicized. The conflict of interests among national governments, societies, and businesses is becoming increasingly acute. All of this leads to polarization of the international system, and, as a result, achieving the goals of the Paris Agreement seems unlikely (IPCC, 2022).

A significant portion of research on EU climate leadership relies on a somewhat simplified understanding of "international leadership", taking the outcomes of multilateral negotiations during the annual COPs as the defining characteristic. However, the directness and apparent obviousness of this argument fail to take into account the main feature of climate diplomacy: its long-term nature. This means that alongside immediate political decisions (such as the annual COP agreements), the less overt but equally critical process of gradual structural transformations is of crucial importance. Its substance lies in shaping the internal structure of climate regimes (in their connection to global trade, finance, industry, and technology), de-

veloping national/regional long-term strategies, and its reflection is seen in the declarations of participating countries.

To bridge this gap, the article aims to identify the direction of transformation and specific features of EU climate leadership, as well as to define the role of the EU in the UNFCCC process through the prism of targeted (directional), structural, instrumental, and ideational influence. This goal formulation dictates the analytical framework of the study: a combination of classical typologies of leadership (Young, 1991; Malnes, 1995) and the model of internal and external ambitions (Lieberink and Wurzel, 2017), which allows for a comprehensive assessment of the link between the EU's internal initiatives and its diplomatic positions in international negotiations.

In accordance with the set goal, the structure of the article is shaped by two main questions: firstly, the influence of the EU's internal initiatives on the formation of its global leadership is analyzed, and secondly, the Union's positions at the UN climate conferences and the prospects for its leadership in climate diplomacy are evaluated.

2. Literature Review

The question of EU leadership in climate diplomacy is under close scrutiny by scholars. An overview of the available literature allows for the classification of studies on EU leadership into the following areas.

Diplomatic Actions in Global Climate Regimes

Bremberg and Michalski (2024) illustrate the development of key diplomatic practices ("narrative shaping", "coordination", "outreach", and "integration") in EU programmatic documents concerning the renewal of strategic approaches to foreign policy and diplomacy under the influence of climate negotiations.

Jacob and Teebken (2022) highlight the steps the EU takes to strengthen its agency at COPs. The authors proposed a model of agency that, in its internal dimension, includes criteria such as autonomy, authority, cohesion, and reliability, and externally – attractiveness, recognition, reliability, and opportunities/needs for external action. They show that such an operationalization of "power" allows for identifying the prerequisites and causes of diplomatic successes or failures, emphasizing that agency includes, but is not limited to, legal institutionalization; it requires political will, internal unity, and autonomy.

Internal Policies for Achieving Climate Goals

Wang (2022) investigates the focus of the European Green Deal (EGD) on balancing the EU's economy and values, and the potential impact of this policy on achieving internal unity and supporting global EU leadership in climate diplomacy.

Mitchell and Cichocka (2024) and Dev and Goswami (2024) examine the impact of The Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM) on EU leadership and recommend adopting this policy to avoid accusations of protectionism.

New Geopolitical Context and the EU's Ability to Respond to Leadership Challenges

Michalski and Parker (2024) believe that contemporary geopolitical challenges to the EU stem from other powers rejecting its vision of a rules-based multilateral order that promotes democracy, human rights, free trade, climate action, and sustainable development. Based on an analysis of the 2021 Indo-Pacific Strategy, they identify three main roles – normative power, market power, and security power – that the EU uses to promote its values and protect its interests.

Hurri (2023) analyzes discursive practices in climate debates between the EU and BASIC countries, as well as their impact on opportunities and obstacles for joint efforts by UNFCCC parties in the energy transition. The analysis demonstrates that to overcome the climate change crisis, these discourses are expected to cross national borders and bridge the divide between the “Global North” and the “Global South” to increase trust among parties within the UNFCCC.

The EU's Participation in COP

This is one of the most widely covered topics. Studies by Bäckstrand and Elgström (2013), Parker *et al.* (2017), Oberthür and Dupont (2021), Kolmaš (2024) and Beardsworth (2024) characterize the dynamics of EU leadership at UN climate conferences.

Existing studies uncover various aspects of EU climate policy, offering a broad interpretation of its climate actions and diplomacy within the evolving international environment. However, a significant research gap persists: the concept of “leadership” remains disproportionately tied to the immediate outcomes of multilateral negotiations. Consequently, any failure to adopt concrete policy decisions – particularly when contrasted with the EU’s ambitious emission-reduction targets – is often misinterpreted as a loss of leadership status.

Crucially, such a traditional understanding of leadership in climate diplomacy does not account for its specific nature as a negotiation environment. This environment is characterized by multilateralism, the sovereign equality of UNFCCC parties, and the Convention’s extended temporal horizon (exceeding 50 years). To address this gap, this study proposes a refinement of the criteria for international leadership. It argues that beyond “instantaneous political breakthroughs”, long-term efforts to shape the internal architecture of climate regimes are equally vital. These structural efforts govern the coordination of parties and the mobilization of resour-

ces – aspects of climate diplomacy that have, until now, remained under-researched in the context of EU’s climate leadership.

3. Methodological Framework

The theoretical basis for studying EU leadership is rooted in classical typologies of leadership, outlined in the works of Young (1991) and Malnes (1995). Here, the factors of leadership are: 1) demonstration by example through unilateral actions (directional); 2) influence on the formation of the international system (structural); 3) utilization of diplomatic, economic, and other levers of influence (instrumental); and 4) agenda setting, shaping the vision and conceptual frameworks that define a problem and potential approaches to its solution (ideational).

This foundation is complemented by the leadership model proposed by Lieferink and Wurzel (2017), which further elaborates on the possible characteristics of leadership by dividing actors based on their internal ambitions (their readiness and ability to be pioneers in implementing climate actions) and external ambitions (their own desire to influence others).

According to this model, the authors distinguish several combinations of external and internal ambitions:

- “Pushers” are actors who are capable of effectively influencing the actions of others and combine this with leading experience in implementing climate measures.
- “Symbolic Leaders” have high external ambitions that aren’t supported by high internal ambitions. In this case, a subject’s leadership is manifested in their ability to articulate a common goal and maintain the relevance of shared values.
- “Pioneers” have strong internal ambitions, but don’t demonstrate a desire to influence the actions of other actors.
- “Substantive leaders” are actors who have the combination of high internal and high external ambitions, and require of others to adopt the same or at least similar ambitions.

Thus, the traditional approach gains greater flexibility in operationalizing climate leadership, allowing for both a general characterization in terms of internal and external ambitions, and a detailed characterization that reveals internal and external policy measures.

The empirical study employed qualitative document analysis, which facilitated the interpretation of data in alignment with the research questions and the identification of key substantive characteristics of the EU’s evolving climate leadership. The application of this method involved the following stages:

- Sourcing and data processing: the data sources include official documents and press releases from the Council of the EU, the European Council, official documents of the UNFCCC Secretariat, research reports from non-governmental organizations, scholarly publications, and news agency reports.
- Thematic coding and analysis: identifying key thematic clusters that reflect the modalities of the EU's political leadership, shifts in the international environment, and the specific challenges encountered in EU climate diplomacy.
- Comparative synthesis: mapping the empirical findings against the leadership typologies established in the study to delineate the transformation of the EU's climate leadership.

4. Impact of European Climate Initiatives on EU Leadership

The EU's voluntary assumption of the role of "climate leader" stems from its readiness to propose solutions, implement domestic economic incentive models, and demonstrate ideational leadership (proposing solutions) and directional leadership (through its own effective example of energy transition).

One of the first examples of European initiatives is the Emissions Trading System (ETS), introduced by Directive 2003/87/EC on October 13, 2003. Its operation involves obliging domestic producers to pay for carbon emissions in electricity and heat, industrial production, and maritime transport sectors. The system provides for a cap on emission allowances at the level of member states through national allocation plans, as well as a decentralized "bottom-up" mechanism for distributing emissions among polluters (European Parliament..., 2003).

The accumulated ETS revenues from the sale of allowances go to the Modernisation Fund, which provides investment support to lower-income EU member states in renewable energy, energy efficiency, energy conservation, and networks, and in their efforts to facilitate the energy transition. The Innovation Fund, aimed at supporting innovative low-/zero-carbon technologies in the ETS sectors, is also financed from ETS revenues.

The ETS experience has been leveraged in the implementation of similar projects in other countries, including the USA and Canada (Bang *et al.*, 2017; Borghesi *et al.*, 2016): the East Coast's Regional Greenhouse Gas Initiative (2009), California's Cap-and-Trade System (2012), and Québec's Cap-and-Trade System (2012); in Switzerland – Swiss ETS, which is integrated with the European ETS (Rutherford, 2014); in the United Kingdom – UK ETS (2021); and in China – the Chinese national carbon trading scheme (2021).

Thus, the established practices of implementing the regional ETSs demonstrate the EU's commitment to directional leadership. The adaptation and replication of

similar projects by other countries worldwide indicate a raising of the EU's external ambitions regarding encouraging other UNFCCC parties to enhance their national contributions to the formation of an international 'low-carbon' economy.

A major step was Directive 2004/101/EC of October 27, 2004, which integrated the Kyoto Protocol's greenhouse gas emission reduction mechanisms – the Clean Development Mechanism (CDM) and Joint Implementation – into the ETS (European Parliament..., 2004). This created an influential instrument for expanding EU climate diplomacy and provided the empirical evidence for considering EU as an instrumental leader whose activities shape the future of the international trade system.

One direction for the EU to realize these opportunities was to deepen cooperation with China in the first half of the 2010s. The EU–China partnership on climate change included a project to facilitate access to the CDM, as well as other initiatives such as: developing a pilot carbon capture and storage project by 2020, establishing the Europe–China Clean Energy Centre (EC2), and implementing a €5 million aid project for the development of China's national waste trading system (Belis *et al.*, 2015). Thanks to the EU's prior involvement, it significantly contributed to the implementation of 7 pilot emission trading systems (in 4 cities: Beijing, Chongqing, Shanghai, and Tianjin; 2 provinces: Guangdong and Hubei; and the Shenzhen Special Economic Zone), and the adoption of the Interim Regulations on Emissions Trading.

The EGD, launched in 2019, is the next EU initiative that has impacted climate diplomacy. It's a package of policies aimed at revising European legislation to align it with climate goals, as well as implementing new legislation on the circular economy, biodiversity protection, investments in environmental and energy projects, and the development of agriculture, trade, and transport. The ambitious strategic goal of these policies is to transform Europe into a carbon-neutral continent by 2050 (European Commission [EC], 2019).

In addition to its internal objectives, the EGD emphasizes the EU's orientation towards supporting the Paris Agreement as the international framework for climate change governance. It also refers to the expected increase in climate-related funding within its external aid policy. From 2019 to 2024, EU countries directed €126.7 billion to support developing countries in combating climate change and adapting to its consequences. The total aid since 2013 has amounted to €230.7 billion (EU Council and Council of the EU, n.d.).

Currently, the EGD serves as an institutional prerequisite for strengthening the EU as an ideational and directional leader in climate diplomacy. It demonstrates the member states' commitment to fulfilling their climate obligations, thereby reinforcing the EU's authority to shape the global climate agenda and act as a pioneer. This internal consolidation simultaneously provides the institutional foundation for the

EU's structural impact on the international system. This policy facilitates the externalization of EU regulatory norms by setting sustainable development standards, underscoring its role as a primary proponent in the climate sphere. The EGD solidifies the EU's ambitions to enhance its agency in climate negotiations and its efforts to pursue an independent internal and external climate policy (Wang, 2022).

An analysis of internal climate initiatives would be incomplete without considering the state's unique role as an entity that harmonizes internal financial, fiscal, industrial, energy, and social policies for society's concerted movement towards adapted living conditions in the face of climate change. According to Beardsworth (2021), the state remains the only entity capable of integrating domestic policy with international cooperation. The EU's attempt to implement such a strategy represents a pioneering approach in global practice. The value of this experience is heightened by the fact that the implementation environment is effectively a supranational political-economic entity comprising 27 states. This model can be applied not only by nation-states but also by other regional international formations.

A new EU initiative involves changing customs policy to account for climate goals. Under the CBAM, importers of goods whose production involves additional carbon pollution not offset by a local emissions trading system (or offset at a lower level) are obliged to pay an emission tariff (European Parliament..., 2023). The purpose of implementing this policy is to prevent "carbon leakage", i.e., the relocation of carbon-intensive production to countries with less stringent climate policies than the EU. It is important to note that the CBAM is not a direct tariff on goods whose production leads to carbon pollution. Instead, the policy encourages other countries to increase their domestic carbon emission tariffs. Such revenues will provide funding for the development of national climate programs.

Another functional result of the CBAM is the tracking of the "carbon footprint". This monitoring enables the assessment of the stage at which pollution occurs during a product's life cycle or use. This facilitates determining state responsibility for emission volumes, providing a basis for calibrating national commitments, and implementing targeted incentives or regulatory measures.

Results of the analysis of the EU's internal initiatives allow us to conclude that the Union's climate leadership has transformed from declaratory to multi-faceted influence. The EU's ideational leadership in climate diplomacy is based on demonstrating, through the EGD, its own example and high internal ambitions, which, in turn, provide empirical grounds for a leading role in shaping the global climate policy agenda.

The implementation of this strategy through the ETS is a manifestation of directional leadership and the desire to be the first to apply new market mechanisms for building a decarbonized world economy.

Internal achievements become levers for the EU's external influence in climate policy. With the introduction of the CBAM, the EU's role as a structural and instrumental leadership has received a tangible impetus for strengthening. It uses its position as one of the world's largest markets to change the norms governing the international circulation of goods that have a significant carbon footprint, as well as to incentivize other countries to introduce their own carbon tariffs.

Thus, the EU's internal initiatives form the foundation of its influence as a structural leader and strengthen the 'soft power' strategy in climate diplomacy.

5. The EU's Participation in COPs

The analysis of the EU's participation in key COPs allows tracing the evolution of its leadership from ideational to a combination of directional and instrumental approaches. This paradigm shift in leadership is largely caused by changes in the geopolitical landscape, as well as being a response to the unsuccessful attempts of the COP parties to achieve unity regarding the objectives of the UNFCCC.

The Kyoto Protocol (1997) at COP3 was the first international treaty to include national commitments to greenhouse gas emission reductions for developed countries. The EU's negotiating position proposed a 15% reduction in greenhouse gas emissions by 2010 (compared to 1990) across sectors like transport, industry, and energy. By demonstrating its ideational leadership, the EU called on the US and Japan to present their own emission reduction proposals, urging them to ensure the success of this climate conference (EC, 1997). However, the parties ultimately agreed to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 5.2% (relative to 1990 levels) during the 2008–2012 period. Given the EU's active role, this outcome was seen as a diplomatic success, but the effectiveness of the negotiating process was significantly diminished by the lack of internal unity among the EU countries themselves (Jacob and Teebken, 2022).

The outcomes of the Kyoto Conference showed that the EU is a global player participating in its established role of a "normative power". This "normativity" forms the foundation of the idea of "collective responsibility", which primarily rests upon the countries that have made the largest contribution to greenhouse gas emissions. The success of this and many subsequent attempts to formulate legal mechanisms of accountability for participating countries would have contributed to the undeniable assertion of the EU's ideational leadership.

However, the global community chose a different path, where the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions is to occur in accordance with the transformations of the global economy: partly under pressure from structural changes in the world market, and partly within the long-term horizon of strategic planning for the development of national economic and energy systems. Nevertheless, despite the insurmountable

obstacles to implementing the EU's most ambitious plans, the contribution made to the Kyoto Protocol demonstrated that the ideational leadership of the EU has a noticeable influence on climate diplomacy.

COP3 also highlighted the divergences between the EU's ambitious stance and the views of some developed countries (the US, Japan, and Russia), which opposed national commitments and mandatory overall greenhouse gas emission reductions.

Before COP15, the EU continued to mistakenly assume that its own example was a sufficient factor of influence to prompt other countries to relevantly enhance their climate ambitions. The EU announced its own commitments to reduce emissions by 20% by 2020, with the prospect of an additional 10% reduction if other industrialized countries set similar targets (EC, 2009b). The 20% emission reduction was set as an internal policy goal by a new climate and energy legislative package. This clearly outlined the EU's intention to ensure the implementation of the Climate Change Convention from its side. Additionally, the policy aimed for the following goals:

- increasing the share of renewable energy to 20% and improving energy efficiency within the same timeframe;
- expanding the sectoral coverage of the EU ETS (EC, 2024a);
- setting national emission reduction targets for sectors not covered by the EU ETS (EC, 2009a).

The EU aimed to develop the Kyoto Protocol, increasing the level of emission limits and the scope of national commitments for parties. However, the outcomes of the COP15 were far from any of these ambitious goals. The parties limited themselves to adopting a declarative decision which, among other provisions, reaffirmed: the parties' commitment to the objectives of the UNFCCC; the recognition of climate targets as justified based on the report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC); and the legitimacy of using markets to increase economic efficiency and promote climate change mitigation measures (UNFCCC, 2009).

The reasons for the EU's diplomatic failures at COP15 lay in its over-reliance on an approach to international negotiations familiar to the EU: the demonstration of ideational leadership, which, combined with active participation in negotiations, was expected to encourage other participants to follow their example (Oberthür and Pallemmaerts, 2010; Bäckstrand and Elgström, 2013). From an institutional (normative) perspective, diplomats and officials were confident that the EU's internal environmental and energy policies aligned with the spirit and goals of the UNFCCC, and that strict adherence to these goals in agenda-setting could not fail to find support among the parties. A realistic view, however, would have required a deeper consideration of the changing geopolitical context (over 15 years since its adop-

tion), as well as an assessment of other states' positions with regard to maintaining the UNFCCC's prescribed pace of energy and industrial transformation.

Thus, to achieve further progress towards the UNFCCC goals, the EU needed to refine its approach to leadership. The key element in this shift was focusing efforts on the development of a global climate finance system and the application of diplomatic, economic, and technological levers to accelerate the energy transition in other countries. This evolution precisely determined the EU's negotiating positions at subsequent Conferences of the Parties.

The COP17 climate conference in Durban (2011) was a critical moment for the continued progress of the UNFCCC. The relatively low level of international climate ambition following COP15 led to limited expectations regarding the future of negotiations.

Due to the rising political and economic influence of large developing countries and the significant growth in their carbon emissions, a need emerged to integrate them into the global mitigation framework alongside developed nations. The EU demonstrated examples of ideational and structural leadership by requiring that a new legally binding international agreement establish binding commitments for all UNFCCC parties (Council of the EU, 2011). The acceptance of this demand by other parties in the Durban Platform for Enhanced Action helped ensure the continuity of the Kyoto Protocol (UNFCCC, n.d.). To ensure universal participation in the future agreement, the principle of Common but Differentiated Responsibilities was developed. Given the historical role of developed nations in fueling the "greenhouse effect", their leading role in financing the energy transition in developing countries and supporting adaptation measures was reaffirmed as a fundamental principle.

The EU also proved itself to be an instrumental leader, capable of utilizing its diplomatic leverage and financial resources to expand the participation of developed countries in financing climate actions in developing countries. Support for this position from developed countries (the UK, Japan, the US, Canada) led to the establishment of the Green Climate Fund (GCF). The GCF was expected to become one of the main channels for distributing aid that developed countries committed to mobilizing in order to finance climate change mitigation efforts for small island developing states, African countries, and the least developed countries (EC, 2012).

According to "The Open Data Library" platform, which presents GCF project/program data, as of 2025, a total of \$63 billion in projects have been implemented. Of this, over \$11 billion came from EU member states (out of a total of \$22.5 billion received) (GCF, n.d.). Data from the OECD's "Climate Finance Provided and Mobilised by Developed Countries in 2013-2022" report indicates that the total volume of global climate finance during this period reached \$693 billion. However,

the annual target of \$100 billion was only met (and exceeded) in 2022 (OECD, 2024). A comparison of this data shows that the GCF has not become the primary channel for distributing climate aid.

The adoption of the Paris Agreement at COP21 in 2015 marked the culmination of the EU's long-standing efforts to involve all UNFCCC parties in global mitigation commitments. The necessity of accounting for national differences, which affect the governments' capacity to pursue climate action, fundamentally altered the mechanism for setting targets: from rigid commitments to NDCs. This new approach stipulates that states independently establish targets for a defined period and submit them to the UNFCCC (UNFCCC, 2015, art. 4). Consequently, the aggregation of these national contributions indicates the overall progress in combating global warming and the feasibility of achieving the Paris Agreement's goals.

Crucially, the viability of this model largely depends on the existence of a national "success story" – or a proven domestic model. Such a precedent would demonstrate the practical feasibility of an energy transition and provide a blueprint for other countries to achieve similar results. Furthermore, such internal policies inevitably stimulate shifts in foreign policy, driven by the transformation of globalized financial and economic relations.

In this context, a shift in the nature of climate leadership is occurring: from ideational leadership, which defined the adoption of the UNFCCC, to directional leadership, which is anchored in proactive diplomatic engagement in bilateral and multilateral relations, as well as efforts to shape the global climate finance system. However, effective leadership by example in climate diplomacy is contingent upon the support of a broad international coalition.

A comparison of the EU's negotiating positions at annual climate conferences, starting with COP26 in Glasgow (2021), reveals a reliance on this updated approach. Specifically, the combination of ideational and directional leadership is expressed in calls for increased climate ambition, as well as in the demonstration of climate actions within the framework of energy transition policies. The EU consistently champions the provisions of the Paris Agreement regarding the assessment of the states' progress in reducing greenhouse gas emissions. In this regard, a constant feature of the EU's negotiating positions at COPs is the call for a GST and the reflection of national results in all relevant work processes within the Paris Agreement.

The necessity of considering the impact of internal transformations within the EU on related international trade, economic, financial, industrial, and security relations is regularly emphasized. This includes a call for incorporating an international dimension of adaptation into the EU's strategy, including through strengthening global interaction aimed at achieving synergy between climate, biodiversity, and other environmental goals.

The combination of structural and instrumental leadership is observed in the vector of aid for economic development and well-being in developing countries. The EU creates and promotes projects to expand investments and secure financing for the energy transition in least developed countries, halt deforestation, strengthen water and food security, foster sustainable development, eradicate poverty, preserve biodiversity, and ensure the integrity of all ecosystems.

The EU promotes broader engagement in the UNFCCC process by international organizations whose experience and expertise can help develop and implement effective tools and indicators for monitoring process efficiency and ensuring transparent and timely reporting (particularly in increasing renewable electricity generation). Structural and instrumental types of leadership are also evident in actions to ensure transparency and accountability in the formation and use of international climate funds through the Enhanced Transparency Framework (ETF) (European Council, 2021, arts. 19, 22).

At COP27, mainly through the EU's support for the G7 countries' initiative, the Loss and Damage Fund was established. Its purpose is to respond to the impacts of extreme weather events on the physical and social infrastructure of poor countries, and to provide funding for rescue and reconstruction efforts after climate disasters (European Council, 2022, arts. 1, 4–5, 13; Harvey *et al.*, 2022).

The COP27 platform was utilized by the EU to forge new partnerships and deepen international cooperation within the framework of its Global Gateway strategy and the REPowerEU plan. Cooperation agreements were signed with Kazakhstan, Namibia, and Egypt regarding the supply of renewable hydrogen and natural resources. Additionally, forest partnerships were launched with Guyana, Mongolia, Congo, Uganda, and Zambia, aimed at sustainable forest management and conservation, biodiversity, and promoting sustainable development. Moreover, the EU and the African Union announced a new “Team Europe” initiative for climate change adaptation and resilience in the Sub-Saharan region. This initiative will combine existing and new climate adaptation programs worth over €1 billion and enhance its impact through improved coordination and strengthened political dialogue on adaptation between the EU and the African Union (EC, 2025b).

Overall, the Global Gateway strategy aims to expand renewable energy and clean hydrogen production, protect biodiversity, foster “green” development of agri-food systems, and ensure climate resilience. Global Gateway projects are implemented in various regions worldwide, including Africa, Asia and the Pacific, Latin America, and the Caribbean. According to the European Commission, over 120 projects have been implemented under the “Climate and Energy” priority of the initiative by 2025 (EC, 2025a).

A joint initiative with the US, the Global Methane Pledge, was announced, aiming to reduce global methane emissions. Over 100 countries joined this commitment, pursuing the shared goal of cutting global methane emissions by at least 30% from 2020 levels by 2030, and transitioning to the use of the best available inventory methodologies for quantifying methane emissions (EC and the United States of America, 2021). This initiative demonstrates geopolitical leadership and, at the same time, once again highlights divergences in approaches to climate policy, as some major countries (China, India, Russia) have not joined it.

At COP27, with the active participation of the EU, Germany, and France, another important initiative was launched: the Just Transition Work Programme. This program aims to ensure the implementation of the Paris Agreement's provisions on a fair and equitable transition to a low-carbon and resilient economy. It shares similar components with the EU's internal Just Transition Mechanism, which has been active since 2021 and supports regions facing the greatest losses during the energy transition. The common features of these projects are: social protection (protecting workers and communities), knowledge and expertise sharing, and financial support. Thus, the EU's leadership in this program is defined by its own experience and acquired knowledge from internal projects, active participation in shaping the JTWP agenda, and commitments under already concluded cooperation agreements (with South Africa and Indonesia).

At COP28, the EU continued to implement its program of directional and structural leadership. Specifically, the alignment of legislation within the "Fit for 55" policy package allowed the EU to increase the ambition of its NDC by committing to a 55% reduction in greenhouse gas emissions by 2030 (relative to 1990 levels), and to reaffirm its intention to achieve carbon neutrality no later than 2050 (European Council, 2023, art. 17).

The EU continues its efforts to develop a global climate infrastructure. Specifically, it has announced commitments to facilitate the wider implementation of climate risk monitoring systems within the UNFCCC, including: the Climate Risk and Early Warning Systems (CREWS) initiative, the Systematic Observations Financing Facility (SOFF), and the V20/G7 Global Shield against Climate Risks initiative. The EU also emphasizes the need to ensure closer links between the UNFCCC and existing international projects, such as the UN Convention on Biological Diversity, the UN Forum on Forests, the International Drought Resilience Alliance, the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction, and others (European Council, 2023, arts. 26, 46–48).

Introducing these projects into the UNFCCC agenda plays a key role in strengthening their binding nature and effective implementation. This, in turn, reinforces related climate, security, and environmental projects. It refines the structure of international climate change policy, making it more coherent and consistent.

A year later, at COP29 in Baku, the EU's own progress on its NDC provided a platform to vocalize its demands for other countries to set their climate targets in such a way that global greenhouse gas emissions peak by 2025, a 43% reduction is achieved by 2030, and carbon neutrality is reached no later than 2050 (European Council, 2024, art. 23). This call should be viewed in the context of the progress made with the completion of the global carbon market agreement. This decision brings closer the creation of an effective global market for carbon credits. Their acquisition allows states facing difficulties in fulfilling climate commitments to offset their excess emissions. Thus, the global carbon market creates financial incentives for implementing environmental protection projects, renewable energy initiatives, and efforts to overcome the consequences of climate change. Simultaneously, it can become the market mechanism that balances the carbon burden at a global level.

The main results of the COP30 climate conference in Belém (November 10–21) demonstrated a significant reinforcement of climate diplomacy channels, which remain a strategic priority for the EU's foreign policy. One of the achievements was the establishment of the Open Coalition on Compliance Carbon Markets. The goal is to foster multilateral cooperation on carbon pricing mechanisms and the market functionalities, enabling both sovereign states and international business to reduce emissions effectively. It is expected that the development of common standards for monitoring, reporting and verification will eventually allow for the unification of national systems into a single global structure. The coalition comprises major emitters and diverse regional actors, including China, the EU (as a single entity), Germany, Canada, the United Kingdom, South American countries (Brazil, Mexico, Chile) and African countries (Zambia, Rwanda) (Souto and Otero, 2025).

The coalition was initiated by Brazil, with the active support and direct participation of the EU. This case serves as an example of the further evolution of structural leadership. With the establishment of an effective international climate adaptation framework, the EU creates incentives for regional states to adopt a more proactive stance. In turn, this creates the necessary prerequisites for developing other mechanisms to address climate change impacts. Primarily, this relates to the expansion of national ETSs, which will receive a new impetus for development due to the prospect of new environmental projects in the Amazon.

This suggests that climate diplomacy can expand the conceptual understanding of leadership in international relations by drawing a parallel with transformational leadership. This model entails a level of interaction between the leader and followers where they "... help each other to advance to higher levels of morale and motivation" (Burns, 2004). Such a shift in power dynamics has the potential to enhance long-term planning for climate change mitigation and ensure a coherent, sustainable global energy transition.

This success is complemented by progress in climate finance. Tropical forests represent a highly valuable asset for the carbon credit market due to their rapid recovery rate. This significantly shortens the timeframe for generating carbon credits from environmental projects. In alignment with the EU's commitment, announced at COP30, to reduce emissions by 90% by 2040, approximately 5% of this target is intended to be met through carbon removals and credits (EC, n.d.). This commitment serves as a tangible impetus for the evolution of such a global carbon credit system.

The environmental projects initiated or expanded at COP30 reflect the adoption of the European approach to combating global warming by other actors. It entails two key points: providing targeted financing for developing nations and transforming these environmental projects through national ETS systems into economic incentives that facilitate the transition to renewable energy. Specifically, the EU's focus on forest restoration gained momentum at COP27, where the foundation for forest partnerships was laid. At COP30, this trajectory was further advanced: project implementation is now underpinned by strict verification standards and digital monitoring. Such advancements provide the necessary regulatory transparency, required for the full integration of nature-based solutions into global emissions trading systems.

6. Conclusions

The results of this study were grounded in a theoretical analysis of the EU's negotiating positions through the lens of classical leadership typologies (Young, 1991; Malnes, 1995; Liefferink and Wurzel, 2017). It shows that leadership in climate diplomacy is a dynamic phenomenon. This dynamism is driven by sectoral transformations that lead to increasingly complex interconnections between various actors during the global energy transition to a carbon-free economy.

The dynamics of the EU's climate leadership have been most significantly influenced by the following factors:

1. Ideological leadership lies in consistently promoting scientifically based climate goals: reducing greenhouse gas emissions, protecting forests, strengthening water and food security, supporting sustainable development, and preserving biodiversity and the integrity of all ecosystems.
2. Directional leadership is demonstrated by the pioneering implementation of UNFCCC mechanisms in internal policy. This includes the ETS and the EGD, which aims to transform Europe into the first carbon-neutral continent.

Currently, the transformation of EU leadership is characterized by a shift towards a synthesis of structural and instrumental leadership. This new role – akin to a “substantive leader” – is underpinned by the EU’s significance as one of the world’s most powerful markets and its ability to provide expert support in financing the energy transition. The EU’s experience in domestic climate action is now actively utilized to shape international policies, effectively driving the transformation of the global economy.

In the long term, this results in an updated paradigm of climate leadership. It distinguishes between declarative leadership (“high-profile achievements”) and the leadership of “incremental gains” – specifically, the formation of an international carbon credit market and financing funds. Ultimately, the leader will be the party that plays a leading role in directing the global economy towards carbon-free development, accelerating the launch of these mechanisms, and supporting their functioning. However, the prospects for the EU’s continued leadership will be determined by the effectiveness of these international projects and the success of energy transition policies across the entire bloc.

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