



Environmental Protection: An Important Contemporary Challenge (Case of the European Parliament)

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ABSTRACT

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Environmental protection, in the modern era – with its numerous existing difficulties and anticipated threats – has become a major challenge for both individual states and the international community due to its fundamentally universal nature. The need for collective responsibility and the involvement of every country has become evident, making the study of this issue particularly relevant.

Because of its broad societal importance, the topic has a general public character: the realities we face and the challenges ahead can only be addressed through unified, global cooperation.

The widespread appeal of shared environmental ideals is confirmed by the activities of the European Greens, who have established themselves as a significant force in contemporary European politics.

The aim of the paper is to study the challenges surrounding environmental issues, and to analyse the main activities and objectives of the Greens/EFA (European Free Alliance) parliamentary group in the European Parliament, based on existing official documents and secondary sources.

The hypothesis of the work is formulated as follows: the environmental concerns of the European Greens and their corresponding actions remain highly relevant for civil society, especially in light of the current reality (political processes in Ukraine and the Gaza Strip, migration pressures, difficulties caused by the war, etc.), which has led to the activation of security and social issues.

This topic also has important practical implications, as many researchers emphasize the need to strengthen environmental protection internationally and frequently criticise the insufficient attention given to environmental issues on political agendas.

The work is presented with a qualitative analysis of primary and secondary sources.

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Introduction

The European Parliament is one of the most important legislative institutions today. Its MEPs represent the concerns of individuals and interest groups, and advocate for specific issues within the legislative body. Among the many topics raised in Parliament, environmental issues have become especially prominent in recent decades due to emerging threats and the growing importance of international cooperation, making them particularly relevant to our research.

The research question of the paper is: How is the Green movement represented in the European Parliament, and what is its programme of action? The task of the paper is to analyse the actions of the Greens represented in the European Parliament and their program interests, including in the newly elected European Parliament of 2024.

The hypothesis of the paper is formulated as follows: the environmental concerns of the European Greens and their corresponding actions, which remain highly relevant for civil society, and the activation of security and social issues related to ongoing world events.

The issue is gaining particular relevance. A number of researchers have noted the need to activate the Greens, and they do not shy away from criticism, claiming that the Greens are fighting for survival and that environmental issues are not sufficiently considered on the agenda (Pearson & Rüdig, 2020).

The reality is that society is only now beginning to grasp the scale of the environmental changes that occurred over the last century, during which irreversible processes have taken on a catastrophic character. In

earlier centuries, it was difficult to imagine that technological progress could produce negative environmental consequences that would, in turn, hinder the normal growth and development of living organisms.

There is no dispute that the ecological situation continues to deteriorate, while the efforts of states to ease these pressures clearly lag behind economic and social developments. Unprecedented industrialisation and urbanisation, the rapid growth of the global population, and other forms of environmental impact have significantly altered energy processes within the biosphere. As a result, reflection, discussion, and the search for solutions – together with experts – have become urgent priorities for the entire civilised world (Kajaia, 2022).

It is also important to note that environmental protection is one of the most crucial prerequisites for preserving Georgia's natural heritage, which holds both national and global significance. It is essential for safeguarding human health and life, as well as supporting the country's economic and social development. Accordingly, the issue is highly relevant to the country's current reality, and it is widely recognised that greater efforts are needed – particularly through intensive cooperation with various international donor organisations – to address the existing environmental challenges (Erkomaishvili, 2021).

For the purpose of the research, we used an analytical method in our studies – collecting and studying existing scientific literature, articles, information sources, and statistical studies, normative and other written material on the topic. We also used a comparative

and historical method when conducting our research, which was used to study the path of environmental protection development over the years and, against this background, to outline prospects for its development in the future.

1. A retrospective Review

Since the 1960s, interest in environmental issues has intensified globally. In 1968, ecologist and philosopher Gareth Hardin, in his essay "The Tragedy of the Commons", noted the danger of individual actions in terms of the depletion of common resources. He believed that the desire for unlimited human consumption would lead to the destruction of the Earth's resources (German Society for International Cooperation, 2019). Given the urgency of the issue, in 1972, with the support of the Club of Rome, the report "The Limits to Growth" (Meadows, 1972) was published.

An important date in the history of sustainable development was 1972, when the first UN Conference on Environment and Sustainable Development was held in Stockholm. One of the goals of the conference was to develop the basic principles that would encourage the world's population to protect their environment. One of the main achievements of the Stockholm Conference was the creation of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) (Gergedava, 2021).

Public interest in environmental issues – reflected in these and other events – demonstrated that the topic had universal significance and required the activation of related policies at both national and international levels. On this basis, the history of Green par-

ties in Europe can be linked to the history of elections to the European Parliament. The first direct elections to the European Parliament were held in June 1979, at a time when the development of green parties in Europe was still in its early stages.

2. Greens in the European Parliament

Green parties have been continuously represented in the European Parliament since 1984. Politically, they fought against environmental pollution, an issue that was particularly relevant at the time, coinciding as it did with the Chernobyl disaster of 1986. The Greens also demanded the promotion of animal protection, and the protection of basic democratic values (Greens/EFA in the European Parliament, 1984).

In 1989, the results achieved in the European Parliament elections allowed the Greens to create the first Green Group of 30 members. In order to promote gender equality, the Greens introduced an innovative system of group presidency with two co-presidents, one of whom had to be a woman (Greens/EFA, 1989).

It is noteworthy that during this period, climate change moved to the forefront of Green policy priorities, when the Greens participated in the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, which produced the "Rio Declaration on Environment and Development". The motivation behind this 27-point document was the recognition of human beings as central to sustainable development, affirming that everyone has the right to a healthy and productive life in harmony with nature.

In line with the principles of international law, the Declaration acknowledges that states have the sovereign right to exploit their own resources according to their environmental and developmental policies, while also bearing the responsibility to ensure that their activities do not cause environmental harm to other states. It further emphasises that environmental protection is an integral component of the development process and cannot be treated as separate from it (Rio Declaration on Environment and Development, 1992).

In 1993, the European Federation of Green Parties was established to improve cooperation among Green parties in Europe. In the following years, membership of the Federation was an important step for Green parties who wanted to be recognised as full members of the Green Party family.

The 1994 European elections brought mixed results for the Greens. Notably, during this period, the Greens organised a major anti-nuclear rally in June 1995 to protest against nuclear testing. Through this and other public actions, they succeeded in drawing media attention to their campaign against biopiracy.

In 1999, the Greens achieved their best representation in the European Parliament, with 38 Green MEPs. Together with 10 MEPs from the European Free Alliance, they formed the Greens/EFA Group, which became the fourth largest group in the European Parliament.

Around this time, green parties were also active in five EU countries: Italy, Finland, France, Germany and Belgium. This had important political consequences, with the five green environment ministers having a decisive influence on the then ongoing negotiations on

the Kyoto Protocol. Climate change remained at the heart of green politics. The Kyoto Protocol, adopted on 11 December 1997 (although, due to the complex ratification process, it did not enter into force until 2005), facilitates the implementation of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, setting specific (different for each country) binding limits on greenhouse gas emissions into the atmosphere for both developed, industrialized countries and countries with economies in transition. Health issues were also on the agenda. Their long-standing priority was to increase human health protection through better environmental protection.

The green movement had become increasingly prominent in debates on European integration, making it a logical next step to advance their pan-European initiative by creating a unified European political family for the 2004 European elections. Until that time, European elections had lacked a truly pan-European dimension.

The European Green Party was founded on 21 February 2004 in Rome, when 34 pan-European member parties gathered for the 4th Congress of the Federation of European Green Parties. The European Greens were the first to transform from a federation into a fully-fledged European political party, confirming their commitment to building a united Europe. The first objective of the newly founded European Green Party was to focus on the 2004 European Parliament elections, which were the first time a joint election campaign had been held across Europe (European Greens, 2004).

In the June 2004 European Parliament elections, the Greens won 34 seats, but were

disappointed by their failure to secure any representation in the 10 new member states. In this election cycle, the Greens led a number of high-profile battles over EU legislation, which brought the group into conflict with the intense lobbying of various industry sectors. Together with a coalition of small NGOs, the Greens were to achieve results, however.

The Greens have also played a major role in the fight for stricter controls on chemicals in the European Union. In the face of intense lobbying by the chemical industry, the Greens launched a campaign in 2005 to reduce the proposed law. The compromise eventually adopted by Parliament, although falling short of the level of protection demanded by the Greens, represented a major step forward in protecting consumers and the environment from toxic substances.

The Greens launched a pan-European climate change campaign in February 2006. The campaign called for stricter measures to combat climate change. The fight against the nuclear industry's efforts to relaunch nuclear power was also an important issue for the Greens in this election period.

Following mid-term changes in parliamentary groups in 2005, the Greens experienced a setback. However, due to various domestic political circumstances, they maintained a clear lead, with their agenda gaining increasing appeal.

At their congress in Brussels (27-28 March, 2009), the European Green parties launched a joint European election campaign, presenting the election manifesto "A Green New Deal for Europe", and adopted the resolution "Stop Barroso". Through their campaign, "Europe Deserves Better", they launched an in-

stitutional and political battle to remove José Manuel Barroso from the post of President of the European Commission. In this regard, they stated that anyone who wanted to change European politics for the better should support them. They presented 25 reasons against Barroso's candidacy, among which were: his passive approach to the financial and economic crisis, reckless deregulation of social policies, neglect of climate change and environmental degradation, and failure to promote democracy and human rights in the EU (European Greens, 2009a).

In the June 2009 elections, the Greens were particularly successful, winning 46 seats. While they again failed to secure any representation in the 12 new member states, they became the fourth largest group in the European Parliament. Following the elections, they focused on ensuring that the EU took a leading role in the UN climate negotiations, and in the international response to climate change.

The global financial crisis that began in 2008 had a profound impact on politics over the following decade, leading many European countries to adopt austerity policies. The crisis also fueled climate change skepticism and the weakening of environmental regulations, which emerged as the central challenge for green politics during this period.

Among the activities of the European Greens in relation to Georgia, the resolution adopted in 2009 – "Commitment to stop violence in Georgia" is interesting. The European Green Party Council condemned, in a resolution on Georgia formulated in eight points: the escalation of violence in Georgia which occurred in August 2008; the begin-

ning of the conflict, which was the result of a serious escalation of tensions and provocations, which had begun much earlier; the use of military force by all parties involved in the conflict; the large number of victims on both sides; and documented facts of ethnic cleansing and forced resettlement.

The European Greens also drew attention to the tragic ecocide in Georgia, where forest fires destroyed a total of 1,100 hectares, including 950 hectares in the Borjomi Gorge – part of the unique Borjomi-Kharagauli National Park, developed with European funding. These fires caused irreparable damage to the region's biodiversity, particularly its wildlife.

The European Greens welcomed the first agreement reached since the August War with the participation of all parties to the conflict on joint mechanisms for preventing and responding to incidents in the Georgian-Abkhazian and Georgian-South Ossetian border areas (18 February 2009, Geneva).

The European Greens called on the Russian authorities and the international community in general to respect the sovereignty, territorial integrity and inviolability of the internationally recognized borders of the Republic of Georgia and, as a result, to disregard any recognition of the independence of the separatist Georgian regions of Tskhinvali ("South Ossetia") and Abkhazia, which was contrary to international law. They called for all relevant parties in the Caucasus to engage in a long-term peace process, and the EU to acknowledge its leading role in achieving a ceasefire and efforts for a peaceful resolution of the Russia-Georgia conflict.

They further demanded: a) the entry of a significant number of international observers

into "South Ossetia" and Abkhazia; b) for the de facto authorities of "South Ossetia" and Abkhazia to ensure the safe return of internally displaced civilians, in accordance with international humanitarian law, and with respect for their property, calling on the parties involved to fully respect the rights of minorities; c) that the OSCE mission in Georgia continue its work; d) an EU-mandated Justice Mission, headed by Swiss diplomat Heidi Tagliavini, to investigate the facts of ecocide in Georgia, along with the military and political aspects of the war; e) that, within the framework of the Eastern Partnership, for cooperation with Georgia and other countries in the region to be strengthened, as indicated in the European Parliament resolution on the situation in Georgia.

In addition, the European Greens reminded both parties to the conflict, and their political leadership, of the values of open democracy (European Greens, 2009b).

Overall, during the period from 2009 to 2014, the European Greens party committed itself to finding solutions to the prevalent financial, ecological, and social crises.

In the June 2014 European Parliament elections, 50 MEPs were elected from the Greens/EFA group. In September 2014, the group launched a critical campaign, arguing that the allocation of key portfolios in the European Parliament – particularly those guiding policy – did not align with what Europeans needed to address the continent's deep social and environmental crises and to confront its broader challenges. As such, their 2014-2019 term of office was guided by the slogan: "We will make a difference."

Throughout the legislative period, the Greens/EFA Group campaigned on a range of key issues, among them climate, food, trade, tax justice, transparency and democracy (United Nations, 2015).

The turnout in the European Parliament elections in May 2019 was 51% across the EU. This was the highest turnout in any election in 20 years (although lower than in the previous European Parliament elections in 1979 and 1994).

With 72 members (35 women and 37 men), the Greens achieved a high level of representation, becoming the fourth largest group in the European Parliament. The green wave swept across Europe, and newly elected progressive MEPs joined the group under the slogan “We are changing Europe”. Their action priorities and areas of focus continued to include the following: protecting the climate and environment for future generations, safeguarding society and freedom of speech, and advocating for genuine democracy.

2021 was a special year for humanity, when the pandemic began to recede. During this period, the European Union focused its efforts on overcoming the challenges and consequences associated with the pandemic. Notably, in discussions of accomplishments, progress on various priorities, and future plans, measures aimed at making Europe a greener continent were consistently highlighted (European Commission, 2021). Moreover, survey evidence from 2021 indicates that EU citizens regarded climate change as one of the most important and pressing issues facing Europe and the world (European Union, 2021).

3. Greens in the 2024 European Parliament Elections

Voting in the 2024 European Parliament elections took place in the member states of the European Union from 7 to 9 June 2024. The population of the 27 member states of the bloc elected a total of 720 MEPs.

The Greens won 53 seats (7.36%) in the 2024 European Parliament elections, placing them sixth in the polls (European Parliament, 2024).

The 2024 European Parliament elections focused on several key issues. Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine brought security and defence to the forefront of the campaign's main themes. Added to these were the economy, jobs, poverty and social protection, public health, climate change, and the future of Europe in general (European Greens, 2024).

At their seventh enlarged congress in Lyon on February 4, 2024, the European Greens adopted an 11-point action plan, which in fact represented the pre-election program directions of the “Greens and the European Free Alliance (EFA)”: ‘European Greens – Priorities for the 2024 European Elections’ (European Green, 2024). It aimed to ensure the essential conditions for the well-being of all citizens in every aspect of life, in accordance with democratic principles.

In addition, the issue of security has always been important for the Greens: energy independence, and building a circular economy and vital technologies that will make Europe safer. “Working together for peace and security, we believe that Europe should make the world more peaceful,” – was their main appeal.

It is noteworthy that the issue of clean water was often discussed by and promoted as particularly relevant for the Greens, who believe that access to clean water should be guaranteed as a basic right.

The fact is that at the present stage, green politics is a global phenomenon. Although its main focus is on environmental protection in order to preserve the planet's ecology and natural resources for future generations, green politics in itself is more than just environmental protection (Green Alternative, 2013).

Conclusions and Recommendations

Today, the state, its institutions, and society as a whole play a crucial role in environmental protection. The active involvement of each citizen is essential for ensuring future well-being, a healthy environment, and a better quality of life. By understanding this and instilling the same awareness in the next generation, the international community and the environment are likely to face fewer challenges in the future.

The European Greens have gradually developed their structures to strengthen the political expression of their member parties. Among other things, this includes the ability to hold common political positions, bilateral election manifestos, and unanimity in European election campaigns. The European Greens also have networks that unite green politicians. All this is possible thanks to the funding that the European Parliament allocates to European political parties.

The 2024 European Parliament elections were held against a particularly turbulent backdrop, and were largely centered on a limited number of key issues. Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine brought security and defense to the forefront of the campaign's main themes. Added to this were the issue of the economy, the need to create jobs, poverty alleviation and social protection, public health, climate change, and a common concern for the future of Europe.

The paper confirms the research hypothesis. Green politics is a pressing issue of modern times. It aims to build a sustainable society grounded in environmental protection, while simultaneously relying on several core principles: ecology, social justice, protection of democratic principles, and international peaceful coexistence. These issues were the main subject of the Greens' judgments during the pre-election period of the European Parliament.

To address the challenges existing at the present stage, it is necessary – in line with the goals of sustainable development – to strengthen international engagement. This applies both to participation in large-scale initiatives implemented by the European Union to tackle environmental and green economy issues, and to the implementation of local projects. Since the problem is of a universal nature, by activating cooperation between neighboring countries, support may be more effective for developing each country's environmental and green economy capacities.

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