

"EU's climate policy has lost its scientific basis"

Interview with Oliver Geden, Senior Research Fellow, German Institute for International and Security Affairs

16 April 2014

By Jakob SCHLANDT •

Oliver Geden is a senior research fellow at the German Institute for International and Security Affairs (SWP) in Berlin. He talked to Europolitics about the new climate report published by the UN's Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) and the implications of its findings for Europe. The SWP is the largest foreign policy think tank in Europe and is financed by Angela Merkel's Federal Chancellery. Geden mainly works on the EU's energy and climate policy and recently published a study entitled 'Moving targets' on the negotiations on the EU's energy and climate targets for 2030.

The IPCC has just released the third part of its fifth assessment report, which focuses on mitigation. What are the most significant developments from a European perspective?

Many of its findings were to be expected, for example the plea that drastic measures have to be taken by the global community to avert a warming of more than two degrees Celsius. But crucially, one figure is missing in the new report, which was included in the previous one. There is no specific target for climate emissions reduction in industrialised countries for 2050. In the previous 2007 report, a reduction of between 80% and 95% was recommended in comparison to 1990 for the world to be in line with the two degrees Celsius target. Instead, it has been replaced by a worldwide, general reduction target. This has important ramifications for the whole political process on emissions abatement, and nowhere more so than in the European Union.

The IPCC is a group of scientists. Why is the report so important?

The reduction target of at least 80% has, over the last years, permeated almost every political debate on climate change in Europe. The proponents of strict measures will often substantiate their views by citing "scientific evidence," namely the 2007 IPCC report. This is no longer possible. What is more, the target is formally embedded in EU policy.

In what way?

Perhaps most importantly in a decision of the European Council in October 2009, which specifically embraced the IPCC's conclusions as a foundation for the EU's climate targets. Every major EU report, paper or target since then is either explicitly or implicitly based on the assumption that there is robust and solid scientific evidence proving the need for a 80%-plus reduction by 2050. This long-term goal, in turn, is guiding the medium-term measures. Most recently, the European Commission's 2030 policy framework for climate and energy, which

proposes a 40% reduction of emissions by 2030, explicitly referred to the 2050 goal. The spring European Council put the "agreed 2050 objective" at centre stage, too. A long list of arguments and deductions has no real argumentative basis any more.

How will this influence the EU's decisions?

Of course, theoretically, the IPCC report is not and has never been binding. No one would stop the member states' governments to confirm the 80% to 95% target without scientific justification. Independence from the IPCC's findings would not even be a novelty: the panel used to recommend for the period until 2020 a 25% to 40% emissions reduction, but this was ignored by the European policy makers. Practically, however, the report and the missing target will probably have massive implications. The opponents of ambitious climate targets, most likely Poland and the other countries in the Visegrád Group, will use the new IPCC report as an argument in their favour and argue for a weakening of the EU's climate policy. I would not be surprised if they now started to fundamentally and systematically question the direction the more ambitious countries would like to take.

Do you think this will influence the European Council's decision in October on the Union's climate targets for 2030?

It would be hugely embarrassing if no decision were made, because it has been firmly announced. But as I said, anybody who opposes strong climate action can now attack the underlying assumptions. Actually, there is a second novelty in the IPCC report that could give the Eastern European countries additional leverage.

Could you elaborate?

Back in 2007, the IPCC basically divided the countries into two global groups: industrialised and developing. Recommendations were set for each group, most importantly the notorious 80-95% emissions reduction path for the richer nations. Now the IPCC has recognised that the world has become multipolar and has introduced additional groups. Basically, Western Europe falls into the group of "OECD1990" states. The Eastern European countries are labelled as "economies in transition" (EIT). Since the IPCC has decided against giving clear recommendations, there are no definite emissions reduction corridors for these groups by 2050. But the panel suggests that the economies in transition could have to contribute less in terms of emissions reduction. This, again, could be actively used by said Eastern European states when the negotiations on burden-sharing for the 2030 framework start.

In short, the IPCC seems to have done climate protection a huge disservice with its new report.

If the IPCC is to blame, then probably for its 2007 report. The scientific community is more aware now that it is detrimental to them in the long term if they become too involved in the political process. At the end of the day, the EU institutions and the member states based their actions mostly on scientific findings – which are by nature falsifiable and prone to change – rather than using convincing political arguments. This has backfired on them.