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Author(s): Sabaheta Ramcilovic-Suominen

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13 EU green transition as a barrier for socioecological transformations

Deradicalizing transformations, degrowth, decoloniality, and justice in the EU's green politics

Sabaheta Ramcilovic-Suominen

Introduction: the role of supranational state in socioecological transformations and the EU's green transition as a case

As a supranational entity historically and currently embedded within the dominant capitalist and growth-oriented, (neo)colonial, neoliberal institutional and ideological realms (Haastrup 2023; Rutazibwa 2010; Ramcilovic-Suominen et al. 2022; Ramcilovic-Suominen 2025), the European Union (EU) and its institutions, including the European Commission (EC), are hardly motivated to engage in socioecological transformations, (i.e., radical change and a shift away from the dominant globalized capitalist market and growth-oriented modes of development toward postgrowth and decolonial futures). However, these shifts are increasingly recognized as a precondition for avoiding socioecological collapses (Gills and Morgan 2021; Lenzen et al. 2022; Slameršak et al. 2024; Sultana 2023). There is growing dissatisfaction with how the EU and its Western liberal economic and political allies have handled—or not handled—the looming socioecological catastrophes using the dominant neoliberal market and growth-oriented mechanisms—both at home and abroad (Almeida et al. 2023; De Rosa et al. 2022; ETUI 2022; Dunlap and Laratte 2022). Considering this dissatisfaction, the EU is thus compelled to engage with the language of change and transformations (see Bioeconomy Changemakers festival and the 2023 Beyond Growth conference)¹

A substantial body of literature, including the scholarship on degrowth, conviviality, and decoloniality, suggests that the state, through policies and legislation, can and should play a role in bringing about wide societal change and transformations (Krüger 2020; Koch 2019; D'Alisa and Kallis 2020). Others maintain that transformations or radical change cannot come from state policies and institutions, as the state is a manifestation of coloniality and violence, which requires the restructuring and/or abolishing (Danewid 2023; Dunlap 2023; Ramcilovic-Suominen 2025). A third group of scholars, while suspicious of state's intentions for change, recognize its centrality in maneuvering societal and policy dynamics, through Gramscian terms of “trasformismo” and “common sense” (Newell 2019; Ford and Newell 2021). This literature emphasizes the inseparability of the

state (i.e. state policy and state projects) and hegemony (Ford and Newell 2021), maintaining that “*A state project pursuing great transformation is only politically feasible if it is reconcilable with the hegemonic formation*” (Silvester and Fisker 2023: 5).

This chapter is positioned within these scholarly debates and sheds light on the role(s) of supranational state policy and projects in transformations as they unroll within the EU green policy and politics. The analysis empirically explores what kind of changes the establishment (including EC officials and bureaucrats) envisions. This includes their motivations and ambitions, how, or by what means they plan to enact the processes of change, and the consequences of involving state policies in transformation processes.

The chapter is organized as follows. The first section introduces the aims and contributions to the debate on transformations. The second provides a short overview of the transformations literature and outlines the conceptual and analytical framework applied, followed by a brief overview of the EU’s Green Deal (EGD) and the EU bioeconomy (EBE) policy contexts. The chapter proceeds by discussing the policy makers’ arguments and framings of transformations, degrowth, and (decolonial) environmental justice (DEJ) and shows how by engaging these concepts, they mainstream or deradicalize them in the process. The chapter subsequently presents the policy officers’ self-identified barriers for advancing change and transformations in policy processes and concludes by discussing the implications of EU transnational green policy and green transition as pathways for socioecological transformations.

Theoretical and methodological notes: transformations as uprooting the system of socioecological destruction and violence (i.e., capitalist-colonialist logics and structures)

Socioecological transformation is defined herein as radical, counterhegemonic process aimed at unlearning and undoing the dominant (neo)colonial-capitalist, extractivist and growth-oriented structures, and social relations, via counterhegemonic means and engagements, with an aim to bring about postcolonial, postcapitalist and radically just futures (see also, Hamilton and Ramcilovic-Suominen 2023; Ramcilovic-Suominen et al. 2023; Verhaeghe and Ramcilovic-Suominen 2024). This framing of socioecological transformations draws on literature that emphasizes the necessity of addressing the structural root causes of socioecological crises (i.e., extractivist, (neo) colonial-capitalist-structures and logics), thus distancing transformations from transitions and incremental changes that typically do not tackle such causes (Feola et al. 2021; Ramcilovic-Suominen 2023; Temper 2019). The shift away from the dominant colonial-capitalist hegemony requires systemic or structural, as well as onto-epistemic undoing and unlearning of capitalist growth structures and their underlying logics, mindsets, and values.² Other defining features of radical transformations include the importance of collective action, social movements, and grassroots initiatives (De Rosa et al. 2022; Kothari et al. 2019; Mehta et al. 2021; Sovacool 2022; Temper et al. 2018) as well as deep and ‘right’ relations (Vogel and O’Brien 2022).

My earlier theorizing on transformations highlights the uncertain, emerging, heterogenic, and multifaceted character of transformative processes (Ramcilovic-Suominen 2023). The open and evolving character of transformations has caused continued cooptation and watering down in favor of continuing business-as-usual (Eversberg et al. 2023; Ajl 2022). By cooptation or deradicalization, I refer to the use of certain terms and processes in a way that bypasses, depoliticizes, does not question, and/or takes for granted the root causes of socioecological destruction and injustices. In essence, this is the colonialist-capitalist nexus (Ramcilovic-Suominen 2025).

Degrowth, decoloniality, and decolonial environmental justice (DEJ) are important preconditions and means for radical socioecological transformations, including in the context of EU green and (bio)economy projects (Ramcilovic-Suominen 2023; Ramcilovic-Suominen et al. 2023). Thus, they are helpful analytical elements to examine transformations (Feola et al. 2021; Giuntoli et al. 2023; Verhaeghe and Ramcilovic-Suominen 2024). *Degrowth* calls for reimagining the idea and imaginary of a “good life” and for collectively defined societal and socioecological boundaries, while fostering societal freedom and liberation from any type of violence and domination (Durand et al. 2024). For example, degrowth can be defined as a democratically planned reduction of energy and material use, designed to bring the economy into balance with the living world to tackle inequality and improve well-being (Hickel 2021). Degrowth is central to our inquiry since it questions the hegemony of growth—including green growth (Hickel and Kallis 2020)—and the capitalist and growth-driven overconsumption of energy and materials that are prominent in the EU member states (Verhaeghe and Ramcilovic-Suominen 2024). It also increasingly acknowledges the well-known inherent linkage between capitalist accumulation and growth, and (neo)colonial enclosures, extractivism and violence against colonized lands and human labor and bodies (Hickel et al. 2021a; Hickel and Sullivan 2023), and to a lesser extent the labor and bodies of more-than-humans. Finally, degrowth’s exploration of policy options and ways to transform the overgrown economies to “de” and “post”-growth -capitalist, and -colonial futures is central to studying radical socioecological transformations via (state) policy.

The centrality of the DEJ to radical socioecological transformations lies in the inseparability of colonialism/coloniality and capitalist accumulation in capitalist global economy (Danewid 2023; Ramcilovic-Suominen 2025). Put simply, since capitalism is colonialism and vice versa (Ramcilovic-Suominen 2025), the end of that “nexus of oppression” can only come through strategies and actions that are explicitly “de”/“anti” capitalist-colonial. Colonialism is established in and manifested through mindsets, logics, philosophies, knowledges, and structures of violence. Thus, the de/anti-colonial-capitalist efforts must work to tackle the decoloniality of the mind/knowledge and of structures/institutions. The DEJ in this sense attends to injustices across the ideational/symbolic and the structural/material and highlights that their division is a product of a colonized mind (see Chapter 1 by Ramcilovic-Suominen and Chapter 15 by Ramcilovic-Suominen and Gram-Hanssen). The DEJ provides a powerful framework and movements for a shift away from the existing global policies and institutions that enable the colonial-capitalist nexus of oppression (see, e.g. Hickel and Slameršak

2022; Ramcilovic-Suominen et al. 2024) to policies designed to undo the (neo) colonial-capitalist violence injustices and oppression—including that related to the “green” policies. It enables decolonial actions, justice, and movements. As I state in the Chapter 5, in the report edited by Giuntoli et al. (2023: 27):

The responsibility of the EU to promote globally just bioeconomy relates to its colonial history and neocolonial tendencies that drive global inequalities, various forms of extraction and domination, biodiversity loss and climate change. Reducing EU’s overconsumption and epistemic domination are the key preconditions for globally just bioeconomy.

Empirically, this study uncovers the EU policy makers’ motivations, ambitions, and engagement with an articulation of “transformations”, and the barriers to transformations in the context of the EGD and the EBE policy projects. It focuses on Brussels-based policy officers working on the EBE policy and green transition (GT). The chapter is based on observations, exchanges, and discussions in a two-day workshop with 21 participants: 13 policy makers and 4 from the European Commission Joint Research Centre (JRC). It is also based on 12 semi-structured interviews with the EC policy officers based at the different Directorates Generals (DGs), working on the following themes: blue bioeconomy, climate change, biodiversity, and economic growth. With a few exceptions, the interviewees were present during the workshop. The workshop and the interviews were held in Brussels in November 2022. I use the generic term “research participant/s” to refer to participants in the workshop and/or the interviews. When deriving directly from the interviews or in direct quotes, I use the term “interviewee”. Finally, the chapter is informed by author’s participation and observations in online and in-person conferences, related to GT, EGD, bioeconomy, decoloniality, transformations, and de-growth, such as the conferences “Beyond Growth” and “Living in the Bioeconomy”.

A brief overview of the EGD and the EBE and some of their contestations

Many policies form the EU’s GT project (Aggestam and Giurca 2021). The EGD is considered the centerpiece around which other policies are organized. The EGD was adopted in 2019 by the then new EC president, Ursula von der Leyen. The EGD is praised as a vision and an emblem for sustainability and policy change. The EGD is indeed an overarching policy, encompassing the interrelated but usually separately treated sectors and policy domains, including forests/forestry, agriculture/food systems, biodiversity, climate change mitigation and adaptation, (bio)energy, bioeconomy, and circular economy.

From critical political ecology perspective, the EGD and GT more broadly have been framed as forms of necropolitics and colonization (Deberdt and Le Billon 2024; Dunlap and Laratte 2022). The EGD is commonly perceived as a fierce defender of the green growth paradigm, which aims to protect and renew green industrial capitalism, primarily through ecological modernization, net-zero energy systems, techno-fixes, and nature-based innovations and solutions (Ajl 2021; Koch 2024). It promises win-win scenarios between ecological, economic, and social

aims/goals, which empirically speaking, are shown to be incompatible (Lenzen et al. 2022; Hickel et al. 2021b; Hickel and Kallis 2020).

Research into the EGD warns against various ecological and social risks, due to the resource intensity of the GT, which leads to extractivist socioecological frontiers and sacrifice zones (Barbesgaard and Whitmore 2023; Brás et al. 2024; Bruna 2023; Dunlap and Laratte 2022; Hanaček et al. 2024). In other words, the burden of transition is placed on the vulnerable populations that lack access to climate technologies and low carbon products (Deberdt and Le Billon 2024). The EGD does not question the (neo) colonial-capitalist structure of the EU economy, and it does not call for climate debt and reparations or for radical reduction of energy and material use in the EU. Invariably, it is based on the myth of unlimited nature and labor supplies and does not grapple with the question of securing raw materials needed to decarbonize the oversized economies of the EU states. This has serious consequences for the peoples, states and regions positioned to lose in the GT, and for global (geo)political stability and the rise of green colonialism and eco-imperialism (Brand and Wissen 2024).

The EBE's ideologies and logics represent the perfect tool for advancing the GT and the EGD. By promoting decarbonization of economies and a shift from fossil to bio-based economies, the EBE anticipates win-win outcomes for economic growth, ecological stability, and social equality (Aggestam and Giurca 2021). Yet, it similarly does not question the growth-based economic model, oversized EU economies, EU overconsumption, or (neo)colonial supply-demand relations, all of which perpetuate green colonialism, extractivism, and violence, both in the EU and abroad (e.g. Holz 2023; Friedrich et al. 2023; Backhouse et al. 2021; Temper et al. 2020). Like the EGD, the EBE is a strong proponent of techno-scientific fixes, focusing on bio-based innovations, which might have a role to play in a radically different production and economic system but are insufficient to tackle the negative social and ecological outcomes of the current system. Like the EGD, the EBE glosses over the politics of competition for the biobased resources needed for a decarbonization economy. While it recognizes the need for an increasing amount of biobased resources and acknowledges the problems this causes (the "Biomass Gap"), the proposed policy measures rely on failing market-based, policy and governance mechanisms, such as the voluntary principles of good governance, "smart-forestry", and carbon offsetting schemes, like the new Carbon Removals Certification Framework.³ All of these measures tend to have significant social costs and limited (if any) ecological improvements (Fletcher 2023). Considering the voluminous literature on the EBE, I point to the following published sources, including two recent co-edited special issues.⁴

Mainstreaming & coopting transformations, degrowth & decolonial environmental justice

Transformations = green transition towards green capitalism and the green growth model

In the framing and articulation of "transformations" as a term, many policy makers use the terms transformations and (green) transition interchangeably.

Approximately half of the interviewees were aware of the differences between the concepts, especially post-workshop (see methods section), where the author gave a keynote on transformations (see Chapter 7 in Giuntoli et al. 2023). However, the policy makers explained that using the terms interchangeably is okay, because in the policy context one can only talk about transitions, anyways, since “*Policy is based on dialogue and dialogue leads to incremental change. If you do not want incremental change, you will have revolution*” (Int. 3), concluding that in policy domain one can only talk about transitions.

The relevance of transformations/transitions, which policy makers largely took to mean “GT” (i.e., transition from fossil to “green” and/or “renewable” energy sources and biological materials) were not questioned. What was questioned was the means, actions, and ways of getting there. The policy makers believed that transformation/GT need to happen through the existing economic and political structures and institutions, both nationally and internationally, despite their lack of effectiveness and the asymmetric power relations within these structures. The weaknesses of the existing structures were acknowledged, but taken for granted, and/or framed as issues that are not addressed by the EC and the EU. The hesitation to engage in structural/systemic changes related to the perception that they are time consuming, conflict inducing and too complex, rendering them an undesirable option considering the urgency of the situation. They also highlighted other constraints, including the difficulty influencing the policy framework and direction, due to issues like hierarchy and corporate lobbying (see the section on barriers).

In summary, transformations as a radical shift away from the socio-economic, socioecological and political models and mindsets toward more just, de/anti-coloniality and de/postgrowth futures (see the theory section) were rejected as being too complex, demanding, idealistic, naïve, undesirable, and/or unreachable through policy (see the section on barriers). The meaning of transformations was reduced to a policy-led transition to a green, bio-based economy (i.e., GT), where social and ecological issues are addressed without jeopardizing the dominant capitalist and growth-orientation. Some exceptions to this dominant position were the occasional critiques of EU green politics and policies, by two respondents from two different DGs:

The EU policies look good on paper because they do not reveal the ugly side in practice. For instance, the EU must secure raw materials in some way, from somewhere for the green transition. But that question is taboo in the house.

(Int.1)

Degrowth = sustainable consumption and sufficiency

Degrowth as a term, a means or an end for transformations was considered a taboo by all but two interviewees, with the vast majority of them protesting the term as

inadequate, unhelpful, controversial, contentious, “against transformations”, and “against human nature which is that of growth and progress” (Int.2).

Degrowth is opposite of transformation. If you want to see transformations, you better forget degrowth, because it only brings conflict and being stuck in place, at the policy level I mean.

(Int.2)

Degrowth is a curse word in politics. The name is key for selling and promoting a new issue. Degrowth will never sell. (. . .) And you know, you need markets, and you need regulations, degrowth is extremely controversial for both.

(Int. 3)

The term caused much polemics, especially during interviews and during the workshop—albeit to a lesser degree. The message from workshop participants was, “*we only want the environmental degradation to stop to grow, not the rest*”. Notwithstanding the polemics related to the term, the respondents did not doubt the importance of the issues that act as motivations for degrowth:

Well, degrowth under that name is a taboo in the Commission. Whole workshop that we had yesterday is a taboo for the EC. But if you take the language out, I can see that some of the issues you talked about yesterday resonate with our agenda. For instance, in this Commission we talk a lot about consumption, sustainable consumption, circularity, absolute decoupling that is our aim. So, while we do not use the word “degrowth”, I think that there is much resonance with our discourses in the EC.

(Int.3)

Most of the research participants accepted the idea of planetary boundaries and the issue of overconsumption. However, the political aspects, including the politics of the boundaries, the politics of overconsumption, the sharing of resources and responsibilities, and the justice issues, including power and wealth inequalities, were harder to discuss about. One of the major reasons for this rejection or hesitation to discuss such issues was the belief that those issues are too complex, broad, or lay beyond the bioeconomy, EGD, and even the EU. This is because they originate in the historic and global contexts of the colonial past and the inequalities and domination that followed thereafter. Thus, the respondents thought that such issues should not be dealt at the level of the EU green politics, rather they belong at the global level and are handled by global organizations, like the United Nations (UN).

To deal with the internal contradiction wherein the problems identified by degrowth literature (e.g., planetary boundaries and overconsumption) are seen as important, while degrowth policy proposals were branded as taboo and/or undesirable, the research participants offered various creative terms as substitutes for

degrowth. These terms effectively relocated the politics, justice, and postgrowth arguments and dimensions of degrowth, including

- (i) “*sustainable growth*”, suggesting merging the gap between sustainability and growth.
- (ii) “*wellbeing-oriented growth*”, suggesting that “*growth is not only pollution, it’s also all these other good things*”.
- (iii) “*regenerative growth*”, “*post-growth*”, and “*re-growth*”, where suffixes “post-” and “re-” were meant to suggest the need for a different or better growth.
- (iv) “*uneconomic growth*”, i.e., growth of other things but not necessarily the economy.

In short, “*anything else but degrowth*” (Int.2). In other words, terms that avoids the discussion of the global capitalist system and green growth were acceptable. The two preferred terms were “*sufficiency*” and “*sustainable consumption*”, which were framed around the technical and measurable issue of consumption. These two terms have successfully entered the policy discourse and bioeconomy (EC 2022), and it would be a major win in the eyes of the more “progressive” policy officers if they make it into the revised bioeconomy strategy.

Decolonial socioecological justices = recolonization by “the will to improve”

The research participants widely recognized the importance of global justice, including recognition of the EU’s colonial past and the continuing dispossession. There was also a recognition of the ideational or epistemic domination brought through EU policy. The lack of attention given to these issues in the EU green policies was recognized but dismissed as understandable due to the complexity and the lack of incentives and/or mandates to change direction (section on barriers). Similar to degrowth, while there was recognition, addressing these issues at the EU policy level was seen as hard or impossible due to the complex and highly contentious nature of (in)justice and inequality. As in the case of transformations and degrowth, global justice and decoloniality were seen as too big or too complex to tackle.

What you term as tools for change are deadlock for change in policy, including justice, due to the controversial and contentious nature. What is just for me may not be so for you.

(Int. 5)

The initial excitement about the policy makers recognizing the past, present, and likely future injustices that may occur within the GT process waned as we got to discuss the question of how the EU and the EC can address such issues. The neo-colonial and interventionist flavor and underpinning of those solutions are undeniable. Preventing injustices at home and elsewhere was not in the policy toolbox or on the mind of policy makers, rather the default response was technology and

innovation to compensate and mitigate harms. The following quotes based on the interview 9, illustrate this point:

Green transition may imply neocolonial project, but we must do it and we can always compensate for it.

Yes, and we need to compensate for extractivism and injustices in the Global South. But how do we mitigate our impact, is the question. How do we pay for it? We can pay for restoring the forest and biodiversity loss that our high consumption led to.

We need new technologies and new infrastructures to produce less ecologically destructive food and feed.

The solutions and policy actions offered depoliticized and deradicalized the very idea of decolonial justice, by calling on vague policy slogans, such as “*Leave no one behind*”, which was considered as the most transformative aspects of the EGD. These vague slogans avoid questions like, Who is going to lead the way so no one is left behind, and who should follow these leaders. It also portrays those robbed of their agency as merely followers. One non-mainstream example of transformative change was the EU Staff for Climate⁵ initiative, wherein staff from various EU institutions petitioned the EU leaders for climate action. These initiatives are important, but currently they are a drop in the ocean amidst mainstream positions and business as usual (BAU) approaches. Being marginal, such initiatives are easily ignored, and/or used as a tool to legitimize existing political projects (i.e., “see, we also have disagreeing voices and live to our democratic principles” Int.5).

The competing motives and the contested notions of transformations and green transition, and how favoring one over the other makes the EU’s GT a barrier for socioecological transformations

The respondents reported that the first motive for policy officers to engage the language of change, transformations and (green) transitions was the climate urgency and the associated public pressure and civil disobedience both within (e.g. Brás et al. 2024; De Rosa et al. 2022) and outside the EU (Sultana 2022, 2023), especially youth climate and environmental justice movements and their protests against fossil capital and climate inaction. The second motive was for the EU to establish itself as an important global leader in decarbonization and green industry development, competing with China and BRICS countries. This push spurred emphasis and investment in GT and bio-innovation as means to an end. Building the EU’s green brand in the context of and/or justified by the geopolitical tensions with Russia, and in the context of competing for land, rare earth minerals and the other resources required to lead the global. At a time of my research (October–December 2022), the EU was in a proxy war with Russia, which has gotten worse since the EU’s involvement and complicity in the US-Israeli-led attack and plausible genocide in Palestine (see Ajl 2024; Falk 2024; Minoia and Tamara (Chapter 7); Salamanca et al. 2024; The Transnational 2024).

These two motives are in clear opposition. The former relates to the need and responsibility to act on calls by a concerned public and disappointed youths for change and a more socioecologically just, decolonial and postgrowth Europe. That is a Europe that curbs consumption and extraction, shifting towards a degrowth society, assuming decolonial objectives and relations with(in) the world, and reversing its unjust and unsustainable ecological impacts. The latter relates to the EU's internal drive to compete, dominate and lead the global GT, and continue the processes of capital accumulation by EU-US companies. As explicitly stated in the EGD, it is the new growth strategy, not a response to climate change concerns and/or climate injustices. Thus, the framing of GT in the EBE is a growth-oriented project, which rather than questioning, legitimizes and strengthens the dominant capitalist and extractivist logics and structures. This type of GT triggers new forms and exacerbates existing forms of green coloniality, green extractivism and appropriation of a disproportionate share of resources. In addition, it serves to deepen the associated raw and slow forms of socioecological domination, violence and injustices (Almeida et al. 2023; Kumeh and Ramcilovic-Suominen 2023; Hanaček et al. 2024; Dunlap and Laratte 2022; Sovacool 2021). These are precisely the issues that the EJ and climate justice movements and protests are fighting, which leads one to conclude that the applied climate and justice solution (i.e., GT) is the obstacle for transformative and just climate action (see the last section).

Barriers to transformations in and through the EU green policy

The following section lists the barriers for change and transformations. With the exception of two barriers (i.e. *Geopolitics, war and the raise of China; and the Perceived lack of mandate to act on some of the key issues*), which respondents brought up in a different context, others are self-reported barriers for change and transformations. However, as I argue here, these two represent important impediments for transformations and are thus outlined as barriers for transformations. Also, except for the reputational risks, which only three respondents highlighted, the other barriers frequently came up in both the interviews and the workshop.

(i) Hierarchy

This refers to the difficulty of climbing the ladder and hierarchy of the “*power tower*” where the actual decisions are made. Demanding or non-mainstream proposals are filtered out as they move through the many layers of hierarchy. Ideas and science policy recommendations are subject to the same filtering process, which eventually dictates what messages in which form reach the policy makers at the higher/-est levels. Radical proposals get blocked at the outset, while it is usually the least controversial and radical ideas and proposals that make it through, as they demand the least amount of change. This filtering process was also mentioned in the context of science-policy interface (SPI), which leads to a skewed SPI in favor of the status quo.

(ii) Skewed and “cryptic” science-policy interface (SPI)

This skewed SPI was partly due to the so-called *stupid politician* paradox, pointing to the policy makers’ preference for short and simple results and recommendations. Policy makers, many with a research background, were aware of the issue, highlighting that the higher in the hierarchy the shorter the report, going down to one page or slide. The details get lost in the annexes of various reports, which policy makers do not bother to read. Another issue was the tendency of the researchers within the EC to adopt simple or quantitative criteria for assessing qualitative and context-specific issues (see also barrier ix), adding to the “*cryptic science-policy interface*”. In other cases, what was referred as “cryptic science” leads to wrong conclusions as the details on scientific methodology are typically placed in footnotes, which policy makers do not bother to read. For example, the figures for the EU biomass import exclude biofuels as a ready product and include only biomass import for producing energy and/or other products in Europe. This gives the impression that EU imports are smaller than they are. Similarly, the figures for imports calculate all imports as dry matter, including seaweeds and seafoods, which significantly decreases the actual amount of what is imported.

(iii) Corporate lobbying

The amount of corporate lobbying was described as enormous and astonishing. Smaller organizations working on social justice or indigenous people’s rights also try to influence policy makers, but they cannot compete with corporate lobbying. “*The amount of lobbying does not compare with that of environmental or social justice organizations. It is 1 email against 100 emails from corporations that reach the higher layers of hierarchy.*” As a policy officer working with biodiversity issues in South America explained, “*The Indigenous Peoples messages get to my desk, but I am not the one who decides. I forward their message, but it is 1 in 1000 messages*” (Int. 1). The past and ongoing business and corporate ventures, investment schemes and personal connections between corporations and businesses policy makers at the highest level of hierarchy serves to explain how and why corporations have an impact in policymaking. Finally, some interviewees said that policy makers receive indirect threats by industry groups, who play on the fears of policy makers to get their agenda and funding schemes through. One of the best examples is the agricultural policy—“*everybody knows it sucks, but it goes on, as corporate lobbying play on fear of hunger in Europe, income loss*” (Int. 6).

(iv) Geopolitics, war and the growth of China

Fear and uncertainties associated with the war in Ukraine and the implications for the energy and food industries, coupled with the global economic and political influence of China further limited the EU’s interest in ecological, ethical and justice-related agendas. Such agendas are increasingly substituted with agendas of self-interests, self-service, global competition, nationalist and far-right sentiments in Europe—as shown by the latest EU parliamentary election. The geopolitics and

associated conflicts were given as reasons for the EU's hesitation to engage in solidarity-based relations with non-EU states, which are treated as supply states and extraction frontiers for the EU's GT. The EU's lack of incentives for degrowth and decolonial policies were attributed to global competitiveness and resource competition, amid geopolitical upheaval. The wealth tax (degrowth policy) and decolonial engagement with partners from the Global South were given as examples of policies the EU would never advance in the current global political atmosphere, as, "*no one wants to hit themselves in the foot, especially considering the increasing role of Russia and China*". It is important to highlight that while I identify the geopolitical tensions and wars as important impediments for transformations towards socioecologically just futures, the respondents framed the geopolitical tensions and wars as a motivation for the EU GT rather than as an obstacle to change and transformations (i.e. the need to secure supply and get rid of Russian oil and gas dependency).

(v) *Reputational risks and fear of losing access to hierarchy*

Some respondents who were more critical of the EU dominant green politics, argued that questioning the status quo puts them at risk of losing their connections and reputation, as the following quotes based on the Int. 5 show. (i) "*Every new idea is observed with suspicion, you will be branded a communist when bringing up the issues of inequalities and gap between the rich and poor; for example*". (ii) "*You are immediately seen as too political, non-neutral*". (iii) "*Also, there is a fear of losing access to hierarchy and influence—if you become too critical and questioning what is considered a common sense in this house, your influence weakens and so does your network*". For these and related reasons, the respondents felt that degrowth, decoloniality and inequalities are too political, sensitive, or taboo. However, when these issues are left unquestioned and bypassed one can ensure they remain marginal in policy debates and legal instruments.

(vi) *Sectoral and silo working culture in the EC obstructing systemic and holistic responses*

The sectoral and silo working style prohibits people who work in tightly intertwined sectors to interact and work together (i.e. economy, environment, agriculture, biodiversity, climate). As a result, they do not understand each other's language when they are brought to joint meetings or committees. For example, the cost shifting in the environmental domain and the associated profit accumulation in the EU at the cost of dispossession in the global peripheries, are only worked on by DG Grow, as people working in DG Environment or DG Clima do not deal with anything related to finance. However, the DG Grow works on the logics of the "market decides" and "profit first". The "*working in lockers*" or "*working in silos*" culture is especially problematic for advancing issues, like justice or systemic change, as these cannot be tackled within one sector or with a 5-year policy contract and mandate (see barrier vii). This leads to simply ignoring certain problems because they are "too

complex”. “*In practice, it is pragmatism that wins, if something seems too big to tackle, it is dropped out and the second thing on the list get tackled*” (Int. 7).

(vii) *Short-term mandates and contracts leading to short-term policy horizons*

The 4–5 year-mandate of politicians demotivates embarking on issues that may be uncertain and risky in the short term but beneficial in long term. This “short-term” logic extends to policy officers, many of whom work in 4–5-year job-rotation schemes. This is meant to ensure “*innovativeness and influx of new ideas*”, but it impedes motivation and hopes for making a change. Similarly, waiting for the “right moment”, that is, moments that serve politicians’ re-election and/or popularity early on in their mandates, further impedes larger changes from happening quickly. Any larger changes, even when agreed internally and/or among member states, are postponed for considerable amounts of time and announced at a time of commission or EC presidency change. Further delays of the much-needed change and action are due to waiting for the so-called policy windows to open, when the likelihood for embracing an issue is considered high. All in all, change through policy is a slow process by design.

(viii) *Quantitative and goal-oriented criteria and measures, and the monitoring obsession*

The EC’s quantitative workstyle was highlighted as an important reason for justice remaining a blind spot in the EU green policy. Working with inflexible and quantitative measures is especially hard when dealing with context-specific and largely intangible aspects that can/should not be quantified, like equity, social (in)justice, or epistemic domination. The “leaving no one behind” pledge of the EGD was given as an example of a “soft” and context-specific issue that cannot be operationalized or measured with these EU’s quantitative criteria/measures. Another significant but underacknowledged obstacle for innovation, thinking outside of the box, and spontaneity and responsiveness to sudden challenges is working on predefined goals and an obsession with criteria and monitoring. This is not only for policy outcomes but of the effectiveness of the policies themselves, which adds to fatigue and slowness in the process. The cultural hegemony of neoclassical economics shapes how science and policy problems and solutions are framed, leading to fetishization of quantification and for economic models like rational choice, game theory and equilibrium. These models project a narrow vision of reality and offer little option space for science and policy making.

(ix) *The perceived lack of mandate and incentives to act on issues of justice, degrowth, and transformations*

Some of the degrowth measures and policies were seen as meddling too much in individual choices, thereby restricting citizens’ freedom of choice. Simultaneously, the respondents understood that the EU’s policies affect the lifestyles and choices

of individuals, and the freedoms of non-EU citizens in the Global South (both directly through EU policy impacts on the ground, and indirectly, through policy governance interventions). This imperialist state of affairs is accepted, neutralized, and justified as the only way to proceed. It was argued that the EU cannot ensure, or does not have capacity/mandate to ensure that its own policies be deliberated outside the EU, even if they obviously influence lives and natures well beyond the EU borders (Int. 1, 4, 8). They discussed that the EC cannot sometimes agree on an issue between the different DGs, let alone respond to outside demands and comments on policies. The respondents recognized that this is an issue but that they see no other way of doing things differently (Int. 4, 8).

(x) *Bureaucracy, consensus building and sparse policy revisions leading to outdated policies*

Agreeing on goals and deliberation on the agreed goals, between different committees, DGs and/or member states is slow and full of bureaucratic, time-demanding procedures. Furthermore, adopting an EU-wide policy change for most policy domains requires a qualified majority vote by the Member States, which means plenty of internal dialogue and strategizing. The energy taxation directive was given as an example of a policy “*stacked under negotiation forever*”. Newer ideas or policy agendas lead to lengthier discussions and more conflicts.

Further, the policies are made with the hope they will be static for a while, as they are not (meant to be) reviewed often, meaning that they are not often up to date with the latest societal trends, let alone equipped for future trends. The EGD was mentioned as a policy that made so much progress and so many policy changes in short period of time, there were a record number of EC staff burnouts. The EBE was seen as a policy that is evaluated and reviewed more often, which leaves some space for change. However, renewing and updating policies is a slow process. All in all, policies do not seem to be the right tool for societal change, let alone transformations as defined herein.

While most of these barriers were discussed from the EC officers’ individual/personal point of view, preference and agency for change, many of them highlight the role of the structural constrains for them to act and/or instigate change. Namely, the top-down political framework, policy direction and ideology provided by the elected representatives—the commissioners and their cabinets—limits the EC officers’ mandates to promoting and upholding the given framework and direction rather than acting for change. Hence, while the EC officials’ individual inclinations and preferences are important, the structural constrains that bind them cannot be overstated.

The EU green transition as an obstacle for socioecological transformation

While some of the barriers discussed earlier could be considered as at least partly external (e.g., corporate lobbying, geopolitical upheaval, etc.), others are directly related to the EC and the EU policymaking structures and working culture. In any

case, they need to be approached within the current political context, including the constraints and limited mandates of the policy officers, as well as their conditioning to follow the political framework and top-down guidance (i.e., from the elected commissioners). The question remains as whether these barriers would be as relevant and effective in an entirely different political context. For example, if there was a left-leaning European Commission that pursued eco-socialist political project instead of the centrist and/or right political leadership pursuing neoliberal and divisive political agendas, the identified barriers may be less effective in postponing transformations and change.

In any case, based on these results, one can conclude that as currently designed, practiced, and institutionalized, EU green politics, including the EU ambition to dominate the decarbonization process, represent an impediment rather than a driver for socioecological transformations and change. The EC's rigid, technical, hierarchical, and siloed ways of working are not conducive to change, let alone anti-hegemonic change. Bypassing the key causes for socioecological destruction as too "complex", "contested", "sensitive", and/or "political" ensures that policy measures are embedded within the capitalist-colonial institutional nexus and logics. The socioecological costs of these policies are framed as "necessary evils", costs or externalities that can be mitigated and compensated. Furthermore, the concerns over climate change and the ambition to respond to the public pressure and youth climate movements—which was the first ambition to engage with the language of transformations—can also become a legitimizing tool for pursuing narrowly framed notions of (green) transitions instead of radical change and transformations. This is because to be radical requires more time, and given the urgency to act, it is deemed undesirable. All this promotes a reluctance to ask hard questions such as addressing the unjust neocolonial relations of the capitalist and economic system. In summary, it appears that protecting the current industrial capitalist and neoliberal socioeconomic and political order and working to reinvent it as green, is prioritized over addressing the socioecological crises, including climate change, climate and social injustice and inequalities.

Moreover, by rearticulating transformation as (green) transition (i.e., shifting from fossil to "green" or "renewable" sources of economy and energy that occur within the dominant (neo)colonial-capitalist-racist and neoliberal growth-oriented structures and logics), the EU green policy project reproduces new frontiers and sacrifice zones for the rare earth minerals needed to feed the oversized European economies in their "greening" process. This is already empirically established to feed green colonialism (Bruna 2023; Deberdt and Le Billon 2024; Hanaček et al. 2024) and is postulated to feed green imperialism (Almeida et al. 2023; Brand and Wissen 2024). This study provides empirical findings that such events originate at the policy design level and cannot be thought of as "unexpected or undesired" policy outcomes of the GT. They are expected and anticipated yet justified and pursued as the only ways forward. These risks are supposedly ameliorated by reproduction of old and new standards, certifications and "good governance" practices and principles (e.g., "climate smart forestry", "nature-based solutions", ecological restoration). However, such interventions, as their predecessors, are likely to reinscribe the existing

injustices and deepen the marginalization of already marginalized actors in resource frontiers and green sacrifice zones (Hickel and Sullivan 2023; Hickel and Slameršak 2022; Ramcilovic-Suominen et al. 2021; Ramcilovic-Suominen 2025). Consequently, the reluctance to tackle the causes of green extractivism and green coloniality at a policy design level represents an obstacle to climate, environmental and decolonial justice and postgrowth economies.

Can things be different? Can supranational policies enable rather than impede a shift away from the neoliberal, market-driven, colonial-capitalist-racist trajectory, as a precondition for socioecological stability and justice? I believe so, but only if the elected political party and politicians embraced such mandates and policy directions. They then must use their power, assets and influence to advance radical and rapid eco-social politics and agendas (Bärnthaler et al. 2024), including post- and de-growth (Buch-Hansen et al. 2024). Various procedures and strategies for a shift to eco-socialism, degrowth, post-development, decolonial approaches (e.g. Fitzpatrick et al. 2022; Hickel and Sullivan 2023; Ziai 2023) and well-being economies (Raworth 2017) have been proposed and supported by citizens. While their emergence is closely connected to the capitalist trajectory (Fraser 2022), they operate under different mental, ideational, and institutional logics, meaning they aim for a good life for all (admittedly all humans), as opposed to economic profit and dominance. Increasingly, degrowth and eco-socialist literature offer creative pathways for state and policy to contribute to decommodification of nature and labor, radical democracy in socioecological provisioning, reducing inequality and creating social material security, ensuring socioecological stability, prosperity, and wellbeing (Durand et al. 2024; Koch 2019; Fitzpatrick et al. 2022; Hickel and Sullivan 2023). While political economy, political ecology, and Marxist perspectives all caution against such optimism, ending on a positive note—despite doubt—I argue that such an optimism is a choice, as is the possibility to correct the structural injustices and oppressive regimes in defense of life and justice.

Notes

- 1 See <https://research-innovation-community.ec.europa.eu/events/2TokJawDoTNTAmlPP0TnCN/overview> and www.beyond-growth-2023.eu.
- 2 For such transformations, see Chapters 1–5.
- 3 https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_24_885
- 4 www.sciencedirect.com/special-issue/10C549VFHK5 and <https://link.springer.com/journal/11625/volumes-and-issues/18-2>
- 5 eustaff4climate.info

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