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E.U. Leaders Fail to Strengthen Climate Target

By Milan Schreuer

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BRUSSELS — European Union leaders failed to reach an agreement Thursday on a proposal to reduce their net carbon emissions to zero by 2050.

Elections were held in the 28-member bloc in May, and leaders are in Brussels this week to set an agenda for the European Parliament's next five-year term. The document will include broad guidelines on key issues facing the union, including migration, living standards and climate change.

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President Emmanuel Macron of France said before the discussions on Thursday that the “climate emergency” should be addressed by “rallying around the objective to reach carbon neutrality by 2050.”

By the end of the meeting, however, leaders were only able to agree on a compromise resolution to study ways to make the bloc “climate neutral” without mentioning a target date.

Climate neutrality means slightly different things in different countries. Some, notably Norway and Sweden, aim to offset the emissions they generate by buying credits that fund initiatives like clean-power projects in poor countries.

Under the rules of the bloc, a unanimous decision was required to adopt the proposal. Delegates said Poland and other eastern countries objected, citing the impact of the proposed target on their economies. Around 80 percent of Poland's electricity production comes from coal.

Environmental activists and politicians expressed deep disappointment over the outcome but also acknowledged the difficulties facing the eastern countries.

E.U. Elections in May

“There are so many vested interests,” said Philippe Lamberts, president of the Greens group in the European Parliament. “It just shows you how out-of-touch politicians at that level are when you see hundreds of thousands of people demonstrate weekly for more social justice and climate action,” he said, referring to weekly student protests across Europe that are pressing leaders for urgent measures to stave off catastrophic climate change.

“But I also understand them,” Mr. Lamberts said. “In the east, their economies are more dependent, on average, on coal for energy production.”

The divisions that led to the compromise agreement point to a broader political reality within the union, experts said.

During the elections in May, environmental parties gained significant ground, winning 69 out of 751 total seats, an increase of 17. But those gains were limited to Western Europe, and many eastern countries, including Poland, did not send a single Green representative to Parliament.

European Union countries are already bound under the bloc’s rules to reduce their carbon emissions by 40 percent by 2030 from with 1990 levels. The union accounts for nearly 10 percent of global emissions.

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