CONTEMPORARY CLIMATE ACTIVISM AND EU CLIMATE POLICY

Societal Engagement as Public Participation

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Contemporary Climate Activism and EU Climate Policy - Societal Engagement as Public Participation

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Key findings

- A new wave of climate activism has emerged in Europe and peaked in 2019, with significant effects on climate policy in the EU, most notably strongly contributing to the European Green Deal.
- Scholarly analysis leads us to distinguish three main types of extra-institutional contemporary climate activism evolving in a protest cycle: (1) mass protests peaking in 2019 have been followed by different forms of (2) disruptive activism as well as (3) direct mitigation action and community creation.
- These three types of contemporary climate activism have all significantly contributed to shaping and advancing the EU's climate agenda and policy decisions. This has mainly happened in indirect ways and via advocacy building on extra-institutional activism.
- Scholarly literature shows that combining extra-institutional contemporary climate activism and advocacy can help to shape EU decisions, and that networks and alliances between climate activism and advocacy could lead to innovative and adaptive change in EU climate governance.
- Several options can be identified for EU climate governance to enhance the impact of climate activism, including:
    - Building meaningful participatory spaces for enhancing EU climate governance by:
        - Developing participatory mechanisms at the EU level that are inclusive, co-owned by participants, and with clarity on how results will feed into decision-making;
        - Building links with bottom-up participatory mechanisms to inform EU climate policymaking.
    - Fostering meaningful spaces for participation in EU member states along the same lines and preserving spaces for climate activism against attempts at undue restrictions, including through further EU guidance and minimum standards (Governance Regulation).
    - Enhancing funding/support for activist networks and alliance building:
        - This should allow more impactful combinations of activism and advocacy and encourage positive feedback loops and learning.
        - (EU) Funding procedures should not be overly complex, should provide operational support (rather than project-based), and avoid onerous obligations about reporting.

Introduction

Extra-institutional climate activism has risen prominently in Europe since around 2015. Building and innovating on a much longer tradition of environmental activism, a new wave of mass protests hit a peak in 2019, notably with the global climate strikes of Fridays for Future. Subsequently, climate activism by groups such as Extinction Rebellion that rely on more disruptive actions such as road-blocks, disruption at sporting events, and other, frequently innovative forms of civil disobedience has been on the rise. These actions have been seen as necessary and legitimate by protesters in the face of the ever more evident scale and impacts of the climate crisis and a perceived lack of urgent and transformative responses from authorities, including the EU. In parallel, direct mitigation and community creation activism (projects like community gardens, repair cafes, or other citizen-led ecological services) have increasingly flourished.

This paper provides a review and analysis of the relevance of this new wave of contemporary, extra-institutional activism for the climate. It specifically focuses on extra-institutional activism rooted in social movements rather than advocacy by non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and others. This kind of activism unfolds outside and out of direct contact with state or intergovernmental institutions, addressing these indirectly either by making demands through protest-like actions, or by creating systems and services in ways that reflect what groups feel states and intergovernmental institutions should be doing. The paper looks at the three aforementioned types of extra-institutional activism: mass protests, disruptive activism, and community creation. It highlights where these types of extra-institutional activism bolster and support more advocacy-oriented work, such as NGO campaigns. It draws on and reviews the existing literature on contemporary climate activism.

The paper argues that contemporary climate activism forms part of a broader social movement that also comprises advocacy and public participation. Mass protest, disruptive activism and community creation have all bolstered and/or informed public participation and advocacy, and extra-institutional activism and advocacy have been mutually reinforcing in producing policy impact in the EU (and beyond). The rise of extra-institutional climate activism therefore provides an opportunity for advocacy to enhance impacts on EU governance and policy. The democratic, participatory and transformational impulse of contemporary climate activism in the EU can be supported and constructively engaged with by further developing meaningful spaces for participation both at the EU level and in member states and enhancing support for activist networks and alliances (with advocacy).

The paper's argument is developed in the following steps. Section 1 reviews existing knowledge about the importance of contemporary climate activism and its impacts, including on EU governance and policies. Section 2 maps contemporary climate activism by focusing on the three types mentioned: mass protest, disruptive activism, and community creation. This mapping includes findings about their policy impacts, including in the EU. Section 3 reviews key insights on the impacts of contemporary climate activism on EU decision-making, which is followed by the identification of options for further enhancing impactful activism in the EU in section 4.

1. Why Social Movements Matter: State of the Art

Citizens acting together to demand change is a necessary and healthy component of democracy. Social movements and activism were central to the emergence and the development of European nation states, and drove the development of core social, political and other rights (e.g., Tilly, 1978). Classical European political thinkers (from Locke to Gramsci) have underlined how important citizens' collective action is for reasons that range from holding governments to account to the need to challenge hegemony (see Kaldor, 2003, for an overview). This also applies to global environmental governance (ibid.). The environmental protests of the late 1960s and early 1970s, which focused on threats from the Cold War nuclear arms race and nuclear power generation, fed into international decision-making such as the landmark 1972 Stockholm Conference (the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment). Current literature discussing how to transform environmental governance continues to see activism as an important source of innovations, ideas, and impetus for new responses (e.g., Dryzek and Pickering, 2018; Scoones et al., 2020).

Given this general agreement that social movements and extra-institutional activism matter and have impacts, this section provides a brief overview of scholarship about how impacts are achieved. It then describes some central approaches used to understanding impact that are key to grasping the significance of contemporary activism as a contribution to securing better responses to the climate crisis.

1.1 The complex outcomes of extra-institutional activism

Extra-institutional activism, such as mass protest, does have impacts. Impacts vary in type and timescale, from long-term cultural change to changes in specific pieces of legislation, to shaping the lives of activists themselves. Impacts also vary in terms of their directness: extra-institutional activism usually has indirect effects via impacts on public opinion (via media coverage) over time. Imagining universal suffrage, civil rights in the US, or anti-discrimination legislation in Europe without activism is difficult. More direct effects are also possible. U-turns by politicians or companies following protests are not uncommon. Examples in the field of environmental campaigning include the 1995 Brent Spar affair, an oil platform due to be sunk by owners Royal Dutch Shell in a decision later reversed after action by Greenpeace[1], or more recently the 2017 reversal of plans to expand coal mines at two sites in Germany following activism in climate camps (Müller, 2022).

Proving links between activism and their impacts is often difficult, as activism always unfolds in contexts with many other factors at work. Social movement studies have developed approaches to study complex contexts and how activism interacts with these, as described briefly in the next subsection. In addition, activism takes place in complex social movements made up of many different actors, not all of whom will share the same visions (della Porta and Diani, 2020). Social movements

[1] https://web.archive.org/web/20101016093639/http://www.greenpeace.org/international/about/history/the-brent-spar/

are loose coalitions, and not like political parties – they do not seek power and do not always put forward coherent programmes or demands (ibid.).[2] When discussing the impacts of activism, social scientists tend to tell complicated stories, and to point out that activism may seek direct influence over a certain decision, but will also aim to influence public opinion via media coverage, recruit new people to a cause, and more (Fisher and Nasrin, 2020).

Accounts of the impacts of activism also distinguish different types. One useful approach refers to different stages of political decision-making. Schumaker (1975) argues that what we call impacts can affect: 1) access (to policymaking); 2) the political agenda; 3) policy; and 4) actual output/outcomes (which refers to implementation). Other impacts concern long-term cultural changes (simply termed 'impacts' by Schumaker), and effects on activists themselves (sometimes known as biographical impacts). When making decisions about how to act, activists choose different strategies by considering contextual factors, as well as the types of impact they want to achieve (della Porta and Diani, 2020).

1.2 Understanding impacts: protest cycles and political opportunity structures

When addressing impact, scholars of activism often pay attention to where activism falls within protest cycles and to political context. In Europe and beyond, activism over the last century or so has unfolded within broad protest cycles or cycles of contention (Tarrow, 1998). This is also true for the environmental movement, which moved from its roots in campaigns for establishing parks and protecting specific species around the turn of the twentieth century to a more radical protest-oriented phase in the late 1960s, linked to nuclear testing and the Cold War. With the development of global environmental governance, environmental advocacy via NGOs become more prominent, yet growing dissatisfaction with progress on key issues such as climate change drove the turn into another moment of heightened protest that peaked around 2019 (de Moor, 2021; Parks, della Porta and Portos, 2023).

Patterns of protest peaks followed by periods where advocacy is more prominent are common for social movements in the global north. Tarrow argues that these cycles display common features (1998). At the start of a protest cycle, the perception of a societal problem, a favourable political context for impactful protest, and group resources combine and protest increases, before hitting a peak. The authorities targeted respond in two general ways, usually simultaneously. On the one side, they are responsive, either by taking the actions protesters have asked for, or by opening spaces to bring movement actors into decision-making processes. On the other hand, authorities take different repressive actions, which can range from more forceful protest policing, passing new laws to make protest more difficult, or denouncing protesters, for example as dangerous, unlawful or extreme. These responses as well as the difficulties of sustaining protest combine to change activism in the cycle. Some groups move towards advocacy, taking advantage of opening spaces, for example by

[2] Although social movements are a source for the subsequent creation of political parties, including Green parties.

becoming NGOs. Others adopt different strategies aimed at solving a problem in line with their views, or at spectacular actions that maximise media attention.

This pattern is also clear in the current wave of climate protest. Inclusive responses from authorities to mass protests included the European Green Deal and taking up calls for citizens' assemblies[3], which funnel claims into more institutional spaces. The COVID-19 pandemic intervened to make mass protest nigh on impossible, but prior to this the UK had legislated against the types of protest pioneered by Extinction Rebellion (see below), indicating repressive as well as inclusive moves. Activists have responded by institutionalising around citizens' assemblies or opportunities to participate in the drafting of NECPs, but also by moving into more disruptive and local solution-oriented (or community creation as we name it here) actions. This divergence can continue to drive impact in different ways as we discuss further in Section 2.

Understanding the specific impacts of activism build on a trio of theories about how social movements act within these cycles. They are underpinned by an understanding of extra-institutional activism as a rational and conscious choice. First, activists take into account resources available (both material and cultural) as discussed in resource mobilization theory. Second, perceptions of the political opportunities and threats in a society, discussed in political process or political opportunity theory, are considered. Third, people evaluate the strength of arguments about the need to act, covered by framing theory (for an overview, see della Porta and Diani, 2020). Resources, opportunities, and frames explain why activism has (or fails to have) an impact: all three are necessary – sufficient resources, an understanding of available opportunities, and convincing arguments.

The key approach for understanding impacts on EU governance is political opportunity theory (e.g., Tarrow, 1998). This is because the EU is a particularly complex set of institutions providing overlapping political opportunities and threats for activism. Generally, political opportunity approaches argue that more open political contexts - like democracies - see more impacts from activism, including climate activism (Fisher and Nasrin, 2020). In more detail, impacts from activism are more likely when, for example, elections are close, elites are divided, or the left is in power. When elites are united, the right is in power, and counter-movements are strong, we see fewer (see Amenta et al., 2010, for an overview). The ways that activism of different types is regulated also forms part of the political opportunity approach. How protests are policed and rules around their legality are very important for understanding strategic choices about more and less disruptive forms of protest. Repressive action against protest has been found to have galvanizing effects, driving further protests, and in some specific cases radicalisation (though only alongside other conditions that are not present in contemporary cases of climate activism) (Ellefsen, 2021). To secure impacts, activists must read political opportunities and threats correctly and strategise accordingly.

[3] See also the Knowledge Network On Climate Assemblies (KNOCA), https://knoca.eu/.

1.3. The impacts of activism on EU decision-making

Attention to protest cycles and political opportunities are central for understanding the impacts of activism on EU decision-making. Work on how activism shapes, and is shaped in turn, by EU institutions is less common than studies of activism in member states. As power over decision-making has shifted to the EU level in various areas, attention to activism targeting the EU and its policies emerged as scholars expected that transnational European activism would follow these shifts. There were examples of transnational protest in the global justice movement, but generally scholars found instead that extra-institutional activism by social movement groups tended to remain within national contexts in the EU (Imig and Tarrow, 2001). This was seen as a function of the EU's political opportunities, which provide clear and ever-evolving spaces for advocacy but present a series of challenges (including the lack of a clear and visible political target) for protest (Marks and McAdam, 1999). Indeed, numbers of social NGOs ballooned in the EU following the Single European Act, and the general rule of advocacy at EU level and protest at national level has continued to hold (e.g., della Porta and Caiani, 2006).

Yet activism targeting the EU has had impacts, and there are some transnational examples. Mass protests in Europe by the global justice movement around the turn of the millennium arguably contributed to the end of the 'permissive consensus'. Activists from progressive movements questioned the overall direction of the Union and took positions of 'critical Europeanism' that called for a more cosmopolitan, social and solidarity-oriented EU, while activists on the far right called for a retreat to the nation state (della Porta and Caiani, 2006). On the left, critical Europeanism also characterised activism during the financial crisis (e.g., della Porta and Parks, 2018) and has continued to the present (e.g., della Porta, 2022). Activism on the right, in the meantime, has moved to an outright rejection of the EU (e.g., della Porta, 2023). Because progressive, leftist movements have been constructive critics of the EU, the idea of 'empowering dissensus' has been advanced, suggesting that the EU must work with citizens through their collective action (Oleart, 2021). Evidence of impacts over time are also provided by Armingeon et al. (2022) who show that the EU's responses to the COVID-19 pandemic seem to display learning from activist demands during the financial crisis.

Other work on specific EU decisions underlines that advocacy and activism need to be combined to secure impact. Parks (2015) finds that to combine advocacy and activism requires networks linking protest and advocacy groups for swift mobilization, and that this is easiest where groups see the European Commission as not providing political opportunities for advocacy or meaningful participation. In cases where advocacy was not combined with protest there were fewer impacts, which seems to be due to groups dedicating the bulk of their time and energy to engaging with EU processes, rather than working with national and local allies. Similar findings emerge about trade union activism on EU decisions (Leiren and Parks, 2014), and in work on insider-outsider (or advocacy-protest) alliances (Crespy and Parks, 2017). Work on the wide-ranging campaign against the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) and EU-Canada Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement (CETA) has also underlined the crucial importance of activism both in the form of

extra-institutional protests and in the form of advocacy and mobilization activities by European umbrella groups (Oleart, 2021). Together, these studies strongly suggest that the role of extra-institutional activism is crucial to bolster advocacy and secure impacts. When groups are engaged in Commission-led participatory discussion forums alone there is little real impact (Parks, 2015), a point also raised in discussions on new EU participatory forums and 'citizen washing'.[4]

Overall, we know that extra-institutional activism has impacts of different kinds and over different timeframes. We also know that there are clear patterns in cycles of protest, and that contemporary extra-institutional climate activism fits these. Finally, we know that to impact EU decision-making requires both advocacy and protest reacting to the varying political opportunities offered by the EU. This suggests it is key to understand extra-institutional activism as one part of the equation of influence in the EU, and as linked to advocacy rather than as a phenomenon unfolding in isolation.

[4] As termed by the EEB: https://meta.eeb.org/2022/07/13/citizenwashing-what-it-is-and-how-to-spot-it/

2. Mapping contemporary climate activism

This section provides non-exhaustive information on scholarship and other data on contemporary European climate activism of different types. The focus is on extra-institutional climate activism rather than advocacy and institutionalised activism, such as citizens' assemblies: the links between these are further discussed in section 3. The literature search focuses on the period from 2019 to present, understood to cover the current climate protest wave. The three streams distinguished (mass protest, disruptive activism, community creation/direct mitigation actions) are discussed separately, but there are significant overlaps amongst them. Mass protests may contain disruptive actions, protesters also engage in direct mitigation actions such as alternative food networks and repair cafes, and created communities such as climate camps are also sites of protests and civil disobedience.

2.1. Mass protest

Key insights:

- New mass climate protests began at international summits when activists became disillusioned with the lack of progress achieved.
- Protest then began to target national governments and local levels as political opportunities for real change were seen as better there.
- The peak of these protests was in 2019.
- An organisation that attracted much attention was Fridays for Future, which called for national governments to act in line with science to achieve climate and intergenerational justice.
- A wide range of other protest groups also continued to be active, including groups calling for more radical system change, such as Ende Gelände.
- These protests were new in terms of involving many young people, targeting national and local levels, and through the method of school strikes.
- Prominent activists such as Greta Thunberg, Luisa Neubauer, or Vanessa Nakate were invited to speak in different arenas and attracted media coverage.
- These strikes were cited as one reason for the European Green Deal.

Mass climate protests peaked in 2019 before being interrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic. In Europe the key movement organisation for mass protest was Fridays for Future. The Fridays for Future protests emerged against a longer backdrop of disillusionment in global multilateral environmental governance (de Moor 2021; Parks, della Porta and Portos, 2023). This saw a shift away from advocacy to protest, and parallel efforts to link climate change more firmly to environmental justice activism

including questions of environmental racism and struggles against deforestation and mega infrastructure projects understood as colonial and damaging to the rights of local and indigenous communities in the global South (see e.g., Agyeman et al., 2016; Martinez-Alier et al., 2014).

A central element of this protest wave has thus been the move from a frame of climate change to climate justice. The key claim of climate justice movements is that climate change cannot be effectively tackled through attention to environmental questions, such as reducing greenhouse gas emissions, alone. Climate change is produced by a global political economic system that creates various forms of injustices including intergenerational injustice and climate injustice, which is overwhelmingly borne by poorer and more marginalised communities as well as by countries that played little part in creating climate change. Following climate justice arguments, tackling climate change means changing whole systems of environmental, economic, and social governance rather than single policies (Agyeman et al., 2016).

Fridays for Future shares this general frame of climate justice and emphasises intergenerational justice in new ways. When their protests began to take off from 2018, lengthy discussions had already taken place in the climate justice movement about the lack of impact from mass protests at international summits and the need to shift protests to target national governments and fossil fuel industries (de Moor et al., 2021). Protests targeting these had become more prominent from about 2010, while campaigns for fossil fuel disinvestment also took off (ibid., Hestres and Hopke, 2020). More disruptive forms of activism for climate justice, as well as new waves of activism for mitigation (or sustainable materialism) and community creation also began around this time (see sections below).

Fridays for Future was a highly visible part of this more general shift back to mass protest. The movement grew from a solo action by Greta Thunberg, who began skipping school on Fridays to protest the Swedish governments' lack of real action on climate change in 2018. The group grew and spread quickly, not least through the use of social media, and to date there are separate, independent Fridays for Future groups across Europe and the globe, including a European formation as well as supportive groups from other generations (grandparents for future) and sectors (scientists for future).[5] Climate strikes, at local, national, and then at global level are the main form of action of this protest wave. Though associated with Fridays for Future, these strikes saw participation and organisation work from many groups, including Extinction Rebellion, Ende Gelände and many others. The first global climate strike in March 2019 involved around one million people, and the series of climate strikes held in September 2019 in conjunction with a UN climate summit involved six to seven million people (estimates in the literature vary, see e.g., Fisher and Nasrin, 2020; de Moor et al., 2021). What was new about these strikes at the time was the centrality of young people and the way they underlined intergenerational justice by skipping school. The message was that children could abandon

[5] https://www.instagram.com/fridaysforfuture.europe/; https://www.facebook.com/groups/680698432327315; https://scientists4future.org/

their responsibility to go to school since adults had abandoned theirs by failing to secure their futures. The local, national and global strikes did not occur for the main part at international summits, thus joining the new move away from multilateralism (though protests did continue at these meetings too). Together, these protests struck a note with different authorities, and high-level politicians invited Thunberg to give (rather damning) speeches at the UN, the European Parliament and elsewhere, suggesting that they at least felt the need to be seen to respond to youth. Other youth activists from Europe and beyond, such as Luisa Neubauer and Vanessa Nakate, also played leading roles in climate strikes, and spoke in various arenas. These invitations and speeches are clear examples of access impacts.

For Fridays for Future (but not all groups involved in climate strikes), it is states who should be responsible for a proper response to climate change, to be achieved by acting in line with the latest climate science. The group is seen in the literature as more classical in its claims because of this. Calls for state politicians to act and follow science appear out of sync with more radical calls for justice via system change, leading to descriptions of the group (alongside Extinction Rebellion) as emblematic of a 'return to the state' (de Moor et al., 2021: 622).[6] Activists in other protest groups that were and still are an important part of this wave, such as degrowth groups and those organising climate camps, call for more far-reaching changes to local, national, and international systems of environmental governance, and are sceptical that states will act in ways that will achieve climate justice (Cugnata et al., 2022). These groups often have roots in the global justice movement (e.g., Rise Up 4 Climate Justice, and Earth First!). The new protest wave that peaked in 2019 is a sign that citizens want action on climate change, but what form this action should take is a hotly debated issue in movements.

The impacts from the Fridays for Future protests were on young people themselves as well as older supporters who demonstrated for the first time (de Moor et al., 2020: 621).[7] This is an important impact since it is 'putting them on track to remain politically engaged throughout their lives' (ibid.: 621). In other respects, the participants mirror 'the usual suspects': many are either university graduates, or the children of graduates. The strikes tend to target national politicians and governments (ibid., Fisher and Nasrin, 2020), but clear cuts to emissions, a key demand of the strikes, were not forthcoming by the end of 2019 (Thompson, 2020). Given this and a decline in media coverage, moves to different strategies were already being discussed by Fridays for Future in late 2019 (ibid.). The pandemic then saw strikes and their organisation move online: websites joined a digital strike to express support and drive traffic to informative websites as well as garner media coverage.[8] Online action during the pandemic was also geared towards fighting calls to put economic recovery

6 Though the most recent research also notes that this in the Belgian case this is also accompanied by distrust of institutions and talk of opposition to capitalism (Knops and De Vydt, 2023).

7 Much of our knowledge about the impacts and outcomes of Fridays for Future in Europe stems from a large survey project that took place during the March 2019 Global climate strikes in 13 different cities (Wahlström et al., 2019) and at the September 2019 strikes (de Moor et al., 2020).

8 https://digital.globalclimatestrike.net/#impact

first and underline the need for green recovery, and to fight misleading tropes about nature 'healing itself' via the pandemic (Thompson, 2020). As to effects on the EU, information about the European Green Deal and the European Climate Pact has been framed as a response to young citizens in particular.[9] Fridays for Future Europe (and other climate justice groups) has nevertheless been critical of the European Green Deal (ibid.), and of failures in its implementation, particularly around the latest reform of the Common Agricultural Policy and the attempt to reject the Nature Restoration Law in the European Parliament's Environment Committee.[10]

2.2. Disruptive activism

Key insights:

- As mass protests peaked, disruptive activism spearheaded by Extinction Rebellion (XR) was inspired by the same disillusionment in progress on tackling climate change and aims to achieve climate justice.
- XR pioneered disruptive tactics aiming to impact governments and fossil fuel producers and funders via media attention and changed perceptions.
- XR pioneered demands (among other things) for citizens' assemblies.
- When mass protest declined after 2019, disruptive activist groups began to multiply in line with ideas about protest cycles and shifting political opportunities.
- As mass protest had failed to effect serious cuts in emissions some activists shifted to more spectacular strategies, seeing opportunities to shock public opinion, governments and industry into action using fewer activists and rekindling declining media interest.
- Groups like Just Stop Oil, Last Generation and Tyre Extinguishers appear to be a major impact building on Extinction Rebellion's work in this stage of declining mass protest.

Post COVID-19 pandemic, attention to more disruptive forms of climate activism has risen. The turn to disruptive protest is linked to strategies developed by Extinction Rebellion (XR) from 2018, and after the post-2019 decline in mass protest. XR formed in the UK against the backdrop of discussions about the lack of impacts from mass protest: just as Fridays for Future moved protests away from summits and into cities, XR's disruptive activism also targeted cities and fossil fuel funders and

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[9] This insight is drawn from an unpublished draft paper presented by Amanda Machin at the first GreenDeal-NET conference workshop on Democracy and the European Green Deal, held in Lisbon in June 2023.

[10] Rival protests and activism by industrial farmers and climate justice activists have characterized both, suggesting an important axis of polarization on climate issues in EU politics. E.g., https://fridaysforfuture.org/change-the-cap/; https://www.euractiv.com/section/agriculture-food/news/rival-protests-take-to-strasbourg-streets-over-eu-nature-restoration-law/

producers to achieve more direct impacts (de Moor et al., 2021). A central motivation given by the founders of XR as a 'civil disobedience movement which uses nonviolent direct-action strategies' was climate inaction (Smiles and Edwards, 2021: 1445). A second motivation for the choice of more disruptive strategies is linked in the literature to the theme of the depoliticization of climate and environmental activism (and activism in general) in the decades following the end of the Cold War (Blühdorn and Deflorian, 2021). The gist of this argument is that current environmental governance splits problems into discrete, technical issues to be solved by experts. This type of governance is linked with market logics that have prevailed since the end of the Cold War and have left little to no space for truly 'political' activism which challenges the governance system rather than single decisions (for example about levels of GHG emissions, or about the behaviour of a single industry). Engaging in disruptive action is one way to engage politically where other kinds of institutional activism fail to address systemic problems, and where political opportunities are closed (e.g., de Moor, Catney and Doherty, 2021).

In October 2018, XR published its Declaration of Rebellion followed up with major protest events in London; a first International Rebellion was held in April 2019 and a second in October 2019 (Gardner, Carvalho and Valenstain, 2022). The group was also involved in the Global Climate Strike of September 2019 alongside Fridays for Future. XR protests were prominent at the Glasgow climate summit in late 2021. XR's 'campaigns were designed to garner media attention and disseminate their narrative of climate emergency, utilising civil disobedience and spectacular repertoires' (ibid.: 431). Mass protests are one part of XR's activist repertoire, highlighting overlaps between types of activism, but are combined with civil disobedience, such as blocking bridges and roads, 'rebellions of one' where single protesters block streets by sitting on pedestrian crossings, 'die-ins' where activists stage their deaths to disrupt traffic, and actions targeting fossil fuel infrastructure such as petrol stations, fossil fuel industry headquarters, and major funders via occupations, activists gluing themselves to buildings, and more (see e.g., Stuart, 2022). Some of these actions are new to the realm of climate activism, particularly those involving performative elements such as the temporary defacement of works of art in public spaces, die-ins, or the colourful interruption of sporting events. Others are not new, such as occupations and roadblocks, but they all involve innovations such as the use of glue or the one-person roadblock.

XR's core demands are for governments to 'tell the truth', 'act now' - later net zero by 2025 (ibid.), and to move 'beyond politics' by setting up and agreeing to respect the decisions of a Citizens' Assembly on climate and ecological justice' (XR cited in Smiles and Edwards, 2021). Their calls for climate assemblies show the clear links between extra-institutional and institutional activism further discussed in section 3.2. XR activists call for broad system change in line with climate justice (Stuart, 2022), and over time included global climate justice arguments following criticism (ibid., and Smiles

and Edwards, 2021)[11]. XR spread very quickly, with new chapters set up across the UK, Europe, and to a lesser extent across the globe (and more commonly in English-speaking countries). Gardner, Carvalho and Valenstain (2022) found 1265 active chapters of XR worldwide in June 2021. This quick spread is in part due to the decentralised form of the group, where chapters use the XR 'brand' but organise autonomously (ibid.). This spread in groups using disruptive civil disobedience strategies is seen as a main impact of XR on the field of climate activism itself, where each major XR protest drives the creation of new chapters (ibid.).

XR's impact also seems to cover the creation and rise of other groups using disruptive nonviolent strategies to draw attention to climate justice. One founder member of XR, Roger Hallam, left the group in July 2020 and was then involved in forming Insulate Britain, another civil disobedience group that used strategies including roadblocks from July 2021. Hallam and other XR members were also involved in the foundation of Just Stop Oil in February 2022. Just Stop Oil is best known for actions involving throwing soup at works of art, disturbing sporting events and the like. It was formed after XR UK announced it would 'temporarily shift away from public disruption as a primary tactic' moving instead towards less confrontational strategies aimed at 'bridge building'.[12] Another group attracting media attention, Last Generation, was formed in 2021 and is most active in Germany, Austria and Italy. This group also uses disruptive protests including targeting works of art (without damaging them) and roadblocks.

The XR type model of providing basic 'branding', literature and guidance also applies to Tyre Extinguishers, a call to action more than a formal group. Tyre Extinguishers provides resources for individuals wishing to highlight problems with the use of SUVs in urban centres by letting the air out of their tyres. The resources provided are clear about how this should be done safely, and explanations of why such action is considered morally justified. These actions have spread in the US, UK, Belgium and Italy in recent years, and have been discussed as morally proportionate to the level of damage done by SUVs (Mohorčich, 2023). Just Stop Oil, Last Generation and other disruptive climate activist groups are linked (and funded) via the A22 network (A22 is funded in turn through the Climate Emergency Fund).[13] All this suggests that XR has impacts beyond the spread of its own chapters, inspiring new disruptive activism.

As mentioned, disruptive activist groups share a theory of change that disruptive activism can effectively pressure governments, political parties, industry actors, international organisations and individuals to make far-reaching changes. Some impacts mentioned in the literature are governments' declarations of climate emergency (Smiles and Edwards, 2021; Thompson, 2020) as well as impacts on the debate on climate change in the UK (Saunders, Doherty and Hayes, 2020). Scholars

[11] Criticisms centred on the white, middle-class make-up of the group and what this meant for its demands and strategies. E.g., https://www.vice.com/en/article/mbm3q4/extinction-rebellion-xr-is-shaped-by-middle-class-white-people-it-does-not-serve-people-of-color

[12] https://extinctionrebellion.uk/2022/12/31/we-quit/

[13] https://a22network.org/en/; https://www.climateemergencyfund.org/

overwhelmingly agree that longer-term impacts are likely despite initial backlash from media and politicians.[14] XR's call for the introduction of climate assemblies, which is shared by other groups including Last Generation, is echoed at the EU level in the Climate Pact and in the encouragement of Assemblies by Commission President von der Leyen. Other scholars point to the ongoing debates in the climate justice movement about the need for system change and underline the deviation between XR's claims about system change and its specific demands (Stuart, 2022). Another less positive impact is about repressive responses. The UK has passed legislation that narrows the possibilities for protest by introducing heavy penalties and focusing on disruptive activism by smaller groups of people, and recent moves in other European countries also crack down on this kind of activism: this risks drawing attention away from the seriousness of climate change to focus blame about societal disruption on activists instead (see e.g., Mead, 2021), and underlines the need for alliances and support amongst activists as discussed in Section 3.

2.3. Direct mitigation actions and community creation

Key insights:

- Some groups reacted to changing political opportunities by taking up direct mitigation and community creation strategies.
- These were also a result of another protest cycle around the financial crisis in Europe, which after a peak of protest in 2011 saw a burgeoning number of groups providing social services no longer covered by the state.
- For the climate protest cycle, groups providing ecological services that aim to demonstrate different ways of life, build community resources, and thereby indirectly challenge existing governance systems are central.
- These moves can be understood as reactions to changing political opportunities. They denote a wish amongst activists to demonstrate the possibility of ecological alternatives and make a concrete contribution. Debates about whether these kinds of activism achieve this are prominent in the literature, and this is key to interpreting the extent of the impacts of such activism.
- Overall, it seems that more local service provision groups have difficulty having real political impacts, while community creation activism – like climate camps – have more.

Scholars have also discussed direct mitigation actions as a form of contemporary activism. Such actions include a wide range of activities where groups organise autonomously to fulfil social,

[14] https://www.apollosurveys.org/social-change-and-protests/

economic, and cultural needs in ecologically sound ways outside the normal models and spaces of the market and government. They can include 'food banks and community gardens via collaborative housing and social centres to recycling networks and repair cafes' (Blühdorn and Deflorian, 2021). Also known as 'environmental alternative action organisations' (de Moor, Catney, and Doherty, 2021) and forms of 'sustainable materialism' (Schlosberg and Coles, 2016; Schlosberg and Craven, 2019) within a broader category of 'direct social action' (Zamponi and Bosi, 2018), these groups provide sustainable services and goods and try to demonstrate that climate friendly ways of living are possible. They are organised in solidaristic, democratic ways, intended to challenge power balances in society. Being voluntary and collective, this kind of activism can also be understood as a form of community creation. Other types of community creation for the climate not centred around service provision include climate camps and other occupied spaces – such as protest camps at the sites of proposed new infrastructure projects, or forest occupations like that underway in Poland - where people seek to live in climate friendly, democratic, and non-impactful ways and protect lands and waters (Müller, 2022).[15]

Both direct mitigation and community creation projects emerged strongly in the new wave of climate activism. Both have also been linked to the wave of protest around the financial crisis in Europe: camps were a prominent feature of the movement of the squares (also known as the Indignados or Occupy movement), and direct social action was also a clear impact from this movement in Europe (Varvarousis, Asara and Akbulut, 2021). In Europe, the austerity packages of the financial crisis meant that basic needs were not being met in many communities, and this coincided with the turn to the local and the wish to take concrete climate action in the climate justice movement. Direct mitigation and community creation activism thus became more common after the financial crisis in Europe. One example is bottom-up energy communities. A wide variety of energy communities are discussed in work on transitions. Those described as 'social innovations' fit the template of activism as they are community-led and take participatory, bottom-up approaches to produce renewable energy as a social good. They have faced important policy barriers and difficulties in securing funding affecting their performance (Dall'Orsoletta et al., 2022).

Whether direct mitigation projects and community creation can impact climate governance beyond providing green local services is a contentious issue in the literature. More positive assessments often focus on prefiguration, i.e. the idea that activists can create spaces in which they can live out the claims they make through other forms of activism (like mass protest) at a smaller scale. Prefiguration demonstrates that the kinds of change they are asking for are possible and replicable. Blühdorn and Deflorian (2021) talk about the '*possibility* of bottom-up democracy and sustainable modes of producing and consuming' (p.264). The different way of organising challenges the technocratic

[15] While such infrastructure opposition has often been dismissed as a symptom of NIMBYism (not in my backyard), analyses have shown clear environmental concerns at work (e.g., Imperatore, 2018).

approaches criticized in the broader movement, particularly if they can be 'scaled up' and replicated (ibid.; Schlosberg and Coles, 2016; Schlosberg and Craven, 2019).

Drawing on the debate on the depoliticisation of environmental activism sketched in section 2.2, more sceptical assessments argue that direct mitigation projects and community creation are unable to change governance systems. First, individual consumption and lifestyle choices have been shown to be insufficient to halt the climate crisis, even if achieved at massive scale (MacGregor 2021). Such activism is thus seen as a sign of co-optation away from political opposition towards providing services (Blühdorn and Deflorian, 2021). It is also seen as contributing to reproducing patterns of colonialism at the global scale by indirectly supporting the continuation of current governance models' their reliance on other parts of the planet (Blühdorn and Deflorian, 2021; see also Choudry and Kapoor, 2013). Others have pointed out that related scholarship has failed to account for the costs of labour involved and who can afford to engage in such work (MacGregor, 2021).

Accordingly, the impacts of these types of activism are ambivalent and not clear-cut. Hence, one part of the scholarship on bottom-up energy communities gas found that these communities have impacts on access to energy and building spaces for democratic and participatory engagement at the local level, but hardly challenge energy governance models more generally (2022). According to de Moor, Catney, and Doherty (2021), activist found more overtly political activism difficult to organise due to their reliance on continued support from authorities and the diversity of their groups' membership resulting from their growth. In contrast, MacGregor (2021) notes that these kinds of activism possess more political qualities if considered coping mechanisms under neoliberalism. Some types of community creation like climate camps also involve activists politically 'rejecting' and 'disengaging' from governance systems (Pelizzoni, 2021). More broadly, direct mitigation and community creation activists also tend to be involved in more overtly political activism types like mass protest (de Moor et al., 2020). As already noted, climate camps also host protest actions with political impacts, for example on decisions on coal mining (Müller, 2022).

Direct mitigation activism may affect European decision-making at best indirectly. One relevant example concerns bottom-up energy communities, encouraged and supported by the EU via the recast EU Renewables and Electricity Directives (Savaresi, 2019). The local political effects of other types of community creation activism, particularly around opposition to projects (e.g., climate camps opposing mining projects) (Müller, 2022), may also produce broader political repercussions.

A Note on *Artivism* as a New Form of Climate Activism

What is artivism and what is new about it?

Artivism, or creative activism, refers to the use of art by social movements to achieve a specific goal (Jordan, 2016). Artivism includes all types of creations like illustrations, light installations, videos, and performances, and is a relatively new type of activism that has gained prominence in recent years within climate movements, such as XR (Stammen and Meissner, 2022).

It has been argued that the power of art to change individual behaviour, move people, and spur societal change has been recognized (and even feared by some) for much of human history (Duncombe, 2016). Yet, art used for a functional activist purpose has been especially observed in recent decades (Groys 2014) and has evolved rapidly in the 21st century with the emergence of new technologies and social media platforms (Weij and Berkers, 2022).

Through social media, geographies of artivism have been blurred and audiences exposed to the artwork are sometimes very young (Rodal et al., 2019). Access to digital spaces has led to international collaborations such as the Artivist Network,[16] The Center for Artistic Activism,[17] Art 350,[18] or Beautiful Trouble[19] that organise trainings,[20] work on common projects[21] and share their artwork and toolkits freely through open-source databases such as the Commons Social Change Library.[22] This is relevant to existing climate movements, such as Fridays for Future, as young climate activists have adopted social media platforms and digital tools as key spaces and means for mobilising and expressing themselves (Belotti et al., 2022).

Why do people engage in artivism?

Artivism has many of the same motivations as other forms of activism, such as raising awareness and educating the public (Aladro-Vico et al., 2018; Rodriguez-Labajos, 2022) and mobilization (Sommer and Klöckner, 2021). What sets artivism apart is the motivation to express, communicate and process emotions. For example, XR has been shown to engage in artistic and creative actions not only to convey messages about ecological breakdown but also to ignite certain emotions among their audiences and to allow activists to share and experience their emotions together (Stammen and Meissner, 2022).

Another motivation for engaging in artivism has been the strengthening of voices that are often not heard. Fortes et al. (2023) highlight how indigenous communities have used artivism to amplify their message of protest against extractivism and colonization. Some artivists have

16 See more about the Artivist Network here: https://www.artivistnetwork.org

17 Activities of the Center for Artistic Activism can be explored on their website: https://c4aa.org

18 See the resources provided by the Art350 initiative: https://art.350.org/resources/

19 Further information on the Beautiful Trouble can be found here: https://beautifultrouble.org/about

20 Trainings and workshops are held on various topics such as Climate Justice Artivism: https://www.artivistnetwork.org/workshops

21 See, for example, the 'Pollution Pods' project by ClimArt: https://www.climart.info/pollutionpods

22 https://commonslibrary.org/creative-activism-start-here/

aimed at giving a voice to the beings and phenomena that cannot speak for themselves, such as glaciers, by using visual art to express invisible realities and provoke an emotional response to the impacts of climate change (for example, by photographing the quietly disappearing glaciers in the Alps and making sculptures and interactive installations about other climate change phenomena).[23]

Effects and affects

Main impacts associated with artivism seem to be linked to its strong emotional response among the public, without this necessarily or always translating into action. The impact on emotions is sometimes called an affect, and it has been argued that in combination with more tangible effects of activism, artivism can have a powerful effect on moving people to act (e.g., Duncombe, 2016). When emotions are activated and issues are portrayed in novel and often visually startling ways, creative forms of activism can be memorable and potentially impact people's behaviour (Duncombe & Harrebye, 2022). Climate artivism might lead to strong emotions, reflections over environmental issues and self-reported willingness to take action. However, it has been difficult to demonstrate concrete effects in the form of real actions or mobilisation (Sommer et al., 2019; Stammen & Meissner, 2022).

The type of art used for activism appears to matter and may elicit diverse responses. In their study of responses to different artwork shown during COP21 in Paris in 2015, Sommer and Klöckner (2021) found that pieces depicting beautiful, awe-inspiring, and hopeful portrayals of nature and the solutions to climate change had the greatest emotional and cognitive responses from the audience, leaving them feeling motivated to act. In contrast, dystopian artwork showing the problems without solutions left the audience feeling depressed, hopeless, and unmoved to take action. This suggests that a hopeful and solution-oriented artivism is most effective at motivating the public. Similarly, policymakers may become inspired to act if exposed to the right type of climate art.

Finally, literature suggests that artivism can have more direct political effects by encouraging individuals to become politically active and participate in actions aimed at changing climate policy. Sanz and Rodriguez-Labajos (2021) found that art used in an anti-coal activism struggle in California not only raised awareness but also helped to engage a wider public (particularly women and youth of colour) and increase public participation in decision-making. In another study from the US (Li et al., 2023), visually appealing and artistic representation of data was found to elicit stronger positive emotions towards climate actions and reduce political divide on climate change issues. According to Bentz (2020), art can transcend its role as a mere communication tool, owing to its transformative power to impact those that engage with it directly, suggesting potential biographical effects. The political effects of artivism, including its interactions with other forms of climate activism, remain a matter of further research.

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[23] See interview with Laurence Piaget-Dubuis in the Arte documentary "Twist: Art against climate change", https://www.arte.tv/en/videos/110325-006-A/twist/; article about the artist in: https://agenda.culturevalais.ch/fr/artist/show/523; see also https://watergaw.ch/

3. Impacts of climate activism on European decision-making

Drawing on this brief analysis and the literature, two key insights on the impacts of contemporary climate activism on EU decision-making emerge.

3.1 Significant agenda and access impacts

Mass protests and disruptive activism have had significant agenda and access impacts at the EU level. The two types of impacts are closely linked and interact. First, and in line with general findings on the political impacts of environmental activism (Parks, 2015), they have significantly contributed to moving climate change up the European policy agenda. Perhaps most significantly, there is strong evidence that climate activism was a major driving force of the European Green Deal launched in 2019 and implemented since (see above).

Mass protest and peaceful disruptive strategies have furthermore created important access impacts. In line with scholarly insights on the evolution of protest cycles discussed above (section 1.2), the European Parliament and the European Commission have responded to intensified climate activism from the late 2010s by enhancing access opportunities. Hence, Greta Thunberg was invited to address the European Parliament, while the European Commission established new spaces for dialogues, for example by setting up the European Climate Pact, in the context of the Conference on the Future of Europe, and through established mechanisms such as public consultations, as well as by encouraging bottom-up participatory mechanisms such as citizen assemblies/panels.[24] Enhanced access has contributed to declines in mass protests. As some activists have moved towards engaging in dialogue, others have shifted to more disruptive types of activism which has helped maintain activist pressure. In response, some authorities in Europe (for example, the UK government) have begun to restrict possibilities for protest.

Questions remain about the extent to which new spaces for inclusion and dialogue have translated and will translate into real impact on policies. Literature has pointed to the danger that enhanced access and participatory opportunities may serve to calm, co-opt and eventually depoliticise activism (silencing or excluding radical voices) rather than to change policy in transformative ways (e.g. Parks, 2015; Blühdorn and Deflorian, 2021). While spaces for dialogue built by activists themselves avoid these issues, their integration into actual policymaking faces challenges.

3.2 Enhanced policy impacts through combining climate activism outside institutions with advocacy work inside institutions

Scientific findings suggest that combining extra-institutional climate activism with intra-institutional advocacy holds particular promise for realising policy impact. The evidence is particularly strong for the combination of mass protest and advocacy, for example in successful campaigns against trade

[24] https://www.buergerrat.de/en/news/eu-commission-president-wants-european-citizens-panels/

agreements such as the Anti-Counterfeiting Trade Agreement (ACTA), Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) and Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement (CETA), but also in case of the Services and Ports Directives (Parks, 2015; Crespy and Parks, 2017; Oleart, 2021; Leiren and Parks, 2014). Similarly, mass protests and advocacy aligned in discussions on the proposed Nature Restoration Law in 2023: advocacy groups and green forces advocated inside the Parliament and climate activists marched outside the Parliament in a networked action that ultimately 'saved' the Law. In these cases, networks between advocacy groups and activist groups were in place. These networks were not necessarily close or formal and did not rest on perfect agreement. As the overall aim was shared, however, mass protests served to strengthen the hand of advocacy groups by signalling popular support and concern.

Evidence for the combined impact of disruptive activism and advocacy is less certain, but there are indications that contemporary disruptive activists and advocacy groups working together could stimulate new participatory mechanisms. In the aforementioned cases, impact actually relied on a combination of mass protests and disruptive activism. Cases where media-oriented activism was present without mass protest was found to result in fewer or no impacts on EU decisions (Parks, 2015). However, the disruptive activism of the current protest wave may have better chances if combined with advocacy. It has attracted a great deal of media attention, has sparked popular debate, and comes at a particular point in the protest cycle and under favourable political conditions for impact. The potential for aligning contemporary climate activism and advocacy is also high because the core demand of disruptive activist groups such as Extinction Rebellion and the Last Generation for the establishment of citizen climate assemblies or similar is shared by many more advocacy-oriented groups. Combined and coordinated action by climate activists and advocacy groups may help establish such assemblies (and other participatory spaces) and ensure their effective and meaningful design (relating to membership/composition, process, and use of outputs), avoiding the problems of 'citizen washing' found in more institutionally controlled consultations. Activism and advocacy groups working together could also help enhance the impact of bottom-up participatory mechanisms deployed by climate activists on policymaking. A pre-condition for this type of impact is to protect the right to protest in Europe, and to avoid and address media and political framings of climate justice activists as a threat.

Notable impact has also been observed as a result of alliances and networks between direct mitigation and community creation activism and advocacy. One example is the EU's recast EU Renewables and Electricity Directives that built on existing experience with energy communities to foster regulatory support for them. While studies on how advocacy and direct activism from energy communities combined to produce this result are lacking, it suggests potential space for impactful link-ups between activism and advocacy. International biodiversity law provides another powerful example of how advocacy and local community action can reinforce each other. Here, the recognition of local community protocols achieved via advocacy by NGOs together with representatives of Indigenous Peoples and local communities further empowered local projects and communities. These

experiences then fed back into international decision-making through formal alliances and mechanisms (Tsioumani and Parks, 2023). Such a feedback loop presupposes that existing laws and regulations are effectively implemented and can be changed and adapted to new lessons (Dryzek and Pickering, 2018).

4. Options for enabling impactful activism

In this section we discuss key options for enabling impactful activism derived from the preceding analysis.

4.1. Building meaningful participatory spaces for enhancing EU climate governance

To enable meaningful impact by climate activism and thereby enhance EU climate governance, our analysis leads us to suggest focusing on developing two participatory spaces. First, participatory mechanisms at the EU level can be advanced to this end. Second, existing spaces for bottom-up participation built by activists and others can be recognised, supported, and developed.

As discussed above, well-established and newer, innovative mechanisms at the EU-level include public consultations of the European Commission, public hearings, the European Climate Pact, citizen assemblies or citizen panels. In addition, the Conference on the Future of Europe deserves mention in this context. These mechanisms have so far mainly been employed ad hoc rather than systematically. In addition, there are questions about how far these spaces allow for open dialogue and result in real influence. Criticisms have especially concerned the lack of co-creation/design possibilities, limitations of participation especially of under-represented groups, and a lack of clarity about the use and impact of the outputs in/on policymaking. Allowing participants more ownership of the structure, timing, format, and questions to be discussed could help address concerns about distortions from the ideal of deliberation (Young, 2004).

Developing and reforming these EU-level mechanisms could serve to draw in more participation by climate activists, tap into their innovative ideas, expertise and potential solutions (Scoones et al., 2020; Dryzek, 2005; Schlosberg and Coles, 2016) and help improve EU climate governance, especially by:

a) Increasing the breadth and inclusiveness of participation, including by reaching out specifically to under-represented groups (including activists).

b) Enabling (co-)designing the participatory process so as to minimise biases and enable a broad and deliberative process co-owned by participants (also enabling discussion of more fundamental EU reform) designed to be reflexive in view of the need for adaptive climate policies.

c) Ensuring clear information about how exactly outputs of participatory mechanisms will be used in subsequent decision-making, a commitment to such use, and related transparency and accountability.

Existing spaces for bottom-up participation built by activists and others possess significant potential that remains to be tapped more fully. Participatory decision-making inside social movement organisations (global justice movement, Occupy, Extinction Rebellion) has been found to be much closer

to deliberative ideals (though of course not perfect) and crucial to developing shared ideas about ways to tackle societal problems amongst different actors (della Porta and Rucht, 2013; Castells, 2012; Extinction Rebellion n.d.). Climate activists and others have also developed bottom-up participatory mechanisms such as (local) citizen assemblies.

Such existing bottom-up participatory mechanisms could foster the impact of climate activism in two ways. First, they can inform the design of impactful participatory mechanisms at the EU level, as just discussed, driving deliberative and participatory innovation. Furthermore, the substantive outcomes could inform EU decision-making to enhance the effectiveness of climate policy measures. The discussed strengthened inclusiveness of EU-level mechanisms may facilitate such bottom-up learning. In addition, specific channels for transporting relevant lessons could be built and expanded, while side-stepping co-optation concerns. For example, the outcomes of bottom-up processes could be explicitly considered in EU decision-making by the European institutions involved, and related procedural rules could be established. In so doing, the relevant bottom-up spaces could be supported and recognised.

Beyond shaping of EU agendas and legislation, mechanisms could usefully also extend to policy and implementation review. Here, direct mitigation and community creation activists have significant relevant knowledge and (local) expertise on mitigation and social outcomes to offer (Schlosberg and Coles, 2019). Their stronger participation could encourage positive feedback loops into EU climate policy from local innovation as called for by scholars of transformative environmental governance (Scoones et al., 2019; Dryzek and Pickering, 2018).

Building such meaningful participatory spaces both strengthens democracy and requires the respect (and enforcement) of democratic standards. On the one side, democracy is a fundamental condition for climate (and other) activism to be impactful and constructive, including for more action on climate change (Fisher and Nasrin, 2020). On the other side, creating more meaningful spaces for participation in climate policy could serve to reinforce the EU's democratic credentials.

4.2. Fostering meaningful spaces for democratic participation in EU member states

To a significant extent, EU climate (and energy) governance is shaped in and by EU member states. Climate (and energy) policy forms a shared competence of the EU and its member states, and member states have much leeway in passing climate measures and implementing broad EU directives. Therefore, the aforementioned options apply not only to the EU level but also to EU member states.

The EU can provide important guidance to the member states (and other actors) in this respect, also to ensure a level playing field and (minimum) standards of participatory democratic governance across the Union. Accordingly, the 2018 Governance Regulation (Regulation on the Governance of the Energy Union and Climate Action) contains relevant rules on public consultations and the establishment of multi-level energy and climate dialogues in the member states (Oberthür et al., 2023) (whereas the 2021 European Climate Law contains some minimal provisions on public participation

at the EU level). Further developing, extending and concretising this guidance along the lines above would hold significant potential to advance public participation and encourage participation by climate activists across EU member states.

In addition, the EU can help preserve the space for climate activism, seeking to ensure it is not unduly restricted. The right to protest is a key ingredient of vital democracy, while engaging in civil disobedience has been key to securing vital state action in the past. The right to peaceful assembly is also a crucial human right and as such protected under international and European law. Recognising this right in EU climate law may help to further bolster protection against restrictive measures that have recently been enacted in some countries, and counter the shifting of urgency and alarm to the actions of activists rather than the climate crisis itself.

4.3. Enhancing funding/support for activist networks

Financial support to help activists build alliances or networks could help to expand the existing impacts on climate policy. More formal, stable and longstanding networks or alliances between advocacy NGOs and extra-institutional activists in the EU would allow for effective combinations of activism and advocacy as well as positive learning feedback loops. Supporting networks could especially help in combining activism and advocacy that has been found to be key for impacting EU decision-making. The spaces provided by the EU for participation and advocacy are not easily accessible for extra-institutional activists, because they require formal structure and considerable knowledge of EU institutions. While this has driven the specialisation of EU environmental NGOs, it has also led to declining links with extra-institutional activists due to limited resources and the difficulty of communicating and coordinating around the technical complexity of EU institutions (Parks, 2015). Support for alliance and network building could counter this trend and enable the re-building of links. In so doing, it may also help foster the bottom-up learning discussed in section 4.1 above.

Relevant financial support could in principle be provided by private funders, but also by the EU itself (not least in its efforts to promote effective democracy). The question of EU support is, however, complicated by concerns about co-optation and depoliticization, particularly if funding is tied to specific projects (Choudry and Kapoor, 2013). Offering funding to networks rather than individual groups could help address concerns about co-optation by the EU to some extent. To the same end, financial support should be provided for operational costs and on a long-term basis rather than the more common project-based approach including requirements to demonstrate quantifiable outcomes. This would free groups from heavy reporting responsibilities on (quantitative) aims achieved. Application procedures should be accessible for groups that do not hold extensive knowledge of the EU.

From the analysis above, we conclude that enabling impactful climate activism in the EU requires a multifaceted approach. First, the EU should cultivate meaningful participatory spaces at both the EU and member state levels, and allow bottom-up participatory mechanisms cultivated by activists to inform and enrich EU decision-making processes. Second, fostering meaningful democratic participation within EU member states is needed, with the EU guiding and safeguarding the space for

climate activism, protecting the right to peaceful protest and assembly. Lastly, providing straightforward financial support, particularly for ongoing operational expenses rather than project-based funding, has the potential to develop and strengthen activist networks and alliances, enhancing their capacity for meaningful impact. In this integrated approach, democracy and climate action go hand in hand, reinforcing the EU's commitment to addressing climate change and ensuring that diverse voices are heard and contribute to shaping climate policy.

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GreenDeal-NET (The European Green Deal: Governing the EU's Transition towards Climate Neutrality and Sustainability) is a Jean Monnet Network that aims to dissect the European Green Deal, and the complex set of governance challenges related to sustainability and climate neutrality it poses. The network aims to deepen our understanding of what a fair and effective climate transition could look like by focusing on the governance of the European Green Deal, by acting as a platform for collaboration and debate on teaching and research.

The core network consists of 12 European universities and is coordinated by the Centre for Environment, Economy and Energy of the Brussels School of Governance that is part of the Vrije Universiteit Brussel (VUB). Moreover, GreenDeal-NET expands beyond these core partners to include an ever-growing number of institutions as Associate Members and individuals as experts, from Europe and beyond, while reaching out to other key actors working on the EU's climate and sustainability transition.

GreenDeal-NET builds on previous successful networking projects, including the COST Action on Innovations in Climate Governance (INOGOV) and the Jean Monnet Network entitled "Governing the EU's Climate and Energy Transition in Turbulent Times" (GOVTRAN).

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