EU HEADLINES

NATIONAL PERSPECTIVES OF EUROPEAN DEBATES

Drilling down into COP28

Amidst an especially heated COP28 taking place in the oil-rich United Arab Emirates, we take a look at the state of the conference, some of the controversies surrounding it this year, and reactions from states and activists.

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Adding fuel to the fire

After one week of COP28 and with still one week to go, *France24* reports that all eyes are on the burning topic of fossil fuels at the annual Conference of the Parties of the UNFCCC held in Dubai, attended by 70,000 stakeholders. Responsible for 80% of greenhouse gas emissions, fossil fuels are a key issue at this COP, as this year's Presidency is driven by the urgency to counter accusations of greenwashing and is faced with the controversy surrounding the decision to host a climate conference in the oil-rich United Arab Emirates monarchy. Adding to the fire, the Sultan al-Jaber stated at an event on Sunday 3 December that "no scientific study, no scenario, says that the exit from fossil fuels will allow us to reach 1.5°C." Public draft texts, which serve as basis for discussion, indeed include fossil fuels and give the option of either a "phasing out" or "phasing down". The former formulation was decried by several countries such as Poland, China or India, while other states, especially in the Pacific, are in favour of the latter option. On Wednesday, a third way emerged: the objective of an "orderly and fair exit from fossil fuels". The article warns that this option might divert from the original goal to get a consensus on the phasing out of fossil fuels.

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Taking the temperature

Global stocktake (GST), or "an obligatory report card of global climate action", as coined by the *Irish Times*, is an exercise of evaluation and self-reflection for the countries of the world upon their efforts to curb greenhouse gas emissions. Named as one of the "better outcomes" and "most robust aspects" of the 2015 Paris Agreement, GST ordains individual states to examine their emission sources and quantified associated emissions to determine the maximum "safe" amount of greenhouse gases the country is okay to produce, along with assessing resilience to climate impacts and availability of finance imperative to addressing the climate crisis. Put together during this year's COP28, the aggregated data demonstrates the world's insufficient progress and gloomy prospects for keeping the global temperatures from rising above the 1.5°C from pre-industrial levels. On the flip side, this reality check can be a make-or-break factor to incentivise the states and investors to revise their climate commitments, scale up their nationally determined contributions, implement meaningful climate laws, stick to carbon budgets, and phase out fossil fuels. Environmental and climate groups contend it also requires parties to respect, promote and consider their respective obligations on human rights, gender equality, and intergenerational equity. Thus, it is safe to conclude, the negotiations in Dubai are as hot as 2023 itself.

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Too crude for comfort

In striking contrast to the vibrant crowds of climate activists and supporters marching down the streets of Glasgow in 2021, the manicured streets of the former Expo City in Dubai during COP28 are mostly populated by over 1300 lobbyists, officials, representatives of the oil and gas world, VIPs from fashion and business, influencers who came to take a selfie with the famous people of the moment but also many families, observes *La Republica*. Despite the record attendance of over 90,000 registrations, nowhere in sight are the flags and faces of Extinction Rebellion, Fridays for Future, and Just Stop Oil, demanding climate justice, a farewell to fossil fuels and quick and concrete actions to limit global warming. Not only did the absurdity of the COP's President being an oil tycoon discourage many young people from attempting to make their voices heard against emissions from fossil fuels – the demonstrations and protests are not allowed or must be authorised by the COP's administration itself. Hindered by the cost and complicated logistics of the location divided into the Blue zone for delegates, politicians and accredited people and the Green zone, where young people, startups and the pavilions dedicated to innovation and sustainability reside, the activists in attendance are left to resort to creative protest tactics. Taking inspiration from feminist movements, those present in Dubai are dressing in a different colour every day: white for rights and solidarity with Palestine, yellow to support climate finance, orange to ask for the farewell of fossils, and blue for loss and damage.

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Gassing up the politicians

Amidst various outrages surrounding the COP28, *RTBF* details the complicated and controversial influence of fossil fuel lobbyists on the conference, with the help of several researchers from various countries. Representatives from the UAE met with about 30 countries beforehand to make deals, and this year's convention hosted at least 2456 fossil fuel lobbyists – for reference, that is more than the delegations of the 10 most vulnerable countries combined. Accreditation for the COP carries over year to year, which can cause issues if an organisation changes focus or takes money in exchange for influence. Further, fossil fuel representatives can manage to obtain the badge meant only for states, giving access to top-level decisionmakers – when asked by *RTBF* if these certifications conflict with UN rules, no answer has been given as of yet. The EU's representative at COP28, freshly minted Commissioner Wopke Hoekstra, has also been raising eyebrows given his business and consultancy background; so far he has failed to provide specifics of his work for McKinsey, which, considering the consultancy has advised at least 43 of the 100 most polluting companies, could shed light on potential conflicts of interest. Business' talking points to justify their participation is that they want to be part of the solution, but their ability to shift discourse and exert influence is clear and reflected in past resolutions. Though this problem is nothing new, this year the UN recognised the lack of transparency and modified its accreditation process.

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