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Europe Needs to Stop Rejecting Climate Adaptation



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*By Irina Slav **

The June heatwave in Western Europe ignited an online debate about air-conditioning, revealed to the world that for many Europeans spending the hottest months of the year in comfort was a moral problem, and put a consistently overlooked aspect of climate change policies into the spotlight: adaptation.

For the past ten years, the European Union has singularly focused on what it calls mitigation measures to counteract unfavorable climatic changes. The assertion that these are human-made and therefore it is human action that can arrest them has been at the centre of decision-making, and this has been a mistake. Because while Europe sweltered and, reportedly, people died from heat-related conditions just so the continent could keep its emissions of carbon dioxide low, China and India cranked up the coal power plants to keep their citizens cool in peak temperatures.

It has often been argued that Europe's efforts to reduce its carbon footprint are meaningless if other continents are humming along without concerning themselves too much with their own footprint. China gets a lot of praise for being the largest investor in wind and solar power generation, and the biggest EV market, but it also gets criticized for building more and more coal generation capacity—because China considers adaptation more important than mitigation. Reuters recently reported that between 2021 and 2025, as much as 72% of the European Union's spending on climate change focused on so-called mitigation, otherwise known as emission reduction, mostly through replacing hydrocarbons with alternative sources of electricity and subsidising electric car sales. This left just 18% of total spending for adaptation measures, with another 9% split between the two priority areas.

Clearly, this is nowhere near enough when trains have to stop because it is too hot for them to run, when patients in hospitals reportedly suffer additionally for lack of air-conditioning and when power outages occur because the grid has not been adapted for such heatwaves.

Granted, heatwaves are not necessarily a stable trend. In some parts of Europe, such as Bulgaria, this year's early summer has been cooler than the summers of the past four years. However, it pays to be prepared, and this includes measures that may interfere with the EU's exemplary track record in emission reduction – because this emission reduction has come at a cost. The cost, according to the many industries that have borne it, is energy demand destruction and loss of competitiveness. As an originally economic bloc that prioritises competitiveness, perhaps the leadership in Brussels needs to stop fixating on emissions.

Fixation, according to the Cambridge Dictionary is “the state of being unable to stop thinking about something or someone, or an unnaturally strong interest in something or someone.” I'm afraid this definition fits perfectly with the EU leadership's attitude to energy policies. While there is a lot of talk and plans about boosting the bloc's industrial competitiveness, priority number-one always and invariably remains the reduction of carbon dioxide emissions—while, it cannot be stressed enough, other big industrial hubs in North America and Asia prioritise actual

competitiveness and reap the fruit of that prioritisation. And they live in greater individual comfort than the French and German citizens that reportedly believe having an air-conditioner at home makes you morally ambivalent.

Fun as the online air-conditioner debate was for the casual observer, it highlighted a major shortcoming in the EU's climate plans with respect to adaptation. The focus on emission reduction by any means necessary, while citing advancing climate change that would have an adverse effect on economies, completely ignored the fact that climate change, such as it is, already has an effect on economies and this effect is not infrequently adverse.

This means we need to adapt first, and mitigate second. Apparently, the emission reduction achieved over the last decade by European countries has done nothing to change the weather and claims that it will change the weather 100 years from now if we keep at it, suffer as we might in the process, do not sound serious in the context of a heatwave of 40 C and higher.

In order to fix the mistake, the EU may need to change its incentive policies. Currently, all incentives, in the form of penalties such as carbon taxes and rewards such as EV subsidies, go towards so-called mitigation. It might be wise to start offering businesses and consumers some incentives for adapting to changing weather patterns, including the use of equipment such as air-conditioners. After all, air-conditioners are close relatives to the heat pumps that have been elevated to essential energy transition status by EU political circles and activists. It is only fair to offer the same treatment to the home coolers that the rest of the world has come to regard as standard summer equipment.

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