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Environmental policy implementation during the economic crisis: an analysis of European member state 'leader-laggard' dynamics

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ABSTRACT

The long-standing debate on environmental policy 'leaders' and 'laggards' lends itself to a new analysis following with the advent of the 2008 economic crisis. This paper, therefore, asks the question to what extent do European Union (EU) member states have the capacity and willingness to implement EU environmental policy amid austerity, budget cuts, and rising costs over the period 2008–2014. Building upon previous studies, 26 interviews with European, Greek and United Kingdom participants and records of environmental infringements, the paper provides a contemporary picture

of the environmental policy ‘leader-laggard’ dynamic in Europe. The findings demonstrate that the impact of the economic crisis seems contestable and varies amongst member states, while the reduction in environmental infringements appears to have a link with the decrease in economic activity. Although environmental policy ‘leaders’ maintain patterns of strong implementation, the improved implementation performance of some ‘laggards’ reflects a shift in their implementation patterns amid a period of intense political and economic controversies.

KEYWORDS:

Economic crisis | EU environmental policy | leaders and laggards | implementation performance | policy outputs and outcomes

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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Michail Melidis is an Associate Lecturer at the University of Exeter. His work and research interests are focused on the analysis and implementation of environmental policies in EU, Greece, and the UK.

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Correction Statement

This article has been republished with minor changes. These changes do not impact the academic content of the article.

Notes

1 The UK in many studies is regarded both leader and in-betweener interchangeably.

2 The former as a small country which exercised leadership in certain stages of EU policy making, the latter as a larger state that provided leadership throughout all decision-making stages. Both of them introduced environmental policy innovations and exhibited high levels of ambitions and standards in different timings. In addition to this, another factor is the six-month rotating Council Presidency that permits Member states to hold the grip and wield great influence to the EU (Liefferink & Wurzel, 2017, p. 956).

3 Environmental infringements relate to the violation of Community environmental law. The EU Commission may take legal action and initiate a formal infringement procedure (of several stages each ending with a formal decision as laid out in the EU treaties) if an EU country fails to transpose the provisions of directives and implement EU law. Similarly, it may refer the issue to the Court of Justice which in some cases (of persistent non-compliance) results in the imposition of financial penalties. A telling example is the referral of Greece by the Commission to the European Court of Justice over poor waste water treatment presenting a risk to public health (26/02/2015) (IP/15/4491).

4 For more information please see the Annual Reports of the European Commission on monitoring the application of EU law, the infringements cases, court documents and rulings here: http://ec.europa.eu/environment/legal/law/press_en.htm.

5 The Pilot Scheme was gradually introduced from 2008 to 2012 as an informal mechanism to dispute settling by which the EU Commission aims to settle violations of EU law preceding the initiation of the formal infringement proceedings.

Additional information

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