

Green Transition in the European Union: The Shift From the “Mediterranean Stereotypes” to a Country-Specific Marketing Driven Approach

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This paper aims to discuss and critically analyze the progress of European Union Southern member states toward a green transition in the light of Marketing. The stereotype of the existence of environmental “leaders and laggards” is disputed, and a way to find an equal-for-all green transition is explored. Our analysis is focused on the cases of Greece, Spain, Italy, and Portugal, the most well-known “laggard” countries, where we assess the role of governmental and non-state actors in implementing effective environmental policies and the various factors that caused their late coming in compliance and implementation of the EU environmental regulations.

Keywords: green transition, EU, Mediterranean EU countries, marketing, sustainability

INTRODUCTION

Investing in a green recovery is more than just an environmental obligation; it's an economic imperative. In the EU, the green transition is an issue of utmost importance. As Alok Sharma, President of COP26, United Nations Climate Change Conference (2021) stated, “*We have a unique opportunity to accelerate the transition to a sustainable future and build back better for the benefit of both people and planet.*” Evidence suggests that not all EU member states are performing similarly concerning their journey to comply with and implement European environmental regulations. A divide between Southern EU members and the Northern ones has been observed. More specifically, the stereotype of Northern EU countries being the “leaders” and the Southern ones being the “laggards” of the EU green transition has been circulating (Gregory-Smith, Manika, Demirel, 2016; Environmental Performance Index, 2020). A great part of the literature attributes the poor compliance and effectiveness records of these countries to common inherent characteristics of their socio-political institutions, the so-called “Mediterranean syndrome” (La Spina, 1993) based on: socio-historical factors, administrative structures and traditions, ineffective legislative processes. Without denying that Southern EU members face significant compliance

problems, these problems cannot be simply attributed to the endemic characteristics of their socio-political institutions (Koutalakis, 2002).

The aim of this conceptual positioning paper is to discuss some preliminary arguments on the opportunity to revise the stereotypes of the “Mediterranean Syndrome approach” thanks to the adoption of a Marketing-driven perspective.

Our analysis is focused on the cases of Greece, Spain, Italy, and Portugal, the most well-known “laggard” countries, where we assess the role of governmental and non-state actors in the implementation of effective environmental policies and the various factors that caused their late coming in compliance and implementation of the EU environmental regulations. The main objective is to underline the need for a Marketing approach based on the segmentation of EU countries according to peoples’ needs and cultures to find a common pace towards an equal for-all green transition in the post-pandemic scenario.

BACKGROUND & LITERATURE

The European Green Deal (EGD), adopted in 2019, is an ambitious plan with a straightforward, long-term goal. Nevertheless, it has a bottom-up nature (Doussis, 2021). The EU is very much driven and shaped by the dynamics of its member states. It can act as a facilitator, but member states, including the Southern ones and their societies, must “do their fair share” through their own policies. If everyone takes action, all EU member states will move towards better environmental sustainability. However, this process can be speeded up if the efforts for contribution were made for the right reasons.

It is of utmost importance to see how both governmental and non-state actors of various EU member states, as well as the EU itself, can contribute to the green transition of the Southern EU member states, which are “environmentally delayed”. The transition from a linear economy to a circular one needs to be stressed and understood, primarily through the EGD. An “*equal for all green transition*” can only be achieved if all EU member states cooperate and reach environmental sustainability. Moreover, there is a necessity for a “*Just-transition for all towards an environmentally sustainable economy*” (International Labor Organization, 2019). More specifically, the recent goal is to ‘not leave anyone behind’, especially those trapped in polluting activities for decades and should now shift to sustainable pathways. Europe is trying to become the world's first climate-neutral continent, which means zeroing net carbon emissions. In its efforts, many blame the “laggard” countries that slow down this transition, namely the Southern EU member states. However, studies have shown that Europe’s delay towards sustainability cannot stem from the Southern actors’ lack of knowledge and willingness to pay for green products but from other reasons (Gregory-Smith, Manika, Demirel, 2017).

Table 1 shows the ranking of the four considered Southern countries based on their Environmental Performance Index (EPI) score.

TABLE 1
SOUTHERN EU MEMBER STATES CATEGORIZED ON THEIR EPI SCORE

| Rank | Country | EPI |
|------|----------|------|
| 11 | Spain | 74.3 |
| 16 | Italy | 71.0 |
| 18 | Greece | 69.1 |
| 20 | Portugal | 67 |

Source: Wood, 2021

The EPI measures Countries across 32 performance indicators – from climate change mitigation to air quality – revealing the world’s most environmentally-friendly economies (Wood, 2021). As the above categorization can see it, the Southern EU member states, namely Spain, Greece, and Portugal, have significantly improved until today’s time. More specifically, Spain ranks 11th in the EU and then follows Greece ranking 18th, and Portugal ranks 20th. It is clear that these countries are determined to ‘catch up’

with the environmental leaders, and an efficient way to achieve this is to introduce to their society tailor-made green products, which would lead to the efficient use of their resources and sustainable lifestyle and transform the way their companies work to being eco-friendlier.

For instance, Greece has made considerable efforts to eliminate coal and have a lignite phase out by 2028, much earlier than other EU member states that still produce coal, with the support of the Just Transition Mechanism. The decision on decarbonization and gradual retirement of the lignite units taken prior to the coronavirus pandemic, the adoption of a national just transition plan which includes emblematic investments for the affected local societies, and the spread of renewable energy sources are undoubtedly positive developments. Moreover, the country recently announced the prioritization of green transition in its recovery and resiliency plan (Greece: Generation 2.0, 2021).

Furthermore, Spain, in 2018, announced a new environmental policy with the goal of ending the country's dependence on fossil fuels, by drawing most of its electricity from renewables by 2030, reaching 100% by 2050 (Heggie, 2020). A year later, Italy, according to its 2019 Report on circular economy, ranked first on waste management performance (EU Commission, 2021). Finally, Portugal has set as its main goal to become carbon-neutral by 2050 (Griego, 2019). Thus, it can be concluded that there is significant evidence of these countries' efforts toward a sustainable way of living.

For Europe to achieve the goal, however, all member states must cooperate and be efficient. This means that the environmentally delayed countries need to "catch up" with the more advanced ones. The stereotype of Northern EU countries as the "leaders" and the Southern as the "laggards" of this green transition has been circulating. Without denying that Southern EU members face significant compliance problems, these problems cannot be simply attributed to endemic characteristics of their socio-political institutions (Koutalakis, 2002). There is an explanatory dynamic of the "Mediterranean Syndrome approach", focusing on the cases of Greece, Spain, Italy and Portugal, the most well-known "laggard" countries. The stereotype follows the logic that all Southern EU countries possess a similar historical, economic, and cultural background that has shaped their political systems and social attitudes to be incapable of adapting to today's policies (Börzel, 2000).

The above statement is misleading since significant differences exist between countries with similar cultures, such as Greece, Spain, Italy, and Portugal. Each member has tried to comply with the EU policies and implement them significantly differently.

There exists a plethora of factors that delayed the environmental transition of the Southern member states that are to be blamed instead of the "Mediterranean Syndrome" and the non-willing to change culture:

1. History of a country: its date of entrance in the EU, challenges that came along with the EU membership (democratic consolidation, socioeconomic modernization);
2. Political structure & characteristics of the government;
3. Necessity for mobilization of all actors (Internal help): mobilization of governmental and non-governmental actors, as well as of administrative structures;
4. Misfit with already existing structures: reponses to the EU pressure by Southern member states (policy misfit (Börzel, 1999), goodness of fit (Risse et al. 2001), role played by domestic institutional settings in mediating EU influence (Radaelli, 2003; Bulmer, 2007)), causes for non-compliance, lack of a push-and-pull approach, the concept of Europeanization and its limitations (concept: territorial structure, policy saliency, trust between state and non-state actors; limitations: lack of a comprehensive national environmental strategy, inability of domestic actors to make full use and financial tools provided by the EU, lack of social support to act for the benefits of environmental protection (Doussis, 2011));
5. Help provided by the EU (external help): role of governance shaper (amount of influence on the environmental regulations of each member state exerted by the EU (Fernández et al., 2000), EU funding, infringement process);
6. Influence from neighboring countries.

Despite the disadvantages experienced in the Southern EU member states, these countries also contain numerous advantages that can and will help them prosper if used efficiently. An important strength point is their geographical location, which grants them an abundance of sea and sun (great opportunity for

renewables), and their strong culture. More specifically, Spain, Greece, Italy, and Portugal are all found to be open to innovations and flexible when facing challenging changes. Furthermore, these countries need to understand their current benefits and use them to “move forward” in the “journey” of sustainability. Another crucial factor driving the countries’ motivation to shift quickly to sustainable pathways is that the Mediterranean is characterized as a “*climate change hotspot*” (A. Tuel et al., 2020). In other words, the Southern EU member states are facing and will continue to face the impacts of climate change more vividly than their Northern partners.

METHODOLOGY

The methodology used to create this conceptual positioning paper began with extensive research. The first step was to thoroughly search for relevant articles, journals, books, and online material on the progression of both Southern and Northern EU member states toward the green transition over the years. The reasons Southern EU member states have been left behind were then connected and analyzed, and the findings were adapted to the emerging scenarios of today's time. After identifying a combination of efficient approaches and consulting relevant financial models, appropriate marketing strategies can be proposed to outline how the Southern EU member states can progress toward the green transition.

FINDINGS

No matter the valuable help it offers, the EU must consider the various social and economic challenges faced by the Southern states and help them adapt to this new reality. Country-specific marketing approaches could be adopted in different contexts to meet these challenging objectives.

Emerging Scenarios

Energy Crisis

The energy crisis of today’s time is more than evident. However, “this will not be the last crisis in the brave new world of clean energy” (Popkostova, 2022), since factors such as extreme weather, dwindling domestic gas resources, and lack of strategic reserves and efficient climate policies still have strong ramifications. The post-covid recovery and the EU-Russia dynamics have also heavily influenced the EU’s energy transition. More specifically, the soaring energy prices amplify inflationary pressures and thereby adversely impact the post-Covid recovery curve, delaying the objectives of the EGD.

At this point, a balance must be found between security, affordability, and sustainability, the three important dimensions of the energy trilemma, and effective management is required to stop the anti-transition sentiment that could delay the goals of the EGD. Flexibility is necessary to deal with the short-term needs of the EU; however, the climate concerns must remain focused on the medium and long-term objectives in order for them to be efficiently achieved on time. There is a chance that a “*high-price environment might become the ‘new normal’ as we progress down the pathway of decarbonization*” (Popkostova, 2022). The excessive energy dependence on Russia and the post-covid recovery require structural solutions for Europe’s energy security. These goals coincide with the ones of the EGD in the medium and long run. The situation calls for bilateral and multilateral cooperation to find solutions with a geopolitical approach to sustain the goals of the EGD.

Covid-19 Pandemic

The COVID-19 Pandemic has become a major public health concern worldwide, which impacts on environmental sustainability and social responsibility, as well as people’s quality of life (Severo et al., 2020). Despite causing numerous difficulties, the pandemic has highlighted some valuable lessons. Like health, the environment and climate must be considered by all stakeholders and citizens as global public goods to be protected.

Implications of the COVID-19 pandemic on sustainability have started to be seen since profound and pervasive social changes are occurring at a global level (Sarkis et al., 2020), but the most difficult challenge

remains how to ensure the participation of everyone in the efforts. From peoples' side, it seems that experiencing a period of quarantine, social isolation, and health crisis has changed and intensified environmental awareness, sustainable consumption, and social actions.

It is noteworthy that numerous reports and studies have shown that COVID-19 has focused our minds on helping to create a better and healthier world. The 2020 global survey by Accenture said that consumers "have dramatically evolved" and that 60% were reporting making more environmentally friendly, sustainable, or ethical purchases since the start of the pandemic. Accenture added that 9 out of 10 of that percentage would continue doing so (Accenture, 2020). Also, a study by Kantar testified that since the beginning of COVID-19, sustainability is more of a concern for consumers than before. And 65% of global respondents believe "*it is important that climate change is prioritized in the economic recovery after coronavirus*" (Kantar, 2020). BCG, in a recent survey of more than 3,000 people across eight countries, had found that in the wake of the pandemic, people are more concerned—not less—about addressing environmental challenges and are more committed to changing their behaviour to advance sustainability with a relevant part of participants which said they were more aware now than before COVID-19 and three-quarters of respondents said environmental issues are as or more concerning than health issues. BCG survey also found that people want to see aggressive action on the environmental front in the economic recovery plans, which should prioritize environmental issues (BCG, 2020).

Invasion of Ukraine by Russia

With Russia's ongoing invasion of Ukraine and the incoming economic sanctions imposed by the EU, Europe's energy dependence was made more than clear to the world, and major policy decisions must be carefully made.

The energy prices for oil, gas, and coal are skyrocketing and have heavily affected the price of electricity in Europe. Additional inflationary pressures have, in this way, introduced a risk of "stagflation", keeping in mind that the maximum use of all available indigenous energy resources is indispensable. At the same time, social concerns need to be addressed to avoid the risk of losing public support for a "greener" economy just because it is perceived to be impacting on their bills (Amaro, 2022). At this point, it is of utmost importance to stress the topic of a fair green transition. Governments need to aid EU member states with scarce financial resources to survive this crisis. "This must be a fair green transition. This is why we proposed a new Social Climate Fund to tackle the energy poverty that already 34 million Europeans suffer from" (Ursula von der Leyen, 2022).

However, this energy crisis has reinforced the necessity to be less dependent on imports and instead strive to improve energy efficiency and investment in renewables. The reduction of the reliance on traditional fossil fuels and the introduction of new climate-neutral technologies, such as hydrogen, biochemicals, or decarbonized materials, needs to be put in action (Delbeke, 2022). At the same time, however, governments should not rush to propose major changes in the current energy market regulation to avoid unwanted side effects, such as undermining investment incentives, that would make short-term problems worse in the future.

The crisis is driving change at the individual level, and this increased commitment to sustainability has major implications for companies and governments too. People seem to be ready today, like never before, to embrace the green challenge but better and solid bridges of communication with the scientific community and policy makers are needed.

Available Marketing Strategies

Increasingly, more firms are seen to utilize green opportunities and change how they function to be eco-friendlier (Molina-Azorín et al., 2009; Haden et al., 2009). For these more forethoughtful firms to adopt green marketing efficiently, they should try to integrate green marketing into all routine marketing activities. Some of the main reasons companies would introduce green marketing would be exploiting opportunities such as increasing corporate image, raising product value, enhancing competitive advantages, and complying with environmental trends (Chen, 2010).

It is obvious that there is a need to create a sustainable green supply management especially in the Southern member states. As a first step “a deeper look and new perspective are needed regarding supply chain risk sources comprising uncertainties arising from the supply chain- environment interaction, a path that several authors have already followed” (Wu et al., 2013). Some challenges are to be faced by the firms underdoing such change of management, namely the internal process optimization (Ferrer and Whybark, 2001; Kleindorfer et al., 2005) and “understanding the effects of this change at the level of the external elements” (Couto et al., 2016). All these external elements will need the efficient cooperation and contribution of competition (Martin and Matlay, 2001), suppliers (Guide and Van Wassenhove, 2002), social responsibility, risk (Wu et al., 2015) and, above all, consumers (Guide and Van Wassenhove, 2009).

Moving on, there is the need to introduce tailor-made green products in a unique way for these countries to achieve an effective result. Some examples of such products could be energy-saving TVs, LED lights, solar panel water heaters, solar panel charging cases, eco-friendly verification phone apps, electric cars, and eco-friendly fridges. The hard part is not really the production and the availability of these products but their normalization and increased use.

Several studies revealed a positive relationship between the three variables of the KAB model (Couto et al., 2016). KAB stands for: subjective knowledge about the environmental impact of products (K of KAB), the environmental product attitudes of EU consumers (A of KAB), and lastly, their willingness to pay for green products (B of KAB)” (Gregory-Smith et al., 2016). Thus, consumers are aware of the value and help of green products and they have a positive attitude towards them. Moreover, it was proven that Southern countries' willingness to pay for green products was higher than that of the Northern EU member states (Gregory-Smith et al., 2016). This outcome contradicts the assumptions of a “broad literature, which predicts the opposite because of lower level of income and development in the South of Europe” (Gregory-Smith et al., 2016).

This effect is due to different strategies Northern and Southern member states used regarding the diffusion of green products in the past. However, these strategies have been leaving the Southern member states behind. More specifically, in the North, consumers have managed to normalize the use of green products and diffuse them in their everyday life (Gregory-Smith et al., 2016). They buy those kinds of goods to be eco-friendly and not to feel prestigious. Moreover, the normalization of green products has led several providers across countries to deliver them without the need of high prices (Gregory-Smith et al., 2016).

On the other hand, green products in the South were introduced in later years. They are considered luxurious and are highly priced since “premium prices can be claimed in markets where environmentally-friendly products are not widely diffused” (Etsy & Winston, 2009). In this way, people perceive that whoever owns such products has greater prestige and power. At the same time, there are only limited producers and importers of eco-friendly products in the South. This situation creates almost a monopoly and allows the set of higher prices.

The impact of a smaller number of people paying very high prices for green products drives up their average willingness to pay and creates the aforementioned adverse effect. Their enthusiasm in green products is linked to the fact that for them, they are still novel and scarce, which becomes a driver of their willingness to pay. In the North, the more established positioning of eco-friendly products is accompanied by a “wider diffusion and higher competition within green product categories, which leads to a declining price premium and a lower willingness to pay” (Gregory-Smith et al., 2016). In other words, in the Northern member states, green products have become a norm everyone learns to follow.

DISCUSSION & CONCLUSIONS

The one-size-fits-all model cannot be effective in fostering the green transition. Only a country-specific Marketing driven approach might allow an efficient diffusion of tailor-made green products.

Country-specific educational campaigns and marketing communication could play a role in building green consumers' behavior: nobody should be thinking about improving the individual's daily life without

caring for the rest of humanity. Communication campaigns should inform citizens on why the transition is needed and keep them “in the loop” regarding the dilemmas that arise in the process of climate neutrality.

The points of strength of Southern Countries should be exploited, including the higher consumers’ willingness to pay, which should be linked to a new perception of environmental values and not limited to the social approval as it is nowadays.

To achieve sustainability objectives, it is not enough for EU policy-makers to take measures and for the national member states’ authorities to be committed to implementing these objectives, nor the individual awareness of the private sector and citizens. Only the coordinated mobilization of all stakeholders together with citizens can make the difference, becoming absolutely essential nowadays.

The extreme weather events in the summer of 2022, particularly in Southern EU member states (such as heatwaves, floods, and wildfires) have further emphasized the urgent need to accelerate the green transition. It’s essential to remember that prevention can be much more cost-effective than inaction.

The EU will continue to pursue its goals towards an environmentally friendly lifestyle. In this long-lasting and challenging journey towards sustainability, no one should be selfish. No stereotypes that create divides between the North and the South of the EU should exist. No one must be “left behind,” and everyone needs to tangibly adapt to a greener reality.

NEXT STEPS

The next steps of this research will involve a deeper exploration of the environmental dimensions through a survey conducted in a sample of 2-3 European countries, focusing on consumer behavior. The primary objective of the survey will be to identify the environmental drivers of individuals in these countries, providing valuable insights for companies to develop sustainable marketing strategies that align with the country's values.

To achieve this objective, the Hofstede model will be used to evaluate the cultural elements of different countries. The survey will concentrate on environmental sensitivity and relate the findings with the Hofstede model, which has been instrumental in explaining behaviors during the pandemic. Understanding the environmental consciousness of people is crucial in this research. Therefore, the survey will identify the factors motivating individuals to adopt environmentally friendly behaviors and determine the most significant drivers of environmental consciousness, varying across European countries.

Furthermore, the research will expand its perspective by including social topics. The ESG approach, encompassing environmental, societal, and governance factors, will be used. Caring not only for the environment but also for the people living in it is of utmost importance.

Conducting this research will contribute to the growing body of knowledge on environmental consciousness and its variation across different countries. The findings will offer valuable insights for developing suitable measures that align with the environmental and social values of individuals residing in different EU member states, helping reach a more sustainable future.

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