

For those who have been following EU energy and climate policy over the past five years, the European Commission's 'Fit for 55' package has a distinct whiff of déjà vu.

As part of the proposals unveiled last week, the EU executive tabled more than a dozen legislative acts - EU directives and regulations - aimed at putting Europe on track to cut its carbon emissions by 55% compared to 1990 levels by 2030. Pascal Canfin, a senior lawmaker who chairs the European Parliament's environment committee, said it was "probably the most important climate package ever tabled in the world," with 13 legislative texts. Faced with thousands of pages of legislation, some have warned that a "regulatory tsunami" is about to hit the European Parliament and the Council of the EU, the bloc's two co-legislative bodies. Indeed, legislators will have a lot on their plate over the next two years - the usual time it takes for the EU to approve new laws.

But isn't there a silver lining to all this? After all, many of the legislative texts contained in the package are simply amended versions of laws that the EU adopted in December 2018, as part of its so-called Clean Energy Package (CEP).

This is the case, for example, for the Renewable Energy Directive (RED), the Regulation on CO2 emissions from cars and the Emissions Trading Scheme Directive (ETS) to name just a few of the heaviest files.

And legislators have been here before. In the previous Parliament, lawmakers expressed fears of a "tsunami of legislation" when the CEP was presented in 2016. At the end of the day, they survived, and completed the job within two and a half years - almost lightning speed by EU standards. So will that make 'Fit for 55' easier to get over the line? Not really, unfortunately.

"We have a lot of experience from the Clean Energy Package," acknowledged Peter Liese, a senior German lawmaker from the centre-right EPP group in Parliament. "A lot of the fundamental decisions have been taken" when the CEP was adopted, he admitted.

However, the political situation has changed since then, with a new crop of MEPs elected to the European Parliament, he remarked.

"We have new colleagues, and their voices need to be heard," Liese said, referring to the 2019 EU elections, which brought an increased number of Green and far-right MEPs.

Liese also vigorously rejected suggestions that the new package was a mere technical update to existing laws, with just a few tweaks in percentages here and there.

Instead, lawmakers will have a charged political debate about changes to the EU carbon market, which puts a price on emissions from the power sector and industry, he said. And with carbon pricing now extended to transport and heating fuels, this means EU climate policies will start directly affecting the citizens.

“At least colleagues are allowed to question it,” Liese commented.

A tighter carbon market also means EU countries will need to bring forward their coal phase-out date, Liese said, probably in reference to Germany which set a 2038 target date to close its last coal power plant - a deadline widely regarded as too late.

“This is a huge thing, it is not just a technical adjustment,” Liese said. “It is really an important political decision that will change the life of hundreds of thousands of employees,” he stressed.

In fact, with ‘Fit for 55’, the European Commission has, perhaps unknowingly, taken an unprecedented step forward in EU environmental policy making - bringing politics with all its messiness and conflict into climate policy. And the more politics get involved, the more outcomes become unpredictable.

Source: euractiv.com