

European Climate Pact Ambassadors as New Organic Intellectuals: Neo-Gramscian Analysis of EU Climate Hegemony and Just Transition

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Abstract: *Using a neo-Gramscian theoretical framework, this paper assumes that European Climate Pact Ambassadors (CPAs) play an essential role in the European green transition, thus contributing to defining new climate hegemony within the EU. The research question answered by the present paper is whether these climate ambassadors can be understood as “organic intellectuals” (in the sense forwarded by Antonio Gramsci) for their participation in the construction of a counter-hegemonic discourse and their determination to challenge the traditional modes of a fossil fuel-based economy. As such, these ambassadors will be ideally placed to develop a new narrative for climate action based on the just transition to the ambitious objectives of the European Green Deal. From this perspective, the article contributes to the broader debate on climate governance by sharply underlining the necessity of grassroots involvement and the possibility offered through a neo-Gramscian analysis to understand the dynamics of climate hegemony in the EU.*

Keywords: *Climate change, Climate Pact Ambassadors, just transition, neo-Gramscianism, organic intellectuals.*

Introduction - A neo-Gramscian theory of just transition in the European Union

The European Union (EU) has been among the critical central players in preventing global climatic changes since the beginning of the 1990s, and its leadership has adapted to new challenges in this respect. The period's model and context conditions inform the EU's strategy, characterised by the tendency to negotiate and effectively implement international agreements, like the Paris Agreement (Oberthür and Dupont, 2021). According to this, the European Union has adopted the European Green Deal (EGD) to help realise the Paris Agreement. The European Green Deal is an ambitious and powerful strategic initiative aimed at ensuring climate neutrality by 2050. It provides us with energy efficiency targets, calls for increasing of renewable energy sources, and promotes a transition to a circular economy (Andrei, 2023). The “Fit for 55 Package” proposes laws that would lower net emissions by at least 55% by 2030 from 1990 levels. This initiative seeks to transform the EU's economy and society, while acting as a model for other regions switching to low-carbon economies (Fleming and Mauger, 2021; Ossewaarde and Ossewaarde-Lowtoo, 2020; Bonciu, 2023).

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Such an ambitious plan also requires a solid commitment to social justice and the protection of vulnerable communities (Pianta and Lucchese, 2020). To achieve social consensus and stability, all the social categories should be convinced that a green transition is the right way toward a prosperous future and that all the transition policies encompassed in the Green Deal are fair and work for all's benefit. As this paper is focused on the European Union as a polity, a consensus among the European citizens should be reached. The European Climate Pact, an element of EGD, was created as a forum for people, groups, and communities to participate in climate action across all societal sectors. It encourages a wide range of actions and commitments to support the climate objectives of the EU (Tosun, Pollex, and Crumbie, 2023). The theoretical framework that will be used is the neo-Gramscian approach to the European just transition, as this can provide a clear image of the social forces involved in the green transformation process and its ideological background.

Neo-Gramscianism provides a critical theoretical approach to understanding European integration. It emphasises the role of ideas, culture, and material capacities in determining the social relations of production and the governmental policies within the European Union (EU). In line with the larger neo-Gramscian perspective that sees European integration as a project driven by the interests of dominant economic groups, neo-Gramscian scholars argue that European integration can be understood through the lens of hegemony, and the role of transnational capitalist classes and their influence on the integration process (van Apeldoorn, 2004). This perspective highlights the significance of transnational classes and the conceptual and material underpinnings of their power, implying that the EU's institutional frameworks and policies are designed to perpetuate the interests of a transnational capitalist class as well as the dominance of neoliberal economic principles (Bieler and Morton, 2001; Bieler, 2002). Furthermore, neo-Gramscianism critically analyses how European integration has affected state-society relations on a socio-political level, arguing that the process has helped to reconfigure state power and create a new European governance framework that cuts across traditional nation-state boundaries. This reconfiguration is made possible by the emergence of a transnational historic bloc that unites various social forces around a neoliberal agenda, including state actors, corporate interests, and some segments of civil society (Cox, 1983; Gill, 1998).

Through this lens, European integration is seen as a political project that reinforces capitalist hegemony at a transnational level, influencing all aspects of EU social norms and identities, including economic policy. However, given the impact of climate change and the necessity to reform profoundly the European Union to become a net-zero society, another hegemonic project needs to be reinforced. Harald Winkler comes with a reshaped neo-Gramscian theory on just transition and European integration, understanding the dynamics between development pathways, climate change mitigation, and social equity. Winkler's (2020) work builds on neo-Gramscian concepts, such as hegemony, ideology, and the roles of change agents, putting forth a framework that would allow coalitions of various players to unite behind the principles of a just transition. According to Winkler, to allow humans to flourish alongside a healthy planet, this coalition must establish a new cultural hegemony that promotes just transitions and modifies the fundamental conditions of the 21st century. By

invoking Gramsci, Winkler emphasises the significance of ideological conflict and the development of a collective will, arguing that changing minds and cultural norms is just as crucial to a transition as changing policies and business practices (Winkler, 2020).

Therefore, the neo-Gramscian theory focuses on the concept of just transition to understand how the European Union is trying to build a large consensus on the transition policies by creating a new hegemonic discourse. The main features of the theory are centred on incumbent actor resistance, elite-backed policy institutes, and the role of coalitions of change agents. Incumbent firms contribute to regime stability and change through strategies of resistance and accommodation, using material, institutional, and discursive forms of power (Ford and Newell, 2021), while elite-backed policy institutes are seen as influential actors in shaping the discourse and policies related to the just transition (Winkler, 2020). The theory also posits that to achieve a just transition, an alliance of change agents must coalesce around the ideological element of this transition (Winkler, 2020). This alliance may include labour unions, social movements, non-state actors, some firms, and international organisations.

As a continuation of Harald Winkler's research, this paper will mainly focus on understanding how the European Union is actively working at all three levels mentioned above. Changing the hegemonic order implies mobilising a critical number of actors at local, national, and supranational levels to legitimise the EU's climate change actions. Meanwhile, the European Commission is already recruiting on a voluntary and non-remunerated basis key national figures (Climate Pact Ambassadors) involved in climate and environmental actions and willing to spread the message and objectives of the European Union's climate transition. Hence, this research paper analyses whether the Climate Pact Ambassadors, seen through neo-Gramscian lenses, appear as "organic intellectuals" actively building a hegemonic climate discourse in the European Union.

Methodology

The role of Climate Pact Ambassadors (CPAs), as organic intellectuals facilitating a just transition towards sustainable development in the EU, is examined in this research paper using a neo-Gramscian theoretical framework. The study aims to reveal how these ambassadors contribute to the hegemonic climate change and sustainability discourse, promoting a collective will that drives environmental action and policy shifts. The research aligns with Antonio Gramsci's theory by identifying Climate Pact Ambassadors as organic intellectuals. It focuses on individuals and groups that emerge from the social structure to articulate and disseminate counter-hegemonic ideas on climate transition, thus crucial in convincing society to embrace a net-zero emissions future.

The methodology employs qualitative content analysis to systematically evaluate the Climate Pact Ambassadors' public profiles, statements, and responsibilities, available on the European Climate Pact website in February 2024 ("Meet Our Ambassadors," n.d.). This method involves collecting data on CPAs from the official EU sources based on the frequency of specific keywords and phrases related to their responsibilities and then representing these frequencies in percentages. The analysis aims to uncover the distribution of these ambassadors across EU Member States, assess

gender balance, identify thematic areas of focus, categorise jobs or occupations, and highlight the CPAs' stated priorities and areas of action according to the data provided in the description. A coding scheme will be created by the author to categorise the information into relevant themes, such as geographical distribution, gender, thematic focus, professional background, and declared priorities for climate action. In February 2024, when this research was conducted, 912 ambassador profiles from all EU Member States were uploaded on the official website. The number of ambassadors varies over time because they may lose their status (due to lack of activity, or faulty communication with the Commission or with the national partner), or withdraw from this voluntary mission.

Shaping EU climate hegemony: A neo-Gramscian perspective

Antonio Gramsci introduced the concept of “hegemony” to describe how ruling classes maintain their dominance not merely through coercion or force but also through consensual acceptance of their values and norms by the subordinate classes. In his 2019 work, Mark McNally shows how hegemony, viewed from a Gramscian perspective, involves mobilising mass consent through ideological and political alliances formed within civil society. In actuality, hegemony is a new kind of politics adopted by a class that is at the pinnacle of its evolution and yet has to give up its narrow sectarian interests in favour of a broader and more complex political strategy of the national alliance to gain state power and establish a new economic order (McNally, 2019).

Scholars in the field of international relations and European integration have turned to Gramsci to introduce a more ideological and consensual dimension to relations of domination. In contrast to the realist power politics, Gramsci's “entrance” into international relations aims to stress the necessity of an ideological, consensual, value- and understanding-based explanation of the world order (Joseph, 2008, pg. 101). As Robert Cox explains, he used hegemony as “a structure of values and understandings about the nature of order that permeates a whole system of states and non-state entities. In a hegemonic order, these values and understandings are relatively stable and unquestioned (...). Hegemony derives from the ways of doing and thinking of the dominant social strata of the dominant state or states” (Cox, 1996, pg. 151). Thus, for Gramsci, hegemony is a form of power exercised through persuasion rather than force. This form of power involves obtaining the consent of diverse social forces through political and intellectual struggle within civil society.

In Gramsci's view, civil society became an ideological arena in which hegemony is secured. Therefore, civil society's relative autonomy transforms the ideological realm into a crucial arena of political contestation between different social groups and ideas (Levy and Egan, 2003, pg. 806). On this premise, Harald Winkler began to develop the neo-Gramscian perspective on just transition. He identified just transition as a critical ideological element around which alliances of social forces coalesce, forming a clear vision and set of values that mobilise support for this cause, namely the green transition. Following the Gramscian logic, just transition will be hegemonic in the European Union when it gains broad support and becomes a common cause and common sense (Winkler, 2020, pg. 5). To achieve this, fundamental conditions need

to change. Establishing a counter-hegemony, such as the “just transition”, enables the transformation of the fundamental conditions for development and climate.

Nevertheless, for a counter-hegemony to be successful, broad support must be gathered, in this case including from those not initially inclined to support the just transition. “Building an alliance requires political, cultural, socio-economic, moral, transformational, collective leadership by an alliance. Forming an ‘organic ideology’ is practical work, carried out by institutions, with collective leadership by some individuals – not necessarily the leaders of organisations, Gramsci’s ‘organic intellectuals’” (Winkler, 2020, pg. 6). Institutions and people do this work, but a community or group fundamentally generates ideology. This is where Harald Winkler limits his research, as his objective was to draft a neo-Gramscian theoretical approach to just transition.

Following the aim of this paper, namely to identify the organic intellectuals acting at the European level to enforce a climate hegemony in the European Union, the analysis will further develop this concept and deepen Winkler’s research.

Organic intellectuals in Gramscian thought

The concept of “organic intellectuals” is central to Antonio Gramsci’s writings. The organic intellectuals’ role is to conceptualise a particular class’s problems and goals and to forge its advancement. Thus, they provide leadership through their work as organisers of social hegemony (Evans, 2005, pg. 27). Unlike traditional intellectuals, who originated in a previous mode of production and persisted in their sphere of influence and organisation despite the radical change in production and political and social organisation (Silva, 2022), organic intellectuals are deeply embedded in the class structure and actively involved in shaping the consciousness and direction of their respective classes (Pijl, 2005).

In explaining who the organic intellectuals are, Gramsci argues that all individuals possess the capacity to be intellectuals, though not all perform the intellectuals’ social function. For him, the organic intellectual is inextricably linked with his role within the complex system of social relations. In his view, intellectuals are not just individuals engaged in mental labour but also organisers, leaders, or everlasting convincers, who actively participate in the real world and use, their moral and intellectual leadership to shape public opinion and social structures (Gramsci, 1971). Various scholars came up with different examples of organic intellectuals. Among them, we mention: Friedrich Hayek – identified by Andrew Morrison (2020) as a leading organic intellectual in transparent neoliberalism, members of policy institutes and think tanks that rationalise the development of neoliberal regimes and legitimise their worldviews in the press (Neubauer, 2012), management cadre in advanced capitalism (Pijl, 2005), social assistants working with social groups deprived of fundamental rights (Jacinto, 2017) or senior managers in big corporations (Evans, 2005).

The idea of “organic intellectuals”, as defined by Antonio Gramsci, is essential to his writings. Gramsci describes their dedication to expressing the goals, concerns, and tactics for class advancement and sets them apart from traditional intellectuals due to their active participation in social leadership and class structures (Getman *et al.*, 2021, pg. 278). While anyone can be intellectual, according to Gramsci, only a select

few can carry out the social role of organic intellectuals who shape public opinion and social structures. On the same model, the role of the climate ambassadors could become central in the new European climate project, which appears to be hegemonic. In the following section, a deep analysis of the CPAs will be conducted to clearly show their role, objectives, occupation, and European representativeness.

The role of Climate Pact Ambassadors as organic intellectuals in the EU's climate policy

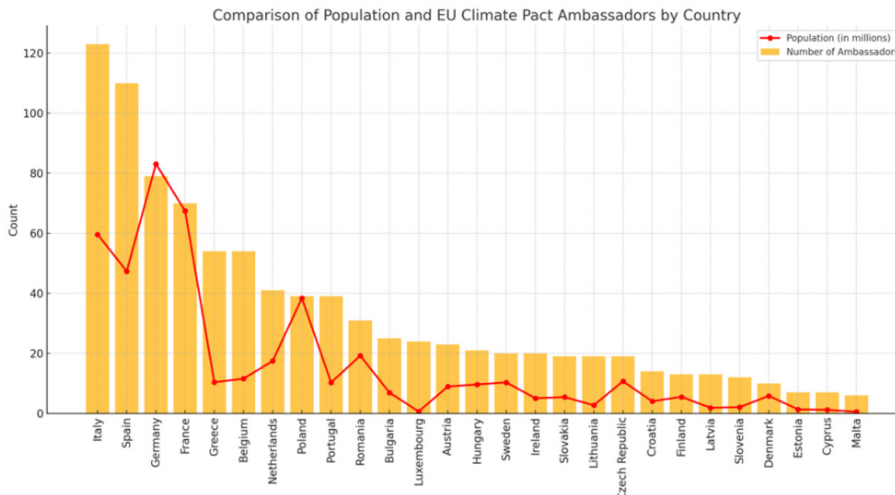
European Climate Pact Ambassadors (CPAs) are volunteers from all the EU's Member States who actively contribute to the European Union's climate action efforts. CPAs are pivotal in advocating for participatory governance and constitute an essential element of the EU's approach to sustainable development. The ambitious agenda of the European Green Deal calls for CPAs to be key players in this transformation (Tosun, 2022). Within their networks and communities, their contribution to raising awareness and stimulating climate action is crucial. They are chosen based on their commitment to climate action and are expected to lead by example, inspire others, and foster connections to amplify the impact of their climate advocacy (Tosun, Pollex, and Crumie, 2023). Involving communities, exchanging information, and enabling initiatives that lead to a greener, more sustainable Europe, are all important aspects of their work, highlighting the significance of the cooperation between citizens, civil society, and policymakers, in combating climate change and achieving SDG 13 - Climate Action (Jevtic and Bouland, 2022).

The activities of Climate Pact Ambassadors (CPAs) and their potential impact on different policy cycle stages, as detailed by Jale Tosun (2022), include facilitating participatory governance and enhancing the implementation of the European Green Deal. By educating the public to support climate action, CPAs can have a major influence on agenda setting. They can offer grassroots perspectives and feedback during policy-making, ensuring that policies are effective and inclusive. In the implementation stage, CPAs serve as crucial actors in mobilising communities and promoting local solutions (Tosun, 2022). In another paper, Jale Tuson, Lucas Geese, and Irene Lorenzoni analysed the public profiles of Climate Pact Ambassadors to better understand their commitment to climate action. They found out that CPAs belong to both older and younger generations and have very different outlooks on climate action and ways of advocating for it. Younger ambassadors are more likely to directly involve their peers in climate initiatives, whereas older participants frequently mention their concern for future generations as a strong motivator (Tosun, Geese, and Lorenzoni, 2023).

Besides the role assigned to them by the European Commission to raise awareness, support climate action, inspire and engage communities, by sharing knowledge and facilitating actions to influence public policies, further analysis of the public profiles of the CPAs is required for a more accurate understanding of their commitments, functions and representativeness at the EU level. For this purpose, a qualitative content analysis of the public profiles of the CPAs – made available on the European Climate Pact website – was conducted (“Meet Our Ambassadors,” n.d.). After collecting and analysing all these data, we can note a close correlation between the ambassadors' role and Gramsci's “organic intellectuals” concept.

The Ambassadors to the Climate Pact (CPAs) have almost balanced representation in terms of gender, with 49.34% being men and 50.66% women. This fair distribution emphasises how inclusive the programme is. It guarantees a broad range of viewpoints and methods for encouraging and carrying out climate action in local communities. *Figure 1* provides a clear picture of the distribution of CPAs in relation to the population of EU Member States: Italy – 13.49%, Spain – 12.06%, Germany – 8.66%, France – 7.68%, Greece – 5.92%, Belgium – 5.92%, Netherlands – 4.50%, Poland – 4.28%, Portugal – 4.28%, Romania – 3.40%, Bulgaria – 2.74%, Luxembourg – 2.63%, Austria – 2.52%, Hungary – 2.30%, Sweden – 2.19%, Ireland – 2.19%, Slovakia – 2.08%, Lithuania – 2.08%, Czech Republic – 2.08%, Croatia – 1.54%, Finland – 1.43%, Latvia – 1.43%, Slovenia – 1.32%, Denmark – 1.10%, Estonia – 0.77%, Cyprus – 0.77%, Malta – 0.66%. The percentages were calculated based on the number of ambassadors per country, out of a total of 912 ambassadors at the European level. Considering this distribution in percentages, a matching rate between the proportion of climate ambassadors and the population in EU countries can be identified with slight variations in the cases of Germany, France, Belgium, Portugal, Greece, and Luxembourg. In its assessment of the ambassadors’ applications, the European Commission does not take into account only the proportional representation, but also the CPAs’ involvement and motivation, and these can vary from state to state. For this reason, some Member States may have more or fewer ambassadors than others compared to the size of the population.

Figure 1. Proportion of Climate Ambassadors vs population in EU countries



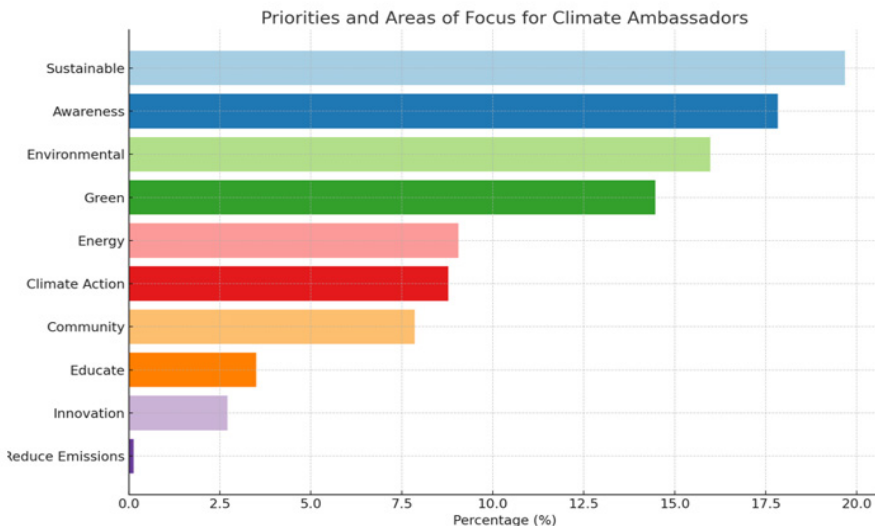
Source: Author’s own research.

The thematic focus areas, which are actually predefined domains that Climate Ambassadors address, cover a wide array of environmental issues. The majority of CPAs’ efforts are directed toward Climate Education & Awareness Raising, i.e., 54.28%. Thus, they highlight the significance of disseminating knowledge and increasing awareness in the fight against climate change. Much attention is also given to Circular Economy / Sustainable Consumption: 37.83% of Climate Ambassadors support the adoption of

these practices in production and consumption, as they are essential for lowering the environmental impact. Less prominent focus areas the ambassadors chose are Energy – 3.18%, Biodiversity – 1.21%, Sustainable Food – 0.55%, and Oceans and Just Transition – 0.11%, while 1.64% did not spot any central theme.

Based on the Climate Ambassadors’ profile description and understood as their main responsibilities (as *Figure 2* illustrates), the CPAs’ priorities and focus areas show a strategic emphasis on “Sustainability” with 19.68% of the discourse revolving around this idea demonstrating a widespread dedication to long-term ecological balance. With 17.83% of keyword mentions referring to “Awareness,” the CPAs’ commitment to enlightening the public about the realities of climate change is evident. At 15.98%, “Environmental” concerns come third, indicating a focused strategy for preserving ecosystems and encouraging environmental stewardship. With a 14.46% share, “Green” is probably connected to supporting eco-friendly practices and technologies. 9.05% of the public profiles analysed mentioned “Energy” as a topic for further engagement, which means a focus on cleaner and more efficient energy. At 8.78%, direct “Climate Action” is another crucial area of focus, denoting proactive steps to address climate change. 7.86% of the CPAs’ mentions stressed the significance of “Community” involvement and group initiatives, indicating their recognition of communities’ critical role in climate efforts. Though less common, at 3.50%, “Educational” initiatives are acknowledged for their contribution to the development of climate literacy. A push for imaginative and practical solutions to climate-related problems is evident in the focus of 2.71% on the keyword “Innovation”. Finally, 0.13% of the cases explicitly mention “Reduce Emissions”, highlighting that lowering greenhouse gas emissions to lessen the effects of climate change is a crucial goal on the global agenda. These numbers collected from CPAs’ public profiles, and subjected to a qualitative analysis, indicate a high diversity in priorities and focus areas, which mirrors the very different social and professional backgrounds of the Climate Ambassadors.

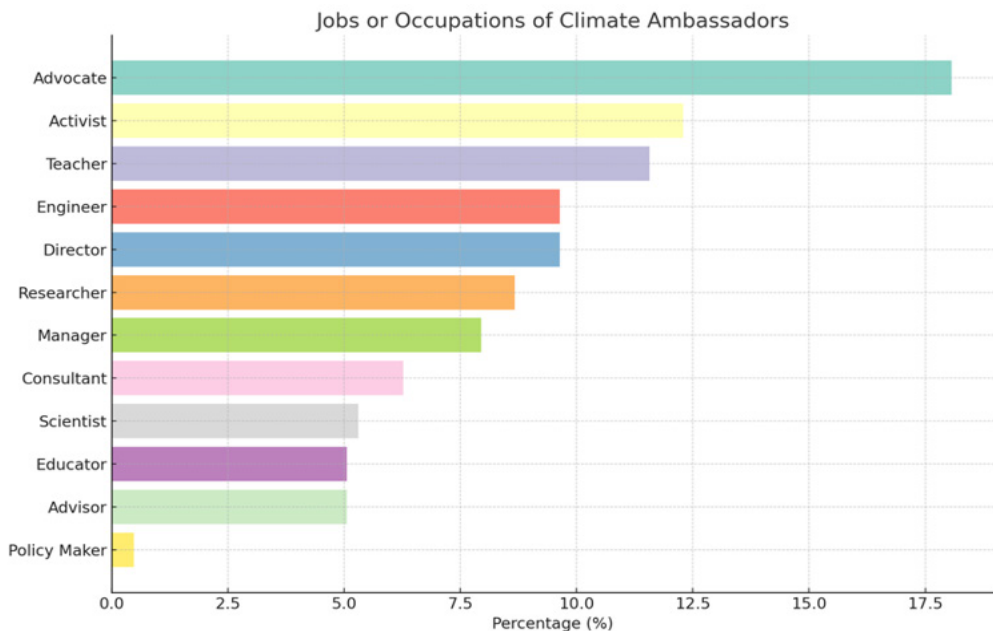
Figure 2. Priorities and areas of focus for Climate Ambassadors



Source: Author’s own research.

The diversity of Climate Pact Ambassadors' jobs or occupations, as *Figure 3* shows, offers a mosaic of responsibilities intricately linked to environmental action and advocacy. Advocates constitute the majority (18.07%) and are the main representatives of the movement for change in climate-related issues. Activists, who represent the practical and frequent grassroots engagement with climate challenges, come in second at 12.29%. Teachers, who comprise 11.57% of the workforce dedicated to these objectives, emphasise education's value in creating an informed and ecologically aware public. Directors and engineers separately constitute 9.64% of CPAs, which indicates a sizeable presence of organisational and technical leadership among ambassadors. To address climate change, 8.67% of researchers emphasise the need for ongoing research and evidence-based strategies. The operational and strategic abilities necessary for implementing climate strategies are reflected in the percentages of Climate Pact Ambassadors who are managers (7.95%) and consultants (6.27%). Advisors, scientists and educators (each of these professional categories accounts for above 5% of CPAs) provide their specialised knowledge and instructional expertise to the climate cause. Though policymakers make up a smaller percentage of CPAs (0.48%), they demonstrate the heartfelt involvement even of people with direct influence over laws and regulations. Hence, we can note that there is a robust professional network committed to advancing the public dialogue and action on sustainability and climate change.

Figure 3. Jobs or occupations of Climate Ambassadors



Source: Author's own research.

Overall, the Climate Pact Ambassadors can be credited with excellent gender and national representation at the EU level. However, several thematic areas that are highly underrepresented (e.g., energy, biodiversity, sustainable food, the just transition) require increased attention. Although the current CPAs have good coverage of climate

advocacy and education, there is room for more diverse professional backgrounds and general priorities to intensify climate action across the European Union.

Conclusions

This research paper examines, from a neo-Gramscian viewpoint, the roles of Climate Pact Ambassadors (CPAs) concerning the European Union's climate policy. To become a critical global actor and adequately implement the Paris Agreement, the EU has adopted the European Green Deal as a new transition mechanism to a net-zero economy. As this transition implies profound economic and social changes, a form of consensus must be reached at the society level. European citizens should understand and support this process to avoid social and political instability. To tackle this, the European Commission has established a Climate Pact and has selected, on a voluntary basis, Climate Pact Ambassadors from each Member State. The CPAs are supposed to organically spread the EU's messages and achieve a consensus on the transition process. Based on this, the research paper explored the possibility of considering the Climate Pact Ambassadors "organic intellectuals" in the Gramscian sense. In the framework set by this paper, organic intellectuals would be those seeking to build a counter-hegemonic discourse on climate transition.

The role assigned to the CPAs by the European Commission has placed them in a vital position. Their activity could form a collective will regarding environmental action and policy shifts, crucial in the neo-Gramscian theoretical framework for developing a new hegemony. The Climate Pact Ambassadors work with local communities, enabling grassroots initiatives, developing educational activities, and influencing agenda-setting. To go beyond their formal role, the qualitative content analysis conducted in this paper – based on 912 public profiles of CPAs – revealed the degree of representativeness, as well as thematic focus areas, commitments, priorities, and occupations of Climate Ambassadors. Therefore, with few variations, the number of CPAs distributed per country is commensurate with the EU population, while their thematic focus is mainly on education and raising awareness – 52.28%. In conclusion, the CPAs ensure a good representativeness of various occupational categories at the EU level, and their paramount mission is to change mentalities and spread the European message. This evidence overlaps with Gramsci's idea of shaping consciousness. The wide variety of occupations and priorities of the CPAs show that they immerse themselves in the social structures and have the organic ability to shape public discourse and foster a new hegemonic discourse. These are powerful arguments in favour of the hypothesis that Climate Pact Ambassadors can be considered "organic intellectuals".

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