

Reassessing the CAP: Farmers, Politics, and the Struggle for Equity in EU Agricultural Policy

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Abstract

In early 2024, European farmers organised international large-scale protests, demanding policy adjustments to address mounting costs, bureaucratic inefficiencies, and stringent environmental regulations. The European Commission quickly proposed a revision to the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) aimed at easing the farmers' administrative and financial burdens. However, this hurried reform has sparked concerns, as it has appeared less to be a response to the farmers' needs, but more as a politically driven manoeuvre to appease agro-industrial interests before the EU parliamentary elections. This paper reviews the events, underlying motivations and impacts of the CAP reform, arguing that political agendas and large agricultural corporations had a more decisive influence on policy adjustments than small or mid-sized farms. Through an analysis of primary sources, stakeholder responses, and relevant literature, this paper highlights the adverse effects of the current reform on small-scale farmers, biodiversity goals, and public trust in EU institutions. This study will also highlight the precarious situation of small- and medium scale farmers, enduring due to the hasty and inconsiderate revision of agricultural policies. To ensure the CAP's effectiveness, this paper will put forward various policy proposals such as more inclusive decision-making processes; targeted financial assistance for small farms, or an enhanced social conditionality in regard to subsidies.

Keywords: Common Agricultural Policy, European Union, farmers

1. Introduction

Over the first months of 2024, farmers all across European countries mobilised themselves into important street protests, calling for significant changes in the current EU agricultural policy. Their primary demands were related to the ever more stringent environmental regulations imposed on them by the reformed Common Agricultural Policy (Henceforth referred to as CAP), coupled with rising costs, inflation, and over-complexified bureaucratic systems to obtain

assistance. To appease the turbulent movements – especially regarding the upcoming EU parliamentary elections – the European Commission quickly responded by a legislative proposal to renegotiate the CAP. The suggested amendments were aimed to alleviate the administrative burden on the farmers; however, they also included significant setbacks on existing environmental requirements.

Nevertheless, the revision of the CAP, implemented in the name of supporting agricultural

farmers at all scales, seems to have been primarily driven by other factors. The hasty decision resembles more of a political concession in the run-up to the parliamentary elections, attempting to improve on the polls of political groups. Moreover, it was not the small and middle-scale farmers needing assistance who were at the forefront of the reconsideration talks. It was rather the large agricultural corporations, who have been pressuring the EU institutions for years behind the scenes to press their own interests for short-term profits. In this light, the revision of the CAP can hardly be seen as a promising advance in favour of environmental regulation or fair support of the agricultural sector. Therefore, this article will answer the following question: *What are the shortcomings of the latest CAP reform, and how might they be circumvented for it to effectively achieve its intended purpose?* In this paper, I will argue that the decision of the European Parliament to renegotiate the CAP was an ill-considered and rushed decision mainly motivated by political interests. I will demonstrate that the primary sources of influence in the procedure were mainly self-interested political and corporate actors rather than the farmers themselves. Consequently, the implemented changes do not favour administrative transparency or environmental protection, as intended to, but in contrast give political parties and large agroalimentary firms all the more leeway to maximise their benefits by circumventing existing legislation.

This paper is intended to follow an explanatory-normative methodology, both revealing the behind-the-scenes events of recent months and making

proposals to achieve the initially intended goals of the policy reform. Research methods include an analysis of primary sources such as press releases or memoranda of EU institutions and agricultural organisations. This will allow us first to get a clear, factual overview of the revision procedure. Then, a review of existing literature and journal articles will be conducted to get a better understanding of the farmers' and other actors' subjective perception of the situation, assessing their genuine demands. Finally, existing policy proposals put forward by experts in the field will be considered in detail, evaluating their potential to address the shortcomings of the latest CAP reform.

II. Factual analysis of the revisional procedure

On March 15, 2024, the European Commission proposed to review certain provisions of the CAP in relation to its Strategic Plans.¹ In the released memo, the institution based this decision on its commitment “to reduce the burden related to controls for EU farmers and provide them with greater flexibility for complying with certain environmental conditionalities”². In practice, the proposal put forward changes to one of the basic elements of eligibility to obtain CAP benefits, namely the Good Agricultural and Environmental Conditions (GAECs).³ Existing mandatory requirements for the reception of EU income support were downgraded to simple voluntary

¹ “Memo on the Commission’s Package of Support to EU Farmers,” European Commission, March 15, 2024.

² Ibid.

³ “Conditionality,” European Commission, February 13, 2024.

measures, weakening six of the conditions that concerned practices related to permanent grassland (GAEC 1); soil erosion (GAEC 5); minimum soil cover (GAEC 6); crop rotation (GAEC 7); non-productive areas/landscape features (GAEC 8) and environmentally sensitive grasslands and Natura 2000 sites (GAEC 9).⁴ Requirements for the minimum share of agricultural area devoted to non-productive activities have been deleted. As such, the retention of landscape features, banning the cutting of hedges and trees during the bird breeding and rearing season are for instance no longer required. The modification also re-authorized the use of pesticides on the concerned areas, leading to a loss of approximately 9 million hectares of pesticide-free land.⁵

On April 11, 2024, the European Parliament voted largely in favour of the proposal through an unconventional ‘urgency procedure’ allowing it to skip the standard approval procedure.⁶ In the absence of any evaluation of the potential consequences of the decision – or of consultations with the stakeholders or debates within the Parliament – the proposal was directly put up to a complete-scale vote during the plenary session of April 22-2; the final of that mandate preceding the 2024 Parliamentary elections.⁷ The resolution has immediately been embroiled in a series of controversies

following its announcement, put forward without any actual impact assessment. This has been justified by the crisis triggered in the wake of the protests all across the continent, said to require urgent decision-making on behalf of the EU institutions. In this regard, the decision was preceded merely by an impromptu consultation procedure that lasted a single week, coupled with a request of the four largest farming organisations at the EU level for measure proposals. This hardly seems like a proposal made on behalf of the farmers’ interests; its urgency suggests that the political actors involved were motivated by other, self-interested or external incentives.

III. The political sphere

A significant factor that could have pushed the European institutions to take such an ill-considered decision was the looming approach of the 2024 EU Parliamentary elections. Indeed, as each political group tried to gather the support of the most extensive electoral base possible, satisfying the citizenry’s demands seemed more crucial than ever before. Voters seem to be increasingly aware of climate change, but at the same time, they also tend to favour lower costs of living over other concerns, making their satisfaction an ambiguous task.⁸ In this political setting, Parliamentary groups were having real difficulties in positioning themselves between calls for action to prevent biodiversity loss and the fear of not appeasing the agricultural and industrial lobbies. As a matter of fact, the latter were constantly calling for an abandonment of environmental

⁴ Natasha Foote, “Re-CAP: Breaking down the Breakdown of the EU’s Green Farming Measures,” *Agricultural and Rural Convention*, July 28, 2024.

⁵ “A Deathblow for the Legitimacy of the CAP,” *PAN Europe*, April 29, 2024.

⁶ European Parliament. “Vote on a Review of the EU’s Agriculture Policy to Enhance Support to Farmers .” *News*, April 18, 2024.

⁷ “Agenda - Thursday, 25 April 2024,” *Europa.eu*, 2024.

⁸ European Commission, “EU Post-Electoral Survey 2024,” *Eurobarometer*, 2024.

regulations by a complete withdrawal of the EU's green policy.⁹ Even on the national level, almost all countries' political debates preceding the elections were marked by a stark presence of agricultural issues. Particularly, the far-right parties of many Member States have made attempts at politicising the waves of national protests, to appropriate this issue area for their benefit. Parties like the Spanish Vox or Germany's Afd have continuously accused ruling powers of letting the farmers down, to play on the pre-existing hostility and wariness of agricultural workers towards the Government.¹⁰ For instance, Vox Senator Ángel Pelayo has fiercely denounced the support of mainstream Spanish parties PSOE and PP to the European Green Deal, describing it as a "ruin for the countryside" during discussions in the Spanish Senate.¹¹ Behind this displayed eagerness to become the bastion of support of the farmers' cause, these parties were evidently making an attempt to form the key themes of the June 2024 European elections around their advantages. Through the denunciation of the bureaucratic system of the Brussels elite and other alerting messages such as the disappearance of the agricultural sector in the EU, far-right parties were seeking to instil a state of fear amongst farmers, pushing the latter to vote for their political group during the elections. However, these messages devoid of evidence or

⁹ Susi Dennison, "Agricultural Tackles: Protesting Farmers and the EU's Climate Agenda," ECFR, February 20, 2024.

¹⁰ Hans Pfeifer, "Germany's Far Right Exploits Farmers' Protests," Deutsche Welle, August 1, 2024.

¹¹ Paula Hidalgo, "VOX Recuerda a PP Y PSOE Que El Pacto Verde Europeo, Que Promueven Y Sostienen Con Los Liberales En Bruselas, Es 'La Ruina Del Campo' - VOX," VOX, February 5, 2024.

rationality have only aggravated the already polarised climate around this subject, needlessly fuelling further chaos and hatred among the population.¹² The result was a general uprise in the importance of the agroalimentary sector preceding the EU elections, each party including agricultural and environmental issues in their manifestos to some extent.¹³

This divided political climate led to an overall polarisation around the Green Deal and the EU's ambitions, with each party trying to exploit the debate for their own electoral benefit. Far-right populist and eurosceptic parties at the EU level have built a solid platform of opposition to environmental targets, crying out for a plan that violates the sovereignty of Member States and would lead to the destruction of European agriculture by depriving farmers of their means of subsistence.¹⁴ This narrative has become particularly appealing to farmers who feel abandoned by Brussels through unfavourable free trade agreements, such as those with Ukraine or the Mercosur. Namely, producers were anxious that agricultural products which do not meet European requirements – and are thus cheaper – would conquer the EU's market while they themselves

¹² Jean Pierre Stoorbants, "European Far Right Opportunistically Supports Farmers," Le Monde.fr, February 20, 2024.

¹³ Luc Vernet, "European Elections: The Agricultural Priorities of the 20 Biggest National Delegations – FarmEurope," Farm-europe.eu, June 10, 2024.

¹⁴ CET Editor, "CEE Right-Wing Launches New Political Family 'Patriots for Europe,'" Central European Times, July 2024.

are forced to abide by stringent regulations which limit their rentability.¹⁵

In this context, centre and left parties found themselves in a difficult position, where polls were already forecasting a significant shift to the right in the Parliament. With the approach of the forthcoming elections, this panic-ridden stalemate has pushed the ruling coalition to take a rushed and risky decision in their efforts to resist the combined offensive of corporate interests and populist rhetoric.¹⁶ This turmoil conceived the Commission's proposal to reopen the revision procedure of the CAP, which thus resulted in a politicised solution that lacked real democratic legitimacy or professional expertise. Of the petty four farming organisations that were involved, only one supported these revisions. Other voices, alerting about the absence of any authentic impact assessment or the consultation of stakeholders involved – such as the farmers themselves – were wholly disregarded.¹⁷

IV. The target audience: position of the farmers

Even if the farmers' discontent seems to have been initially triggered by a coincidental series of issues specific to each country, their demands have aligned along a common call for a revision of Europe's

¹⁵ Maïthé Chini, "Sowing Despair and Misery: Farmer Protests Denounce EU's Free Trade Agreements," *The Brussels Times*, February 27, 2024,

¹⁶ "Cap Reform Catastrophe: A Step Backward for European Agriculture and Democracy," *Agroecology Europe*, May 14, 2024.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

agricultural policy, in the light of the reform of the CAP that was formally adopted on December 2, 2021, and which entered into force on January 1, 2023, right as the initial discontent of the farming community began to form.¹⁸ The main aim of this legislation was to strive for a more performance-based CAP, with higher environmental ambitions and stronger mandatory conditionalities to become a beneficiary.¹⁹ Coupled with insufficient prices to provide a stable income and considerable importations from countries that do not comply with European standards and undermine the EU market²⁰, the PAC 2023-2027 reform was just additional fuel to the fire regarding the farmers' discontent and anger, leading to the formation of a Union-wide wave of protests amongst farmers, setting up blockades in and around major European cities.

A. Self-Interested Appropriation

However, not long after the farmers' activity gained widespread public attention across the EU, their reasonable claims have quickly been appropriated by large agro-industrial corporations lobbying for their benefits.²¹ The impressive mobilisation provided a solid

¹⁸ European Commission, "CAP 2023-27," agriculture.ec.europa.eu, 2021.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Bernard Bourget, "The Various Causes of the Agricultural Crisis in Europe," www.robert-schuman.eu, February 26, 2024.

²¹ Fleur Vonk and Frédéric Lépine, "The Agriculture Lobby in the European Union," *Master in Advanced European and International Studies -European Policy and Governance - Trilingual Studies*, 2022.

ground for the companies to argue in favour of an unplanned revision of the CAP ; and a removal of the existing environmental regulations on beneficiary conditionalities, favouring the rentability of their cheap, pesticide-heavy supplies of goods through large-scale monoculture farming.²² Therefore, this decision seems to be very far off from what it is depicted as by the EU institutions following its implementation. Indeed, the revised CAP does not reduce the burden of EU farmers concerning administrative transparency or financial support, while providing them with greater flexibility for complying with certain environmental conditionalities. This decision, on the other hand, embodies another successful move of large-scale industrial producers to circumvent the ever-decreasing remainder of environmental safeguards in agriculture..Currently, the CAP primarily favors large agribusiness corporations, directing financial support and thereby consolidating the agricultural sector under their control. These corporations heavily depend on fertilizers and synthetic pesticides to maximize crop yields.²³

This has been repeatedly emphasised by organisations representing the interests of smallholders, such as the European Coordination Via Campesina (ECVC), firmly rejecting the latest reform by the European Commission. The European Farmers'

Association – representing millions of farmers from 70 countries opposing industrial agriculture and defending family farming²⁴ – has expressed its discontent regarding the agreed proposal in a position document, alerting for the umpteenth time that this CAP lacks the tools necessary to achieve the socio-economic and environmental sustainability that would allow it to address the current situation.²⁵ More specifically, the organisation has emphasised that, as of now, the CAP will continuously neglect the real demands and needs of young, agroecological farmers, by lacking the means to truly facilitate the entrance of other farmers on the market.²⁶ One of the main critiques of the organisation is targeted towards the allocation of financial support of the current CAP system, which they describe as “unacceptably unjust”. Being based on land ownership and capital, the mechanism favours large-scale investment projects by large agroindustries over medium or small scale farmers, ignoring the latter’s efforts to adopt more environmentally sound solutions to their activities.²⁷

B. Vain Hopes

In this manner, the modernised policies of the CAP 2023-27, introducing social conditionality into their system, could be seen as a long-awaited

²² Nina Holland and Zuzana Vlasatá, “Feeding People or the Agroindustry?,” *Green European Journal*, December 21, 2023.

²³ Natacha Cingotti, “Rushed CAP Changes Are Not About Farmers.,” *Foodwatch EN*, 2024.

²⁴ “Home,” *European Coordination Via Campesina*, December 18, 2019.

²⁵ “Youth Articulation Position Document on the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) Reform,” *Eurovia.org*, July 13, 2021.

²⁶ “Position Document on the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) Reform,” *European Coordination via Campesina*.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

accomplishment to improve agrarian working conditions for many. This innovative tool binds EU countries to dedicate at least 10% of direct payments to the redistributive income support tool, to meet the financial needs of smaller and medium-sized farms.²⁸ However, despite its promising aspects, this measure must be complemented by other means to counter the dominance of big farms in the obtention of income aid. One of the main weaknesses of the current policy is that social conditionality will solely apply to those receiving area-based direct payments, yet again mainly being large-scale farmers who obtain subsidies based on the amount of land they own or cultivate.²⁹ Consequently, specific areas of production linked to sector-focused financial support schemes will be excluded from social conditionality.

As a result, this new mechanism has inconsequential to no effect at all on a significant portion of farm workers in specific sectors where seasonal and temporary work is most prevalent, such as fruit, wine, olive oil, and apiculture. As a result, labour standards in these sectors are not monitored or enforced under the CAP like they are for other subsidy recipients. This is highly problematic because these are the very sectors where precarities such as underpayment, poor working conditions, and lack of job security, are most

prevalent, due to the lack of fluidity of production throughout the year.³⁰ By excluding these sectors, this limited scope of social conditionality creates a significant loophole that prevents the policy from protecting farm workers in some of the most labour-intensive and potentially exploitative sectors of European agriculture.³¹

Moreover, even when considering the sectors that fall within the scope of social conditionality, this additional provision does not imply any new legal requirements imposed on farmers, making it unlikely to lead to any significant behavioural change among CAP beneficiaries. The relatively modest, standard sanction of a 3% subsidy reduction in the case of non-compliance is implausible to lead to any considerable deterrent effect. Indeed, as farmers are in many cases already subjected to sanctions set out by domestic law for the same reasons, the CAP's new mechanism carries limited additional effect of dissuasion.³²

V. Proposals

The preceding summary of the recent CAP reform should make it quite evident that the current

²⁸ European Commission, "CAP 2023-27," Agriculture and rural development (European Commission, 2021).

²⁹ Federal Ministry of the Republic of Austria, "Direct Payments and Conditionality from 2023 Onward," Agriculture, Forestry, Regions and Water Management, 2023.

³⁰ "Harvesting Hope: The Realities of Seasonal and Migrant Workers in Agri-Food Value Chain," European Economic and Social Committee, April 12, 2024.

³¹ Mathieu Willard, "CAP Social Conditionality: A Game Changer for Farm Workers? | Agricultural and Rural Convention," Agricultural and Rural Convention, October 4, 2023.

³² Thomas Bangsgaard Lyngs, "Social Conditionality: An Adequate Legal Response to Challenges Faced by Agricultural Workers in the EU, or an Example of Redwashing within the Common Agricultural Policy?," European Labour Law Journal, March 28, 2024.

approach to problem-solving needs to be much improved. Naturally this does not mean a relinquishment of the CAP altogether, but simply a thoughtful, thorough reworking; despite how sarcastic this may sound after its repeated modifications. The CAP is a valuable cohesive instrument that can be the real driving force for a green transition in agriculture and a fair assistance to farmers, if implemented rightly. In the future, it must undergo a historic reform, to enable a genuine shift to more sustainable production models that are resilient in the face of climate change.

A. Representation and Participation

Firstly, the representation and participation of farmers in EU decision-making processes must be improved. Young, small-scale farmers are especially vulnerable in this regard, due to the threat of an over-reliance of the Common Agricultural Policy on expensive technologies and an automatising of the agricultural sector, pushing it towards an even greater dependence on multinational corporations and polluting, energy-intensive activities. In this regard, it is crucial to improve and expand the involvement of young and small-scale farmers in decision-making discussions by ensuring means of communication with EU institutions. For this purpose, the creation of a new Civil Dialogue Group (CDG) could be a plausible solution, centred around the thematic of the representation of independent, modest farms relying on traditional methods of production. CDGs are expert groups created for the purpose of enabling the

European Commission to draft policy initiatives via the integration of non-governmental stakeholders, thereby allowing the policies to better incorporate the sectorial competencies of the said experts in decision-making.³³ However, as of now, none of the thematic dialogue groups address the unequal representation of small-scale farms compared to large agroindustries. This would make the establishment of a new group a reasonable decision to counter this issue, allowing smallholder farmers to share their experiences and knowledge in the field, for policy developments to better take into account their interests and demands too. This proposal has somewhat already been articulated by the European Coordination via Campesina too, asking specifically for a new group to be established for the benefit of young agricultural producers in order to enhance the representation of peculiar producer profiles.³⁴

B. Financial Aid Distribution

Secondly, the current system of financial aid distribution must be reworked too. As already mentioned above, the allocations unjustly favour large-scale producers who have the capacities to devote large areas of arable land to monocultural investments, leading to soil degradation and severe damages to soil

³³ “Agricultural Civil Dialogue Groups,” European Commission (Agriculture and rural development, March 13, 2024).

³⁴ “Position Document on the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) Reform,” European Coordination via Campesina, July 2021.

microbiomes.³⁵ This issue could be countered by setting an upper limit on the extent of redistributive aid that can be allocated to large farms, in proportion to their levels of income and the size of cultivated land. Upon implementation, this rule could define a degressive scale for the amount of subsidies that can be obtained, thereby preventing the absorption of allocated financial support by a few dominant agroindustries.

C. Social Conditionality

Social conditionality also unfairly excludes some of the most precarious agricultural sectors from its scope, leading to no improvement in the support and protection of small producers in those areas. For social conditionality to achieve its full scope in strengthening the social security of small and medium-scale farmers, the CAP must ensure their decent means of livelihood. To this end, social conditionality must be extended to all sectors, including those relying on partial working schemes. Significantly in regard to seasonal workers, their vulnerability to exploitation and trafficking must be reduced through rigorous investigations, warranting that subsidies are devoted to the protection of all farm workers' rights. This could be done through the establishment of a public observatory system, similar to the recently launched EU agri-food chain observatory

(AFCO).³⁶ Currently, the aim of the AFCO is simply to enhance price transparency, cost composition and the distribution of margins and added value in the supply chain. This additional observatory would need to focus on the compliance of seasonal employment contracts with EU level regulation, ensuring fair remuneration and living standards during the working period. To enhance the support of smallholders in precarious sectors of production even more, a minimum wage could be considered, requiring agricultural contracts to be a source of stable income rather than uncertainty. This could encourage even more people to pursue their education and career in the agricultural field, making it a promising and appealing domain for young professionals. To the same end, compliance with the requirements of social conditionality could be better assured through a more rigorous sanctioning system in the case of breach. Indeed, additional sanctions going further than the preexisting national regulations and an EU-level harmonised inspection mechanism could both help address the observed laxity concerning current rules, improving livelihood security for many.³⁷

Nevertheless, none of these proposals could reach their full potential without the active guidance and accompaniment of the farmers in the procedure. Supporting farmers through the often overly complex

³⁵ Vaclavas Bogužas et al., "The Effect of Monoculture, Crop Rotation Combinations, and Continuous Bare Fallow on Soil CO₂ Emissions, Earthworms, and Productivity of Winter Rye after a 50-Year Period," *Plants* 11, no. 3 (February 4, 2022).

³⁶ "Commission Starts Setting up the Agriculture and Food Chain Observatory," European Commission (Agriculture and rural development , April 9, 2024).

³⁷ Mathieu Willard, "CAP Social Conditionality: A Game Changer for Farm Workers? | Agricultural and Rural Convention," Agricultural and Rural Convention, October 4, 2023.

bureaucratic procedures is essential for the functioning of the subsidy system. This includes removing legislative and administrative obstacles that prevent agri-food workers and employers from freely forming or joining organisations and actively participating in social dialogue processes at all levels. Integrating the role of social partners more effectively within the CAP is essential for farmers to stay informed and defend their rights through these united bodies. Such improvements could be done through the allocation of specific funding to support the efforts of organisations in the agricultural sector, aimed to guide farmholders in administrative processes and to guarantee that workers are fully aware of their rights. Achieving social conditionality depends on the solid alignment and active participation of both EU and Member State organisations and unions with these shared goals, as they can unite farmers at the local, regional or even national levels.³⁸

VI. Conclusion

In light of the above, this brief overview of the CAP demonstrates that this tool of the European Union could be a quintessential component of sustainable and equitable farming if reconsidered properly. Its provisions in place all aim to contribute to the common good and the wellbeing of all agricultural workers, even in spite of errors that unfortunately lead to the exploitation of this beneficiary system by a few.

³⁸ Pesticide Action Network Europe, “COMMISSION NON-PAPER REDUCING the ADMINISTRATIVE BURDEN for FARMERS: NEXT STEPS,” PAN Europe, May 8, 2024.

These faults could simply be overcome by minor adjustments, as suggested in some points in the aforementioned policy proposals. More importantly, though, the CAP and its reforms need to be made more resilient and separated from external influence. Indeed, the management of this common policy needs to remain in the hands of the sovereign farmers and political experts of the agricultural field. The interference of self-interested lobbyists and political groups seeking to gather popular support must be eliminated from the policy streams, as their influence only hinders the effectiveness of this device. Widespread awareness must be raised about the CAP and its importance, for public media to provide a more efficient shield against unjust exploitations. To this end, further research should be conducted and published on the current reform processes, informing citizens and farmers transparently of the current situation and the possible paths forward. After that, the decision-making should equally consider the will and demands of the People in future revision procedures, making the entire procedure yet again fully accessible and participatory to include the voices of all.

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