

Greta Thunberg is inspiring climate action. But in some countries her message is falling on deaf ears

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(CNN) [Greta Thunberg was protesting](#) in front of the Swedish parliament on Friday, just like she has almost every week for the past year.

Wearing a yellow raincoat, her long brown hair in a single braid, the 16-year-old Thunberg held her now famous "[School Strike For Climate](#)" placard.

"The climate crisis doesn't go on summer holiday, and neither will we," the teenage activist said in a tweet to rally her supporters around the world.

For the past year, Thunberg's weekly sit-ins outside the parliament have gained a worldwide following, with [students walking out of schools in well over 100 countries](#).

The climate strikes appeared to nudge some of those in power. German Chancellor Angela Merkel praised the students for taking action. After initial reluctance, her government joined the European efforts to adopt an EU-wide emission target. In the UK, parliament [declared a climate emergency](#) and adopted [new emission targets](#), partly in response to the protests.

'Ignored and ridiculed'

Elsewhere, the students' actions were met with much less enthusiasm. In the Czech Republic, their efforts fell on deaf ears.

"In response to our first strike, the [Czech parliament] debated climate change," the organizers of the protests in the Czech Republic said in a statement. "But the meeting only lasted a few hours and more than half of the deputies left the chamber at its start...we demanded action, but we were ridiculed and ignored."

Despite the students efforts in the streets, the Czech government was among the nations [that blocked the EU's net zero emission proposal](#). The plan, debated at the European summit in June, would have resulted in the elimination of most greenhouse emissions in the bloc by 2050. Apart from the Czech Republic, three other member states -- Poland, Estonia and Hungary, vetoed the plan. "Why should we decide 31 years ahead of time what will happen in 2050?," Czech Prime Minister Andrej Babis told reporters at the meeting.

"This exact kind of behavior is and was the reason why we started striking," Eva Matoušová, one of the Czech organizers of the student strikes, told CNN.

Matoušová said that while there won't be official strikes over the summer, smaller, more local events will take place. The next major nationwide strike in the country is planned for September 20.

"The Czech government's ongoing inability to take climate seriously is alarming... . It's clear that our common future is not their priority and that needs to change," she said.

The result of the summit reflects, at least partly, the attitudes of people across the EU. According to [Eurobarometer](#), a public opinion survey conducted by the European Commission in 2017, only 22% of Czechs, the lowest proportion in the entire EU, thought climate change was one of the four most serious problems facing the world. Poles, with 27%, were second to last.

Yet in Sweden, one of the countries that pushed for the plan, 76% of people think climate change is the single most serious problem the world is facing.

Climate economics

Thomas Bernauer, the director of the Institute of Science, Technology and Policy at ETH Zurich university, said the divide comes down largely to economics.

"In the wealthier European countries like Switzerland, or Germany, or Scandinavia, people have reached a certain level of well-being and pay attention to issues that go beyond their daily needs," he said.

"If you're in a very rich, liberal society, and you have a certain job, a sufficient income, enough food, housing, and so on, basically, you're contained on the material level, of course you can redefine things like climate change into something that is a basic need... . But say you're in Bulgaria or Portugal, and there's a 30% unemployment, and you have no prospects of finding a job, then it's a very different calculus," he said.

The current European divide over climate policy illustrates much deeper economic, political and cultural divisions within the bloc, according to Mike Hulme, professor of Human Geography at the University of Cambridge, in the United Kingdom.

"You have 28 countries at very different stages of economic development... . It's partly about political leadership, it's partly about cultural values, norms, partly about religious beliefs, it's partly about geopolitics, and the perceptions of who holds power and influence in the world," he said.



Greta Thunberg



@GretaThunberg



School strike week 46. The climate crisis doesn't go on summer holiday, and neither will we. We go on. [#fridaysforfuture](#) [#schoolstrike4climate](#) [#climatestrike](#)

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How Europe stacks up on climate

School climate strikes have spread throughout Europe. While the students' message is the same across the continent, policies and attitudes toward climate change differ.

% who put climate in top four most important issues

XX Voted for/against a EU net zero emissions target

Number of climate school strikes



CNN Note: Number of strikes as reported by organizers
Source: European Commission, Fridays for Future

Number of climate school strikes key
<50 50+ 100+ 200+ >300

It's a practical question, too. Poland is the second largest coal producer in Europe. As much as 80% of its electricity comes from coal-burning plants. The sector employs tens of thousands of people, and is seen as strategic, allowing Poland the freedom of not relying on gas from Russian.

"It's a much easier thing to become emissions free when a country has other alternatives," said Darrick Evensen, lecturer in Environmental Politics at the University of Edinburgh.

Politics is increasingly playing a role in the fight against climate change. In recent European election, Green parties scored significant victories, a reflection of the topic being on the minds of the voters.

Climate change policies generally suffer from the discrepancy between their costs and benefits. The costs are high and imminent. Phasing out fossil fuels, which scientists say is necessary in order to limit global warming, will require huge investments into new technologies.

The benefits, on the other hand, might only become apparent by the end of the century, when most of those paying the costs now will be long gone. That makes it hard for politicians to push for a change.

"With environmental issues you're not seeing any near-term payout, that's the problem," said Darrick Evensen, lecturer in Environmental Politics at the University of Edinburgh.

"But that's something that may be changing because of the protests, the politicians are starting to see, and we're seeing this in the UK, they do see a near-term payout for climate change legislation, because it can get them into power," he said.

It's a calculation that works only when there are no other major issues.

"If there's an economic crisis, urgency to create jobs, high inflation, or other things that create a lot of misery for people, those are the things that the electorate wants to be dealt with as a priority, but that doesn't mean that climate change is irrelevant," said Bernauer.

Sweden is one of only a handful of countries that have adopted emission reduction targets in an effort to tackle climate change. On the international stage, the Swedes have been championing action on fossil fuels.

Still, [Greta Thunberg](#) continues to spend her Fridays sitting in front of the Swedish parliament.

She says she won't stop until Sweden is in line with the Paris Agreement. The 2015 accord aims to limit a global temperature rise this century to 1.5 degrees Celsius by dramatically cutting carbon emissions.

According to Climate Action Network Europe, a coalition of NGOs, no European country, not even Sweden, is on track to fully meet its targets. "We will probably sit there for years to come," [Thunberg told CNN](#).