

ON THE WAY TO COPENHAGEN: AMONG HOPES AND FEARS

MIKAEL ROMAN EXPLAINS HOW US POSITION ON CLIMATE CHANGE IS CHANGED FROM BUSH TO OBAMA ADMINISTRATION AND GIVES HIS POINT OF VIEW ON THE DIFFERENT POSITIONS WITHIN THE CLIMATE NEGOTIATIONS AND WHAT WE CAN EXPECT FROM THE SUMMIT IN COPENHAGEN.



INTERVIEW WITH **MIKAEL ROMAN**
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1. Considering the growing divergence between the US and rich nations on one side and China and India on the other side, what can we expect from the Copenhagen summit?

With regards to the divergences it has to be said that we have on one side some political rhetoric and on the other side some more fundamental challenges. Yes, there are some major divergences. That's always been the case. In this phase, everyone is trying to play a little bit of chicken race. Divergences seem to grow but I am not sure they are really growing. I believe that is more about a political rhetoric. Differences have been always there and my personal point of view, at least from an European point of view, is that there are too many expectations towards Copenhagen. First of all, I don't think it is reasonable to expect a new concrete agreement out of Copenhagen. We can expect at best some form of an agreement on how to move forward. There are too many issues on the plate at this point; there has been for long time a kind of mission impossible to negotiate and reach an agreement on each and every issue. I don't really follow negotiations that closely, so I can't see what exactly they can agree upon. Nevertheless, there has to be some progress on particular issues. My sense is that you can start – as in any kind of negotiation - with the easy issues in order to build trust and to move to the difficult ones. What I mean is that it is impossible at this point to get closure on all the issues. Rather, an agreement on how to move forward is a more possible and reasonable output of the process.

2. What more should we expect from the Obama administration in terms of new policies and change of perspective in the climate debate? How different is this compared to the previous Bush administration?

This is a very interesting and sophisticated question, in many ways. First of all it is very important to distinguish between what is happening at domestic and at international level. Let me be very clear. Non Americans unfortunately have a very limited sense of the complexity of US domestic issues, and here we go back to the political process in which Obama makes decisions. For example even if the US President is the one who ratifies the treaty, he is not the one who gives the approval, it is the Senate. This is just one example of the complexity. Frankly that's how it works in every country, but the US federal system - with many checks and balances along the way and different areas of jurisdictions between the States and the Federal Government - makes it very difficult for Obama to speak for America: the big diversities between the states and the complicated system for decision making locks up each and every act.

This is the first point. Secondly, if we want to compare the Obama and the Bush administration, again, we need to think in domestic and international terms. At international level it is obvious that Obama is moving from bilateralism or even unilateralism – that was the Bush domain and that is still one of the options out there (since it is hard to get a major agreement, it's better to have a set of agreements) - to multilateralism. So, although some components of the Bush politics are sort of coming back now, the major change of Obama is really towards multilateralism. The US want to play and to get a leadership role.

At national and international level, what is really important is the major conceptual change that is about taking climate change as major objective. Bush was afraid and put climate change on the negative side of the balance saying we have to deal with development, let's just leave climate while others were considering climate more important than economic development. Obama is now saying that it is all about development, for each everyone of us. Some countries – such as Malawi and Vietnam - are struggling with underdevelopment and some others in the rich world - like US and EU - are struggling with effect of overdevelopment, but also have a development concern. China and Brazil are struggling with both. Let's use climate change as a means to support development, i.e. creating new green jobs, and alike. This is the major conceptual shift, the core of his message.

In this way he is putting the climate debate in a political context and invites more actors to discuss in political terms, not about what has to be done, what is good and bad, but what politics may have a positive side effect on climate. By framing climate as a means rather than as an end itself, he is actually building alliances and involving more people in the discussion. Instead of saying we need to build green technologies because we want to lower emissions, he says let's support green technologies because we can create jobs and also become energy independent.

This is politically very important. I actually do think that negotiations will benefit from more of a development focus rather than a climate change focus. By saying so, I don't refer to climate change from a natural science concern. We know what has to be done, and that is undisputable. I refer here to the political process that has its own logic, its own concept and its own frame. It's art not science. This is why it is so important how Obama is reframing the issue, putting climate change as more a side effect of development policies. In this way he can build alliances.

At domestic level, he is trying to do the same. I am not saying he will succeed because this is a very sensitive issue. Under Bush there were essentially four strands in the US political system in which climate change could develop or not: one was the presidential administration, the other was in congress, the third was in the judicial system, and the fourth in the State level. We know that under Bush the congress was locked up, although there were proposals back and forth. In the judicial system there was virtually nothing happening until the very end where there was the famous legislation in favour of the EPA regulating CO₂. At state level there was lots of activity going on. Now Obama is effectively trying to link all these different arenas so that they work in conjunction.

The first thing he can do is to change the whole *modus operandi* of the presidential administration, coming out with administrative regulations: in Sweden we do not have the same, but the US President can decide on political appointees, on budget allocation, and some rules and regulations on how bureaucracy works, that force the steps to take on climate change issue. This is a major shift because when that happens, the judicial system is in the loop as well and you can build alliance with the President, with people at state level and within the congress.

So, by reframing and using his power in certain arenas, he can start linking up actors so that they gains from one another, and I think that is happening.

3. In your view, how likely is it that Europe will reach a consensus and take a leadership role in the negotiations?

This is really interesting when we sit and criticize Obama for not coming up with a clear message. It is interesting on how we - as Italians, Swedish, and so forth - talk about the United States and compare the US to countries like Sweden, Italy, or Denmark. The point is that the entities of comparison here should rather be Europe and USA, with Sweden and Italy being like New Hampshire or Wisconsin.

When we look at ourselves, in Europe, it's worth wondering to what extent we are really homogenous and to what extent we don't have the same kind of disputes as the states have in the US. What is the joint position that we portray to the rest of the world? I think this is something to be taken into account when we make comparisons. I don't think Europe will have any more of a chance to come up with a consensus than Obama has. First of all because of our national settings that are complicated to harmonise.

Regarding the leadership role, we should first understand what we mean by 'leadership role'. Is it to define the agenda, or is it to define what the final outcome is? There can be an entrepreneurial leadership that has little saying but is instrumental in getting people to talk. Instead, if it is about setting the agenda, this is a completely different role. The question is what kind of leadership are we expecting from the EU? If it is about being visible and deciding what has to be discussed, coming with smart proposals, or being the one who decides in the end, that is very different and perhaps less productive than anyone who is there invisible but making the discussion smooth.

I don't see Europe coming out the way they did last time, sort of deciding the outcome or defining the agenda. I think if we did, we would actually not gain much respect. Europe is not seen in the rest of the world as we would like to think. Maybe we are not seen as delivering in the way we talk. A common critique is that we talk but do comparatively less.

Maybe the role for the EU is to make people talk to one another. This is another important leadership role, that does not get the headlines. We can be the harmonizer in such a tense situation among the divergences.

One of very contentious issue here, at bottom line of division, is the distinction between mitigation and adaptation. I followed the adaptation debate for my [report](#), although I do not work with it myself. I was really stunned to see how totally absent the issue is - or was at that time, nice months ago - in the US. Then, if you travel to other countries - I was in Mozambique a few weeks ago - you realize the debate is about adaptation. So when you think about that, you realize that a third credible actor may be needed to get everyone to listen, respect and understand to one another's positions.

4. According to the [press](#), some diplomats in Bangkok suggested that the only way out could be a separate agreement for the US with regard to cutting emissions that is acceptable to developing countries. What do you think of this option? (How practical would this be? What are the risks inherent?)

This is really an intriguing question. Again it is about politics: the practical and the expected. Will people automatically accept this option? From a more legalistic aspect, sure, actually the convention says 'common but differentiated responsibility'. So how could you have a separate agreement for the US? We already have in Kyoto protocol different kind of commitments.

In an open minded world, we can discuss the US situation and understand what solution can be reasonable and workable for them.

I just give you one example. The US lost eight years. The Bush administration was a disaster, in that sense they lost lots of ground. Many of the measures that they would have undertaken in order to kick up the commitment, have generated in the first instance even more ambitions. For instance they have an electric grid that is completely

outdated and need to be updated. If you first of all do it, yes it is an enormous undertaking with an enormous amount of money, but even if you did it, it would first of all take quite some time because it is a huge country with lots of gear to change. The fact is that it will probably also increase emissions as a result.

So, what is the point here? Is to decrease emissions in 5 years or in 15 years? In a sense those are the type of issues that you would negotiate in an ideal world, sitting down and discussing what kind of problems each of us is facing, in order to find an agreement that is suitable for all. That's the ideal world, that is connecting to the principle of common and differentiated responsibility.

Regarding the developing countries, of course, they won't like the option of a separate agreement. That's the political reality. They would only accept if they get something in return. This is how politics works.

Personally, I think that things will evolve, but in different strands, in different coalitions, where actors speak at one another and can deal from their commonalities rather than their differences. In the practical world, I think this is the way it will evolve, but it will probably evolve outside the agreement. Maybe not even for climate change reasons, but because of financial implications and development.

and also because of implications with aid policy and funding...

Yes. It would be very practical but I don't think it will evolve that way. I would be surprised if something of the kind will come out and if it did it – I do not exclude it completely – it will probably be again more unfortunate since some actors will feel sort of overrun because this would be again about the big actors deciding the rules of the game.

5. According to the *Transatlantic Trends* survey by the GMF of US, American public opinion seems less worried than the EU on climate change and also less keen to undergo economic restrictions in favour of more climate sensitive policies. What is your comment on this?

Interestingly my [report](#) has also a section on public opinion. I don't think it is fair to compare different places in the world. What is interesting is what the trends are. In the US there is a growing awareness about climate change which is then an interesting sign. It brings in the next thing that is understanding where it takes place, who is getting more interested and why. The pattern is both positive and discouraging.

People are getting more aware about climate change in general and people are saying they should take care of it. About payments, are they ready to sacrifice their own well being? In general their awareness is growing but not at the same extent. The idea is: we need to do something but someone else has to pay.

Another pattern is about a strong correlation between climate change and party affiliation. If there is any correlation that overflows the other is the fact that republicans are against and democrats are for. There is also a strong correlation between the sceptics and the republicans. Having said that, you also find a strong correlation between certain regions and climate change, which then causes some interest because then you get into politics. The so called rustbelt - sort of industrial centre of US, with heavy industry, more often coal dependent – often has republican governors, senators or representatives. More importantly, though, a democratic majority does not necessarily translate into proactive climate policies. Instead, regional economic concerns regularly create a defensive stance on climate policies. So, even if the democratic political representative has a more proactive stance with respect to climate, he or she may in the end have to follow the opinion on his or her constituency on that particular issue.

do you mean they do not even have the alternative?

Exactly! Because at the end of the day it's also the fact that politicians are not elected because of their position on all issues but more often on some prioritized ones. So the

democratic representative in a state like Indiana, he or she may have been voted into office because of his/her position on health policy or whatever and then all the sudden it ends being part of int'l climate accord - but finds him or herself there in a position where that vote runs totally counter to the constituents position on climate change - but he or she were never voted into office for climate change because it wasn't an issue, it was rather health.

This creates some very difficult situations in the political system, - nothing new, it happens all the time with other issues and in every place - but in this case it becomes difficult given how the political system is set up.

Also, there seems to be another clear connection: if you want to take the sort of stereotypical description of a climate sceptic, he is a young man, industrial worker, low educated, living in the South. These guys tend to cluster. This clustering of climate sceptics indicates that in the US they may have a higher sort of breakthrough at the political level than they actually have on the aggregate level.

The fact that they tend to join in a certain constituency and to be very strong implies that they can have a very high influence at aggregate level given that their political representatives have to consider their position although they themselves may have another opinion.

So it depends on the voting areas and where interests cluster. Therefore it's very important to go behind data and see what dynamic is at the lower level of structure. So to sum up and answer to your question: yes, there is a difference between the US and Europe. We can have different interpretations, about culture, bigger consumptions and abundances that Europe does not have. The point is that things are happening in the US, but they are still very connected to particular interest groups which have implications on how the issue is represented in the political system and it is not necessarily representative of the aggregate interest in the country.

6. At this point in time, how much progress is there within policy making circles regarding the idea of public-private alliances?

This is going to happen and is already happening. As you probably have noticed already, I am not very positive about the political UNFCCC process in itself. I think it is slow and it has fundamental problem because it focuses on sort of the whole thing. From a political perspective. I don't say it is the wrong thing. It is right to focus on climate change. But in order to put it in the political context, this is not necessarily the right way to talk about climate change all the time. You need to find the drivers for action and not promoting climate change *per se*.

There is something to be said about a political framing and the scientific framing. Some of the unfortunate outcomes are that scientists have been the ones that who probably defined the political process and that's perhaps why we are in the current situation. I think that companies have begun to realize that they can move money out of it, and this is actually going to happen a lot. Countries realise they can make money or position themselves for political prestige. That's when things move on quickly as well, and this is happening.

Again I give you an example about the US: there was a very interesting article a couple of weeks ago in the New York Times about how the electric utilities or coal industry have always acted as one homogeneous actor. They are breaking up now. So there are those companies that are realising that they can gain from the process. Competition is almost never between different industries. Competition takes place within industries so when people are sitting to debate programmes and they have a representative from the oil industry and a representative from the coal industry, they are actually speaking on behalf of those who don't want to see any changes at all. But within that industry there will be actors that actually don't like the way the game is played. They are not winning in the competition within the industry.

They would like to see a change and actually benefit from it. They are sitting on new technology that is very expensive with current regulations but it would be very much in

favour of a change where everyone has taken the same measures because they are sitting on the technology that would be the alternative. That kind of dynamic has now appeared. Alliances between NGOs, environment organisations, government and industries are pushing the envelope for stricter regulations, for stricter measures in general on climate change. They all see that they can gain from it. I think this is the dynamic that has to be explored much more and without necessarily an international climate accord. On the other hand, the international agreement can benefit and push this process further.

This is probably where Obama will succeed...

Yes. Take the example of the US Climate Alliance Partnership (USCAP). This is a very tough lobby group, umbrella organisation comprising the [World Resources Institute](#), different states and the General Electric - a very diverse sort of actors. Some of these players would ever compromise on what they want for themselves, and they are not there to save the world primarily, they are there to gain from something. So just thinking through what they stand to gain from this is a critical exercise in itself.

7. What are some of the key fears if the agreement fails?

Based on what you have told me so far, I am actually also wondering what should we consider as a failure in this case?

This goes back to politics again, it is not science.

It is obviously important that it will not be a disaster because that would take away all the energy from a lot of actors which would be very unfortunate. That's always my fear with expectations. We can have different parameters for what is a success, whether it is a sort of more rational or emotional one. The emotional one is just as important as the other one. If people really want something and they don't get it they would lose energy. So to that extent it is a problem if the agreement fails. But we can leave the table with an idea of which are the priorities and the action plan for the next couple of months. Then everyone can claim some sort of success and the energy is still there. Then, you ask me whether is important that the process breaks down for saving the world: no I don't think so, because of the rest of the dynamics that we have been talking about so far (the role of industry, the action taken by various countries, and so forth). Take the example of what is happening in the US: regardless of the climate accord or not, there will be changes in the US for internal legislative reasons. That is where these accord with EPA is critical: the EPA will- if there is no carbon trade system in the US – have to regulate CO₂. So things will happen in the US, again regardless of any outcomes of the agreement.

So to answer to your question: will the failure be a disaster for the better of the world? No I don't think so. But for the process itself and for all the spirit that is out there, a failure will obviously not be good.