

Sustainable Leadership in the Context of the Green Deal: Private Transport Leaders' Perception of Strategic and Operational Barriers

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Abstract

This research investigates the connections between sustainable leadership, perceived strategic and operational barriers, and the future probability of implementing sustainable solutions in the private transport sector, within the framework of the European Green Deal. A quantitative, exploratory approach was used, involving an online survey sent to Romanian citizens. The sampling process resulted in 114 valid responses from transport sector professionals, which were analyzed using SPSS with Spearman rank-order correlations after the assessment of reliability and normality, under the Shapiro-Wilk normality test. The results indicate a statistically significant negative correlation between sustainable leadership and the perception of financial-commercial barriers, but no significant correlation with macro-regulatory constraints. This implies that macro-level challenges, like regulatory instability and infrastructure shortages, are seen as universal systemic issues, independent of leadership abilities. Additionally, the perceived severity of operational barriers is positively linked to the adoption of digital optimization solutions, suggesting their role as a compensatory measure for hardware limitations. The study also shows that sustainable leadership has a significant, positive moderate impact on the probability of implementing green solutions in the coming years. By concentrating on the micro-level cognition of leaders, this research fills a notable empirical gap concerning the human factor in sustainability transitions. Practically, the findings highlight the importance of sustainable leadership in bridging the „value-action gap.” Organizations need to develop leadership capabilities to effectively reframe financial constraints and utilize digitalization to speed up the transition to sustainable mobility, working also with the authorities in order to minimize the regulatory constraints, such as infrastructure, legal framework, and other barriers that are in the authorities' hands to solve.

Keywords

European Green Deal, sustainable leadership, strategic barriers, operational barriers, digital optimization, private transport, Romania.

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Introduction

The transition toward sustainable mobility has become one of the most pressing priorities of the European policy agenda, especially under the European Green Deal, which seeks to achieve climate neutrality by 2050 and sets an ambitious target of reducing transport-related greenhouse gas emissions by 90%. In this context, the private transport sector is under growing pressure to redesign its strategies, operations, and investment priorities in line with environmental objectives, digital transformation, and evolving stakeholder expectations. As transport remains one of the most difficult sectors to decarbonize, understanding the organizational conditions that support or hinder this transition has become increasingly important. Within this broader transformation, leadership emerges as a critical factor, not only for ensuring operational

adaptation, but also for shaping strategic responses to sustainability challenges (Avery & Bergsteiner, 2011; European Commission, 2019; Hallinger & Suriyankietkaew, 2018).

Sustainable leadership is crucial as it combines long-term economic performance with environmental responsibility, social value, resilience, and innovation. Unlike short-term focused leadership, it emphasizes systems thinking, stakeholder orientation, and guiding organizations through change (Bass & Riggio, 2006; Iqbal et al., 2020; Senge, 2006). This leadership is linked to transformational and adaptive capabilities, vital for facing regulatory, technological, and market pressures. In the transport sector, these capabilities are key to managing decarbonization, infrastructure, digitalization, and competition.

The implementation of sustainable transport solutions faces barriers such as financial-commercial constraints, regulatory instability, technological limitations, infrastructure shortages, organizational resistance, and market uncertainty (Blake, 1999; Hahn et al., 2014). While many studies focus on macro perspectives like public policy and technology, fewer explore leaders' perceptions of these barriers and their impact on organizational adoption. This oversight is crucial as leadership perception influences strategic prioritization, resource allocation, and readiness for change, and is related to the value-action gap, the difference between recognizing sustainability's importance and implementing it (Blake, 1999; Hahn et al., 2014).

Against this background, the present study addresses a specific research problem: how sustainable leadership relates to the perception of strategic and operational barriers and to the future intention to implement sustainable solutions in the private transport sector. More specifically, the paper investigates whether stronger sustainable leadership is associated with lower perceived financial-commercial barriers, whether operational barriers are linked to a greater orientation toward digital optimization solutions, and whether sustainable leadership positively influences the probability of adopting new green solutions in the coming years. By focusing on the private transport sector and on leaders' cognition in the Romanian context, the study responds to a clear empirical gap in the literature, where micro-level leadership perceptions remain underexplored compared with policy-level and technology-centered analyses.

To explore these relationships, the paper adopts a quantitative, exploratory design based on an online survey administered to professionals from the transport sector, resulting in 114 valid responses. The data were analyzed in SPSS using reliability testing, normality assessment, and Spearman rank-order correlations in order to examine the proposed relationships between sustainable leadership, perceived barriers, and future sustainable adoption intentions. Finally, the paper is structured as follows: the next section reviews the scientific literature on sustainable leadership, the European Green Deal, and strategic and operational barriers in transport; the subsequent section presents the research methodology; this is followed by the results and discussion; and the paper concludes with the main contributions, implications, and directions for future research.

1. Review of the scientific literature

Sustainable leadership has become a central concept in addressing complex socio-economic and environmental challenges, particularly in the context of the European Green Deal. The Green Deal represents a systemic transformation agenda aimed at achieving climate neutrality by 2050, requiring profound changes across industries, including the transport sector (European Commission, 2019). Within this framework, leadership is no longer limited to operational efficiency but extends to long-term value creation, stakeholder integration, and environmental responsibility.

Sustainable leadership integrates economic, environmental, and social objectives into organizational strategies, emphasizing resilience, innovation, and ethical governance (Avery & Bergsteiner, 2011; Iqbal et al., 2020). It is closely linked to transformational leadership, which fosters organizational change, promotes innovation, and aligns employees with sustainability goals (Bass & Riggio, 2006). Moreover, sustainable leadership requires systems thinking, enabling leaders to understand interdependencies between organizational activities and broader ecological and societal systems (Senge, 2006).

In the transport sector, this leadership approach is particularly relevant due to the sector's significant contribution to greenhouse gas emissions and its dependence on infrastructure, technology, and policy frameworks. Sustainable leadership in this context involves balancing regulatory compliance, technological adoption, and market competitiveness while driving decarbonization (Hallinger & Suriyankietkaew, 2018).

The European Green Deal identifies transport as a key sector for achieving emission reductions, targeting a 90% decrease in transport-related greenhouse gas emissions by 2050 (European Commission, 2019). This

objective requires a transition toward sustainable mobility systems, including electrification, alternative fuels, digitalization, and modal shifts.

However, the transition presents substantial strategic challenges for private transport leaders. Organizations must invest in new technologies, redesign business models, and adapt to evolving regulatory environments. These changes are associated with high uncertainty, particularly regarding technological development and policy stability (Banister, 2008; Geels, 2012).

Furthermore, digitalization is increasingly recognized as a key enabler of sustainable transport, allowing for improved efficiency, real-time data management, and new mobility services (Cramton et al., 2017). However, it also introduces new complexities, requiring leaders to develop digital and analytical capabilities.

The literature identifies several strategic barriers that hinder the implementation of sustainable transport initiatives. One major barrier is regulatory uncertainty. While the Green Deal provides a long-term vision, short-term policy inconsistencies and fragmented regulatory frameworks create uncertainty for private sector investments (Lah, 2015; Marsden & Reardon, 2017). This uncertainty affects strategic planning and may lead to delayed decision-making. Financial constraints represent another significant barrier. Sustainable transport technologies often require high upfront investments, while the economic benefits may materialize only in the long term.

Additionally, market-related barriers, such as unclear demand for sustainable mobility solutions and competitive pressures, limit the adoption of green innovations. Firms may be reluctant to invest in sustainability if it threatens short-term profitability or market share (Porter & van der Linde, 1995). Another important barrier is the lack of strategic integration of sustainability into core business models. In many organizations, sustainability remains a peripheral concern rather than a central strategic objective, reducing its effectiveness (Eccles et al., 2014).

At the operational level, several barriers further complicate the transition toward sustainable transport. Technological limitations remain a key challenge. Despite significant progress, issues related to battery performance, infrastructure availability, and system interoperability continue to hinder the adoption of low-carbon transport solutions (Jelti et al., 2023).

Infrastructure constraints also play a critical role. The existing transport infrastructure is largely designed for conventional systems, requiring substantial investments for adaptation to sustainable alternatives (Banister, 2008). Organizational barriers, including resistance to change, lack of expertise, and insufficient employee engagement, further impede implementation. Transitioning to sustainable practices often requires significant changes in organizational culture and processes, which may encounter internal resistance (Lozano, 2015). The perception of barriers by private transport leaders is a critical determinant of organizational responses to sustainability challenges. Leadership perception influences strategic priorities, resource allocation, and innovation adoption.

A key concept in this context is the “value-action gap,” which refers to the discrepancy between awareness of sustainability issues and actual implementation of sustainable practices (Blake, 1999). Even when leaders recognize the importance of sustainability, structural constraints and short-term pressures may limit their ability to act. Cognitive factors, such as risk perception and decision-making biases, also play a role in shaping leadership behavior. Leaders who perceive sustainability as an opportunity are more likely to adopt proactive strategies, while those who view it as a cost or risk may resist change (Hahn et al., 2014).

Transformational leadership has been identified as a key driver of sustainability, as it encourages employees to adopt new behaviors and supports organizational change (Bass & Riggio, 2006). Similarly, adaptive leadership enables organizations to respond effectively to complex and uncertain environments (Heifetz et al., 2009). Leadership plays a crucial role in implementing this framework by aligning organizational strategies with sustainability objectives.

In addition, digital technologies and innovation ecosystems offer new opportunities for enhancing transport sustainability. However, their successful adoption depends on leadership capabilities, including digital literacy and strategic vision. Despite the growing body of literature on sustainable transport and leadership, there is a lack of empirical studies focusing on how private transport leaders perceive strategic and operational barriers within the specific context of the European Green Deal.

Most studies adopt macro-level perspectives, focusing on policy frameworks or technological solutions, while neglecting the role of leadership cognition and decision-making processes. This gap is particularly relevant for understanding the dynamics of sustainability transitions in the private transport sector.

Therefore, this study aims to address this gap by exploring the perceptions of private transport leaders, providing insights into the factors that facilitate or hinder sustainable transformation.

2. Research Methodology

This paper is based on a quantitative, exploratory research design, looking to assess leaders' perceptions from the private transport sector regarding strategic and operational barriers in the context of Green Deal implementation. Going into a more specific ground, the main objective of this study is to examine the relationships between sustainable leadership, perceived strategic and operational barriers, and the future intention to adopt sustainable solutions in the private transport sector. In order to achieve this objective, some secondary objectives were formulated:

O1: To investigate the relationship between the level of sustainable leadership and the perception of different types of strategic barriers (financial-commercial vs. macro-regulatory) among private transport leaders.

O2: To investigate the relationship between the perceived severity of operational barriers and the extent to which private transport companies adopt digital optimization solutions.

O3: To assess the effect of sustainable leadership on the intention to adopt future sustainable solutions.

H1: The level of sustainable leadership is negatively correlated with the perception of strategic barriers of a financial-commercial nature, but not with macro-regulatory ones.

H2: The perceived severity of operational barriers is positively correlated with the adoption of digital optimization solutions.

H3: Sustainable leadership positively influences future probability to adopt new solutions in the coming years in order to align with the Green Deal objectives.

The present research was carried out through an online survey, which was shared with Romanian citizens through social media and email. The instrument used for data collection was the questionnaire, and participation in the research was completely voluntary, with anonymity being guaranteed. The authors also used the snowball method, and the research concluded with 114 valid responses. The questionnaire was divided into 3 sections. The first section collected socio-demographic information, the second one collected information about the perceived strategic and operational barriers, and the third section collected information regarding sustainable leadership and new possible solutions to align with the Green Deal objectives. The second and the third sections were based on multi-item measures on a six-point Likert scale (ranging from 1, totally disagree, to 6, completely agree).

In Table no. 1 are presented the details regarding the sample of this study. Considering that the study is focusing on the leaders' perception, almost all of them have a higher education, 50.9% having a Bachelor's degree and 38.6% having a Master's degree. The majority of this sample are males (57.9%) and most of the respondents were between 35 and 44 years old (39.5%), followed by people between 45 and 54 years old (28.1%). Speaking about experience in the transport sector, most of them had between 5 and 10 years (51.7%) and between 11 and 20 years (23.7%), occupying, in most cases, other management roles (50.8%).

Table no. 1. Socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents

Characteristics		Respondents (N = 114)	Percent
Education	High School	4	3.5
	Bachelor's degree	58	50.9
	Master's degree	44	38.6
	PhD	8	7
Gender	Male	66	57.9
	Female	45	39.5
	Others, I prefer not to say	3	2.6
Age	Under 25 years	6	5.3
	25-34 years	17	14.9
	35-44 years	45	39.5
	45-54 years	32	28.1

	55-65 years	14	12.2
Experience in the field of transport	Less than 5 years	18	15.8
	5-10 years	59	51.7
	11-20 years	27	23.7
	Over 20 years	10	8.8
Position in the company	Operations Manager	14	12.3
	CFO	10	8.8
	Fleet Manager	10	8.8
	Logistics Director	13	11.4
	General Manager	4	3.5
	Sustainability Manager	5	4.4
	Other management role	58	50.8

Source: Processed by the authors based on research results

Data were collected over one month in March 2026 and were analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS).

3. Results and discussions

As a first step of the analysis, the authors run a reliability analysis to check the statistical reliability of the answers to the formulated questions from the questionnaire. Therefore, looking at the Cronbach's Alpha coefficient values, all of them are greater than 0.7, indicating high reliability (Table no. 2).

Table no. 2. Reliability Coefficients (Cronbach's Alpha).

Strategic barriers of a financial-commercial nature	0.924
Strategic barriers of a macro-regulatory nature	0.895
Operational barriers	0.938
Sustainable leadership	0.927
Future probability to adopt new green solutions	0.932
Future probability to adopt digital optimization solutions	0.874

Source: Processed by the authors based on research results

To investigate the first objective, the authors used 3 variables, working with the means of them, after the extraction, only of the items of a financial-commercial nature, and then the ones of a macro-regulatory nature. To determine the appropriate statistical tests for the correlation, the assumption of normality was evaluated using the Shapiro-Wilk test (Table no. 3), resulting in the fact that none of the three variables analyzed follows a normal distribution ($p < 0.05$). Taking into consideration this result, the Spearman correlation was used as the next step in the research in order to achieve the first objective.

Table no. 3. Test of Normality

	Kolmogorov-Smirnov ^a			Shapiro-Wilk		
	Statistic	df	Sig.	Statistic	df	Sig.
Sustainable leadership	0.07	114	.200*	0.974	114	0.026
Strategic barriers of a financial-commercial nature	0.172	114	<.001	0.917	114	<.001
Strategic barriers of a macro-regulatory nature	0.142	114	<.001	0.948	114	<.001

Source: Processed by the authors based on research results

The analysis (Table no. 4) revealed a statistically significant, negative correlation between the level of sustainable leadership and perceived financial-commercial barriers ($r = -0.228$, $p < 0.05$) and no statistically significant correlation between sustainable leadership and the perception of macro-regulatory barriers ($r = -0.122$, $p = 0.198 > 0.05$). Therefore, H1 is accepted, confirming that leaders with a stronger sustainability orientation tend to perceive financial and market constraints as less severe, while the lack of statistical significance between the sustainable leadership and macro-regulatory barriers supports the second part of

the hypothesis, suggesting that these kinds of barriers are perceived as equally severe by all leaders, regardless of their sustainable leadership capabilities.

Table no. 4. Spearman Correlation

		Sustainable Leadership	Strategic barriers of a financial-commercial nature	Strategic barriers of a macro-regulatory nature
Sustainable Leadership	Correlation Coefficient	1	-.228*	-.122
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.015	.198
	N	114	114	114
Strategic barriers of a financial-commercial nature	Correlation Coefficient	-.228*	1	.842***
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.015	.	<.001
	N	114	114	114
Strategic barriers of a macro-regulatory nature	Correlation Coefficient	-.122	.842***	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.198	<.001	.
	N	114	114	114

Notes: *. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed). ***. Correlation is significant at the 0.001 level (2-tailed)

Source: Processed by the authors based on research results

To test hypothesis 2, a Spearman's rank-order correlation test was conducted in SPSS, following the same process as in the previous hypothesis. Therefore, working also with the means of the variables in question, for the first variable, the authors used all the items, and for the second one, only the items that refer to the adoption of digital optimization solutions. As in the previous scenario, non-parametric testing was chosen due to the abnormal distribution of the data ($p < 0.05$), supporting the use of the Spearman correlation.

The statistical analysis revealed a statistically significant, positive correlation between the perceived severity of operational barriers and the extent to which digital optimization solutions will be adopted in the next few years ($r = 0.193$, $p < 0.05$) (Table no. 5). Although the correlation coefficient indicates a weak relationship, the positive direction and statistical significance fully support hypothesis 2.

Table no. 5. Spearman Correlation

		Operational barriers	Future probability to adopt digital optimization solutions
Operational barriers	Correlation Coefficient	1	.193*
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.04
	N	114	114
Future probability to adopt digital optimization solutions	Correlation Coefficient	.193*	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.04	.
	N	114	114

Note: *. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)

Source: Processed by the authors based on research results

Lastly, moving to the next objective and hypothesis, all the items from each variable were included in the means, resulting in 0 exclusions here. Also, a Spearman's rank-order correlation was performed based on the Shapiro-Wilk test, which concluded with $p < 0.05$ for each variable, supporting the non-normal distribution of the underlying data.

The Spearman correlation test demonstrated a highly statistically significant and positive moderate correlation between the level of sustainable leadership and the probability of implementing new green solutions ($r = 0.328$, $p < 0.001$) (Table no. 6). The results lead to the acceptance of H3, supporting that sustainable leadership positively influences future probability to adopt new solutions in the coming years in order to align with the Green Deal objectives.

Table no. 6. Spearman Correlation

		Sustainable Leadership	Future probability to adopt new green solutions
Sustainable Leadership	Correlation	1	.328***
	Coefficient		
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.	<.001
	N	114	114
Future probability to adopt new green solutions	Correlation	.328***	1
	Coefficient		
	Sig. (2-tailed)	<.001	.
	N	114	114

Note: ***. Correlation is significant at the 0.001 level (2-tailed).

Source: Processed by the authors based on research results

In conclusion, the findings demonstrate that sustainable leadership significantly mitigates the perception of financial barriers, aligning with Hahn et al. (2014) regarding the proactive reframing of costs as strategic opportunities, and acts as a robust predictor for future green investments that bridges the “value-action gap” identified by Blake (1999). However, macro-regulatory constraints persist as universal systemic obstacles, consistent with Marsden & Reardon (2017), which drives firms to utilize digitalization as a key enabler (Cramton et al., 2017) to offset operational limitations. Practically, the study underscores the urgency of developing transformative leadership competencies to navigate the systemic transformation mandated by the European Green Deal. The positive impact of sustainable leadership on adopting new green solutions is strongly confirmed by recent literature, which highlights its critical role in bridging the “intention-behavior gap” (Duong, 2024) and effectively driving actual green innovative behaviors (Senbeto, 2025).

Conclusions

This research provided a detailed perspective on the critical role that sustainable leadership plays in navigating the strategic and operational barriers encountered in the transition toward the European Green Deal in the private transport sector. The key findings indicate that sustainable leadership serves as a strategic tool for addressing financial obstacles, while macro-regulatory barriers are perceived as equally severe by all leaders, regardless of their sustainable leadership capabilities. Digitalization compensates for operational constraints, results showing that the perceived severity of operational barriers positively influences the adoption of digital optimization solutions. Lastly, the results showed that sustainable leadership is a strong indicator of future green investment intentions, helping to close the „value-action gap”.

This research offers a framework for private transport leaders to understand how a leadership mindset can aid sustainability investments, highlighting the importance of adaptive and digital skills to manage regulatory uncertainties.

Although the results are significant, the study has limitations due to the relatively small sample size of 114 respondents, focusing only on the Romanian market, having a cross-sectional quantitative nature, which only captures a moment in time. To extend these findings, future research could aim for comparative analyses between different EU member states to observe the influence of national infrastructures, longitudinal studies to verify the transformation of intentions into real long-term investments, and qualitative research based on interviews to more deeply understand the psychological nuances of resistance to change.

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