

ESDN Conference 2026

Discussion Paper

Environmental Security in Europe: Building the Foundations of Long-Term Resilience

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Introduction

This Discussion Paper will provide participants taking part in the ESDN Conference with some background information on the conference's focus, the topics that will be covered by speakers and presenters, as well as how the conference's interactive parts will be run.

The conference will be focusing on “Environmental Security in Europe: Building the Foundations of Long-Term Resilience”. The conference is taking place in Dublin, Ireland on the 2nd of October 2026, and is being organised by the European Sustainable Development Network together with the Irish Department of Climate, Energy and the Environment.

For decades, economic prosperity has been a central driver of human well-being, enabling social stability, and rising living standards across Europe and globally. Yet the same growth model that has delivered these benefits now poses profound risks: the current ‘business-as-usual’ trajectory is undermining the ecological foundations on which societies depend. Human activity is now eroding the functioning of the Earth System itself, driving climate change, accelerating biodiversity loss, intensifying land-use pressures and degrading marine ecosystems. Collectively, these processes threaten the stability of the planet and, ultimately, human security and prosperity. Addressing this paradox requires transformative change, which means new ways of producing, consuming and organising societies that remain within planetary boundaries.

Economic cooperation has long been the foundation of European integration, and globalisation has been a key enabler of peace and interdependence. Today, however, global cooperation stands at a crossroads. The world now faces more active state-based conflicts than at any point since the end of the Second World War. Geopolitical tensions are rising, supply chains are increasingly weaponised, and the international system is shifting towards multipolarity, where power is distributed among several competing actors. Alongside states, multinational and globally interconnected corporations now play a growing role in shaping geopolitical dynamics, supply-chain vulnerabilities and the institutional frameworks through which sustainable futures are built. This complex and systemic global environment complicates the European Union's (EU), and Europe's ability as a continent, to advance sustainability, manage environmental risks and maintain economic and societal stability. The green transition itself is reshaping geopolitical dependencies, particularly through critical minerals, energy systems and technological competition.

In this rapidly changing landscape, the central question has become what new structures will underpin a sustainable and secure future. Traditional models of cooperation are no longer sufficient. Emerging frameworks must integrate environmental resilience, climate adaptation, secure and diversified supply chains, fair and sustainable resource use, and stronger multilateral governance capable of addressing systemic risks. This includes rethinking economic interdependence, strengthening environmental protection through legal and institutional mechanisms, embedding climate resilience across all policy domains, and developing cooperative security approaches that recognise the deep links between ecological stability, geopolitical dynamics and societal well-being. These evolving structures will define how Europe, and the world, navigates the transition towards a more sustainable and secure future.

Chapter 1 focuses on the systemic risks that climate change and environmental degradation pose to Europe, analysing how these threats affect ecosystems, economies and societies. It reviews the EU's current measures and identifies structural challenges that complicate effective risk management in the changing political landscape.

Chapters 2 and 3 will provide information on Exchange Spaces that will be taking place during the workshop and provide introductions to the table's agendas. The purpose of the Exchange Spaces is to allow participants the chance to exchange with their peers from other countries on good practice cases. Each table will include an example of different topics around sustainability, resilience and democracy.

After the Workshop, an ESDN Policy Note will be published that will highlight the main outcomes, ideas, and recommendations that come out of the presentations, the discussion panel, and from the Exchange Spaces. The ESDN will publish this as soon as possible.

Chapter 1: How can multilateral environment and climate policy succeed in building resilience and support peace and security during turbulent times

This chapter provides an overview of the current environmental state of Europe and the European Union, examining the continent's condition through three interconnected dimensions: climate change, land-use patterns and the resilience of marine ecosystems. Then it examines how these environmental conditions intersect with peace, security and geopolitical stability. Climate change and geopolitical risks have been recognised as some of the most acute challenges facing the global economy and the wellbeing of humans. Understanding the systemic interactions between these risks is crucial.¹ Climate change, environmental deterioration, and geopolitical risks are difficult to grasp in their full scope because the world is so deeply intertwined and complex that systemic dynamics often remain obscured. This frequently results in gaps in preparedness, as it is impossible to anticipate every cascading effect.

Today's conditions are a continuation of long-term historical development. The industrial revolution, which began in the mid-18th century, marked a significant increase in how human activities shape the environment, and the development has been rapid since the 1950s.² The rapid acceleration and vast scale of modern industrial production, alongside the global proliferation of dams, roads, urban areas, factories, warehouses, and countless consumer products, such as automobiles, amount to a systemic and qualitative shift in the Earth system.³ Some researchers have defined a new epoch, the Anthropocene, where humanity influences every aspect of the Earth on a scale comparable to the major forces of nature.⁴ It has been estimated that human activity has substantially transformed 75% of the Earth's land surface and 66% of the marine environment.⁵ After humans were able to detach themselves from the cycles of nature, for example, in food production and other essentials of life, the relationship between humans and nature has become more complex and contradictory.

The intertwined effects of growing environmental stress and geopolitical dynamics were recognised during the Cold War, when rising awareness of the worldwide dangers posed by nuclear, biological, and chemical weapons helped to realise the interconnectedness of environment and security. This ultimately culminated in the 1972 United Nations Conference on the Human Environment in Stockholm, which explicitly linked environmental protection with the risks associated with nuclear weapons, focusing also on development.⁶ By the mid-1980s, the World Commission on Environment and Development focused on resolving tensions between environmental degradation and development priorities. In 1987, the idea of sustainable development as a response to environmental insecurity was introduced in "Our Common Future". As concerns about climate change intensified, governments established the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) in 1988.⁷

A deepened and broadened understanding of the harmful impacts of human activity has also prompted the development of various political agreements and policy measures. In the 1990s, several high-level international discussions regarding the environment took place. The United Nations Framework

¹ Treepongkaruna & al 2026, 1.

² Steffen & al 2011, 739.

³ Dalby 2026, 23; Rockström and Gaffney 2021.

⁴ Stockholm Resilience Center 2015.

⁵ European Environment Agency 2025, 32; IPBES 2019.

⁶ Dalby 2026, 26-28.

⁷ Dalby 2026, 28.

Convention of Climate Change and the Convention on Biodiversity were generated at the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro in 1992.⁸ From 1980-2000, several other international conventions concerning environmental and climate issues were adopted, such as the Vienna Convention for the Protection of the Ozone Layer in 1985, the Chemical Weapons Convention in 1993, and the UN Convention to Combat Desertification in 1994. The United Nations Millennium Declaration, which paved the way to Millennium Development Goals to be achieved by 2015, was adopted in 2000.⁹ The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the seventeen Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) were adopted in 2015. Since then, the understanding of systemic interconnections of sustainability has deepened, leading not only to criticism of the 2030 Agenda for its lack of systemic perspective, but also to countries approaching the SDGs through broader systemic frameworks in their national strategies. This systemic perspective is likewise reflected in environmental security, particularly in turbulent times.

Despite the hard work during the last decades, human activities are still breaching the planetary boundaries. Despite all technological development and progress, economies and societies still fundamentally depend on ecosystems to provide the means of living. It has been proven that no country has been able to meet its population's basic human needs and ensure well-being while remaining within the Earth's biophysical boundaries.¹⁰ This means that humanity's use of the biosphere is not sustainable, and is breaching planetary boundaries.¹¹ (see [11th ESDN Peer Learning Platform Discussion Paper](#)) In essence, human societies depend on functioning ecosystems but fail to operate within their boundaries, thereby weakening them. This self-inflicted degradation threatens the basic conditions that make human life possible and poses serious long-term security risks and illustrates the defining characteristics of the Anthropocene, where human activity has become a dominant force shaping ecological stability.

In the Anthropocene, ecological security in the sense of flourishing ecosystems has become a crucial question for humankind.¹² In December 2022, nearly 200 nations adopted the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework. The aim of the framework is to reverse nature's rapid decline, restoring and protecting ecosystems and endangered species worldwide by calling for protecting 30 percent of the planet's land, ocean, and inland waters.¹³ Climate change and environmental decline constitute deeply interlinked, systemic issues. Today's geopolitical landscape exacerbates these dynamics by constraining global cooperation and generating additional security threats.

Current State of Environmental Resilience in Europe

The state of nature and the environment is deteriorating at an undeniable pace, with human activity playing an important role in shaping the development. Human actions influence the Earth System through interconnected mechanisms, including greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions and land-use change, both of which drive systemic shifts in climatic and ecological processes. This highlights the extent to which human societies are embedded in, and dependent on, the biosphere, even as they transform it at planetary scale.¹⁴ Over the past three decades, the most significant shifts have stemmed from the expansion of urban areas, the intensification of fishing activities, and the large-scale transformation of tropical forests. As a

⁸ Dalby 2026, 29-30.

⁹ Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights.

¹⁰ Linnér & al. 2026, 3-4.

¹¹ Stockholm Resilience Center 2015.

¹² Dalby 2026, 31.

¹³ Altman 2023.

¹⁴ Folke & al. 2011, 719; Steffen et al. 2011.

result, an estimated 75% of the Earth's land surface and 40% of its ocean areas are now heavily modified by human activity.¹⁵

Climate change is a prominent sign of the human-driven changes to the global environment. There is clear and undisputed evidence that the Earth is warming, with human emissions of GHG, especially CO₂, being the dominant cause for most of the warming since the mid-1900s.¹⁶ It is a human-induced phenomenon that affects multiple components of the Earth System, and the impacts are already observable today. The IPCC has examined different ways climate change affects the Earth's systems. For example, climate change increases both the frequency and severity of extreme weather events, with cascading impacts on ecosystems and societies. In addition, it has already caused substantial damage, and increasingly irreversible losses in terrestrial and water-related ecosystems. These changes have reduced food and water security and hinder progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals.¹⁷

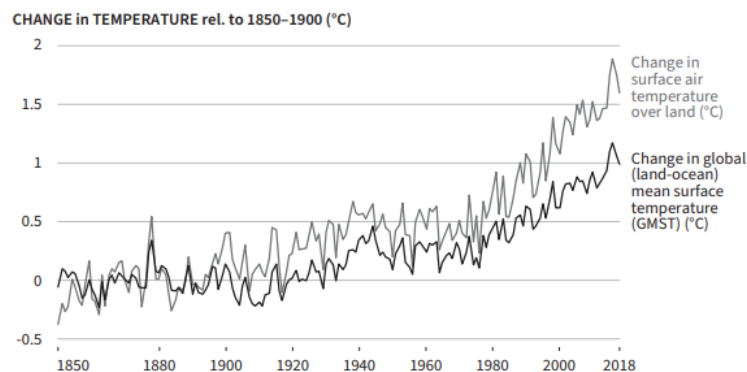


Figure 1. Since the pre-industrial period (1850–1900) the observed mean land surface air temperature has risen considerably more than the global mean surface temperature. Source: Shukla & al. 2019, 41.

This global development is also visible in Europe, which is the fastest-warming continent,¹⁸ and climate change imposes rapidly rising, substantial human, economic and environmental costs.¹⁹ Climate change poses major health risks, and the European Scientific Advisory Board on Climate Change has estimated that in recent years, extreme heat alone has resulted in tens of thousands of premature deaths in Europe, including an estimated 24,000 in summer 2025.²⁰ According to the World Health Organization, more than 200,000 people have died from heat in Europe over the past four years,²¹ even before the severe 2026 heatwave. August 2026 ranked as the warmest month ever recorded on Earth with global average surface air temperatures 1.65°C above the estimated pre-industrial level.²² Furthermore, weather- and climate-related extremes have resulted in estimated economic losses of assets of EUR 822 billion between 1980 and 2024, including more than EUR 208 billion in just between 2021 and 2024.²³

¹⁵ IPBES 2019, 60.

¹⁶ Steffen & al. 2011, 739.

¹⁷ IPCC 2023, 6.

¹⁸ Directorate-General for Defence Industry and Space 28.4.2026; EEA 2025, 57.

¹⁹ European Scientific Advisory Board on Climate Change 2026, 5.

²⁰ European Scientific Advisory Board on Climate Change 2026, 5.

²¹ World Health Organization Regional Office for Europe 11.6.2026.

²² Copernicus Climate Change Service 10.9.2026.

²³ European Environment Agency 14.10.2025.

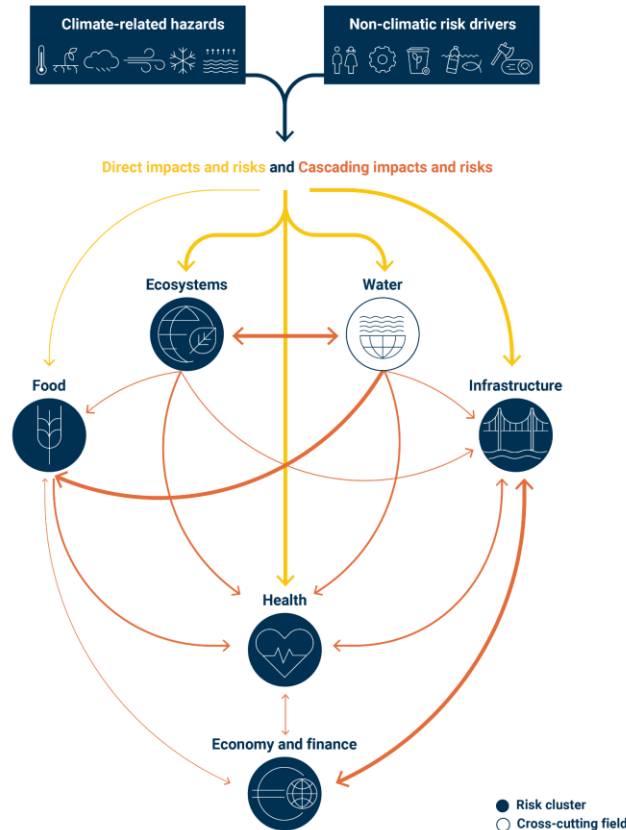


Figure 2. Links between risk drivers and the clusters of climate risk. Source: European Environment Agency 2025, 88.

Climate change creates multiple risks for the environment and nature, and these impacts have significant consequences for people and other species. For example, extreme weather events driven by a warming climate can damage ecosystems, disrupt habitats, and threaten both human well-being and biodiversity. As an example, Europe experienced significant wildfires during the summers of 2025 and 2026. In August 2025 alone, nearly 335,000 hectares were lost within a single week, which was an unprecedented extent.²⁴ The year 2025 stands as the most severe wildfire year on record, with 1,003,860 hectares burned by 10 September.²⁵ By early September 2026, a total of 658,327 hectares had burned since the beginning of the year.²⁶

Beyond the burned hectares, wildfires inflict profound ecological and societal damage. They destroy habitats and force wildlife to flee, devastate agricultural land and thereby affect opportunities for local livelihoods, endanger human lives, leave communities displaced and homes lost, and generate substantial economic losses alongside long-lasting psychological impacts. These escalating impacts highlight the need for crisis preparedness. Through the “[Preparedness Union Strategy](#)”, the EU aims to improve its readiness to anticipate, prevent and respond to multiple types of crises from geopolitical and cyber threats to climate change and natural hazards.²⁷

²⁴ Copernicus Emergency Management Service 2026.

²⁵ Joint Research Centre 2026.

²⁶ Joint Research Centre 2026.

²⁷ European Environment Agency 2025, 46-47.

Land use and climate change form a two-way dynamic where climate change alters land systems, while land-use practices themselves generate GHG and reinforce climate change. Agriculture, forestry and other land-use activities, therefore, remain significant net sources of GHG emissions.²⁸ Approximately one quarter of GHG emissions originate from land clearing, crop production and fertilizer use, with animal-based food systems accounting for about 75% of these emissions.²⁹ Land-use patterns are closely tied to food systems. Currently, half of the world's habitable land is used for agriculture. One-third of agricultural land is cropland and two-thirds are grazing land. Only half of cropland grows food directly to people. A lot of cropland is used for biofuels, industrial crops, and livestock feed. Taken together, grazing land and feed crops mean livestock uses about 80% of global agricultural land.³⁰ This highlights the climate implications of current food systems and the importance of shifting towards more sustainable, plant-based diets, which would enhance food security under climate and socio-economic changes.³¹

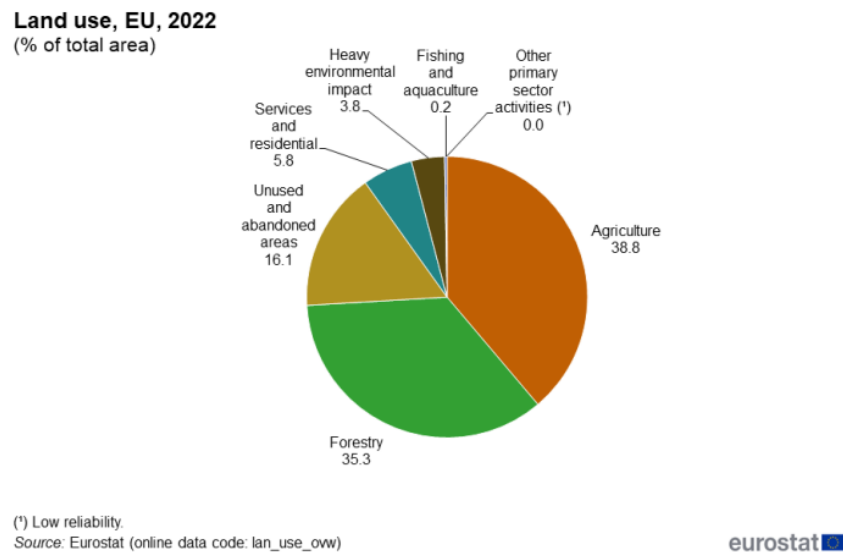


Figure 3. Land use in the EU in 2022. Source: Eurostat 2025.

Europe is one of the most intensively used land areas globally, with large shares of its territory devoted to agriculture and forests, and smaller but still substantial shares shaped by urban areas and infrastructure.³² About four fifths of Europe's land surface has been shaped by human activities. This means that the surface is covered with buildings, roads, industrial infrastructure or used for agriculture.³³ Agricultural land was the EU's largest primary land-use category in 2022, covering almost 40% of its total area (Figure 3). Forestry accounted for a slightly smaller share at approximately 35%, while 16% of land was classified as unused or abandoned.³⁴ In 2023, arable land covered over 60% of the utilised agricultural area, permanent grassland approximately 30%, and permanent crops 7%.³⁵ This division varies substantially between European countries, reflecting the diverse geographical, ecological and socio-economic conditions.

²⁸ Shukla & al 2019, 45.

²⁹ IPBES (Summary) 2019, 28.

³⁰ Ritchie & Roser 2024.

³¹ Shukla & al 2019, 42.

³² European Environment Agency 2025, 114.

³³ European Environment Agency 2024.

³⁴ Eurostat 2025.

³⁵ Eurostat 2026.

Although the global and EU figures are not directly comparable, both clearly demonstrate the profound extent to which human activity shapes nature and the environment through land use. In Europe, this influence is evident in the deteriorating state of biodiversity, driven by persistent pressures from production and consumption systems, most notably the food system. As a result, 81% of protected habitats are in poor or bad condition, 60–70% of soils are degraded, and 62% of water bodies do not meet good ecological status.³⁶

Oceans, seas and the marine ecosystem resilience form an essential part of sustainability, biodiversity, and environmental resilience. The “[Marine Messages III. State, pressures, and choices for the future](#)” report in June 2026 concluded that almost all of Europe's seas are struggling with biodiversity and ecosystem resilience. There are issues such as pollution and litter, overfishing, as well as warming, acidification, and loss of oxygen. These issues are resulting in biodiversity loss and habitat degradation, which have weakened resilience.³⁷ The report calls for a shift from sectoral management to a more comprehensive approach that takes into account human pressures as well as restoration efforts: reducing pressures, expanding and effectively managing protected areas, restoring degraded ecosystems, removing harmful subsidies, strengthening enforcement, and aligning public and private finance with ecological objectives.³⁸ This transition is essential for safeguarding marine ecosystems that underpin food security, climate regulation and long-term environmental stability.

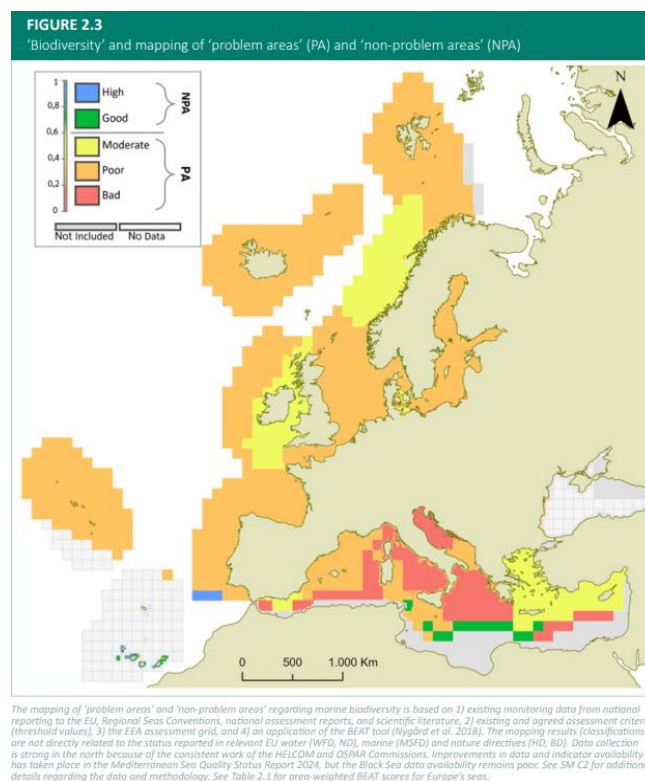


Figure 4. Map of the current state of Europe's seas' marine biodiversity and ecosystem resilience. Source: Andersen & al. 2026, 21.

Environmental degradation has far-reaching economic consequences. Europe's economy is deeply intertwined with natural systems, relying heavily on natural resources, many of which are imported from

³⁶ European Environment Agency 2025, 57.

³⁷ Andersen & al. 2026, 7 & 10.

³⁸ Andersen & al. 2026, 6.

outside the EU.³⁹ Environmental degradation and accelerating climate change pose systemic risks to economic stability, with impacts cascading across sectors and borders. This dependence on natural resources is further illustrated by estimates showing that close to three quarters of businesses in the Euro area depend critically on ecosystem services, and around 75% of bank lending is directed to companies whose operations rely on natural resources.⁴⁰ The agricultural sector alone generated EUR 223.9 billion in gross value added in 2023, accounting for 1.3% of EU GDP, while the EU's agri-food trade reached a record net export value of EUR 70.1 billion.⁴¹ These figures underscore how vulnerable Europe's economic prosperity is to environmental pressures, and how essential resilient ecosystems are also for the EU's long-term competitiveness and stability.

In response to the risks posed by climate change and environmental degradation, the EU has established a comprehensive set of policy frameworks aimed at safeguarding nature, ecosystems and environmental quality. The [European Green Deal](#), launched by President von der Leyen in 2019, aims to transform Europe's economy, energy, transport, and industries for a more sustainable future. It aims to cut emissions by at least 50% by 2030, rising towards 55%, while legally binding the 2050 neutrality goal through the "[European Climate Law](#)".⁴²

The EU has further expanded its environmental legislation through multiple initiatives.⁴³ The "[EU Biodiversity Strategy for 2030](#)" is a comprehensive and long-term plan, with specific actions and commitments, to protect nature and reverse the degradation of ecosystems. The "[EU Forest Strategy for 2030](#)" contributes to achieving the EU's biodiversity objectives, as well as the greenhouse gas emission reduction target of at least 55% by 2030 and climate neutrality by 2050. The "[EU Soil Strategy for 2030](#)" outlines EU's commitment to fostering sustainable soil management practices, restoring degraded soils, and mobilising resources to achieve long-term soil health for the prosperity of future generations. The "[Zero Pollution Action Plan](#)" is for air, water and soil pollution to be reduced to levels which are no longer considered harmful to health and natural ecosystems.

The recently adopted "[Nature Restoration Regulation](#)" marks a significant reinforcement of this legislative architecture, and the Commission is preparing a new European Climate Resilience and Risk Management framework to help Member States prevent and prepare for the growing impacts of climate change.⁴⁴ The "Nature Restoration Regulation" is the first continent-wide, comprehensive law of its kind. It sets binding targets to restore degraded ecosystems, particularly those with the most potential to capture and store carbon and to prevent and reduce the impact of natural disasters.

Climate and Security Nexus

Environmental security rests on the recognition that human well-being depends on stable and functioning ecosystems. Thriving ecosystems provide food, water and the ecological conditions necessary for societal resilience, while environmental degradation, from water scarcity and soil degradation to ecosystem collapse, can rapidly translate into humanitarian stress, displacement and instability. As the climate crisis increasingly drives fragility and geopolitical tension, the environment has become an integral dimension of security policy and policymakers are compelled to treat environmental pressures as strategic security

³⁹ European Environment Agency 2025, 113.

⁴⁰ European Environment Agency 2025, 21.

⁴¹ European Environment Agency 2025, 71-72.

⁴² European Commission 2026.

⁴³ European Commission 2026.

⁴⁴ European Commission 2026; EEA 2025, 60.

concerns. For this reason, the EU's foreign, security and defence policy now seeks to mitigate climate-related risks and to strengthen Europe's ability to adapt to their growing security impacts.

This broader policy evolution is reflected in recent strategic assessments and policy acts, where the EU has increasingly begun to frame climate and environmental pressures as core security concerns. For example, Niinistö's report "[Safer Together: Strengthening Europe's Civilian and Military Preparedness and Readiness](#)" underlines this shift by identifying climate change and environmental degradation as direct threats to European security.⁴⁵ There are multiple policy frameworks in which climate change has been recognised as a component of security, such as the "European Preparedness Union Strategy", which highlights the interconnectedness of natural disasters, extreme weather events, human-induced crises, hybrid threats and geopolitical instability.⁴⁶

These policy frameworks are grounded in a rapidly expanding evidence base, when the manifold risks and threats that climate change poses to Europe and the EU have been explored in multiple reports. As an example, the first "[European Climate Risk Assessment](#)" (2024) provides a comprehensive overview of Europe's growing climate vulnerabilities. It identifies 36 climate risks that threaten the continent's energy and food security, ecosystems, infrastructure, water resources, financial stability and public health. According to the assessment, many of these risks have already reached critical levels and could escalate into catastrophic impacts without urgent and coordinated action.⁴⁷

In June 2023, the EU adopted its Joint Communication on the climate–security nexus, which strengthens the Union's framework for addressing climate change and environmental degradation as factors that amplify security risks. The Joint Communication reflects a growing recognition across the Union and its Member States of the need to integrate climate, environmental and security considerations more systematically into policy and preparedness.⁴⁸

This strategic shift is further elaborated in the "[Navigating Peace in a Changing Climate](#)" report, which outlines five key pathways through which climate change is intensifying security challenges. According to the report, these pathways will continue to shape the complex interactions between environmental degradation, climate dynamics and security in the coming years, underscoring the need for sustained and effective EU action.⁴⁹ In the report, emerging developments in the climate–security nexus are analysed by using a multi-causal approach that recognises the complex and interconnected nature of climate, environmental change and security dynamics. To structure these interactions, the authors organise the links between climate change, environmental degradation, peace and security into five thematic trend areas:⁵⁰

1. Water governance, food pricing and natural resource management
2. Migration, displacement and livelihoods
3. Energy transition, decarbonisation risks and critical minerals
4. Environmental degradation, biodiversity loss and environmental crime
5. Global governance, financial reform and climate justice

⁴⁵ European Environment Agency 2025, 26; Niinistö 2025, 6.

⁴⁶ European Environment Agency 2025, 26.

⁴⁷ European Environment Agency 2024.

⁴⁸ High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy 2025.

⁴⁹ Whitaker & al. 2025 3.

⁵⁰ Whitaker & al. 2025.

The first and fourth themes were partly addressed in the previous chapter. They remain central to the EU's long-term security and resilience agenda. Ensuring affordable and secure food production, safeguarding water bodies, and improving the sustainable use of natural resources are essential for long-term resilience. These themes translate into ongoing EU initiatives. For example, the EU has committed to large-scale nature restoration with Nature Restoration Regulation and more sustainable resource management with the Circular Economy Act, which is due for adoption in 2026. The EU has also strengthened the criminal law framework for environmental protection: on 26 March 2024, the Council adopted the revised EU directive introducing tougher sanctions and an expanded list of environmental offences.⁵¹

The second thematic area concerns migration, displacement and livelihoods, which are increasingly shaped by demographic trends and climate pressures. Europe's population is aging rapidly, creating growing labour shortages and increasing pressure on welfare systems. At the same time, the EU and its Member States depend on immigration to sustain their economies and maintain essential services. Yet migration remains one of the politically divisive issues across Europe, shaping public debate and policy choices.

These tensions are further exacerbated by the growing conflict between immigration policy and insufficient climate action. As the impacts of climate change intensify and environmental degradation accelerates, the risk of climate-related displacement is expected to rise, placing additional pressure on already contested migration systems.⁵² This emerging dynamic underscores how demographic needs, political contestation and escalating climate impacts increasingly intersect.

Overlap between climate-related hazards, conflict, and forced displacement worldwide (2023)

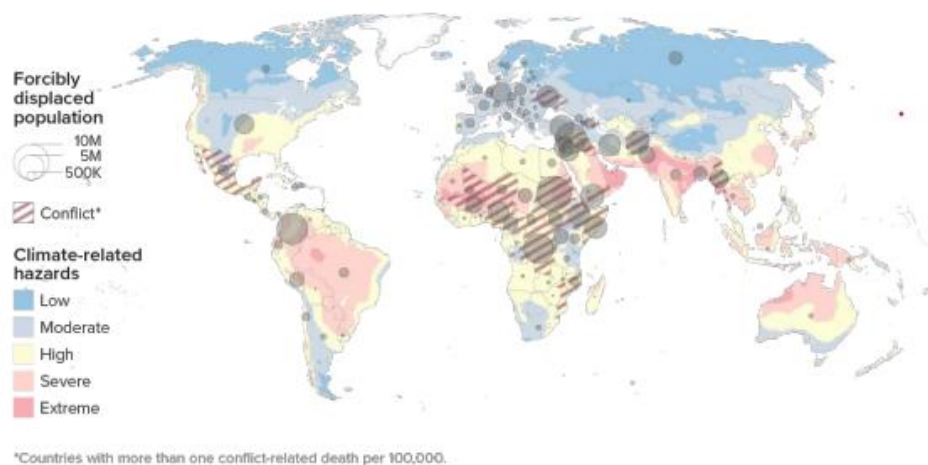


Figure 5. Climate-related hazards and conflicts are highly intertwined. The majority of forced displacement is internal, meaning that most people do not cross international borders but remain displaced within their own countries. Source: UNHCR 2023, as presented in Niinistö 2024.

The third thematic area, energy transition, decarbonisation risks and critical minerals, also carries significant geopolitical implications. Some of the EU's commitments regarding climate and environment, such as the obligation to reduce GHG emissions by at least 55% by 2030 compared to the 1990s level, and to reach net zero emissions by 2050, were made in a time when the belief in globalisation and global

⁵¹ Council of the European Union 2024.

⁵² Whitaker & al. 2025, 21.

cooperation was still high. The current material supply chains lie largely outside of the EU and can, therefore, be used as tools for political pressure. This would affect the EU's economic functions and cause societal and political tensions.⁵³ This chain reaction has already been visible, particularly in the case of oil and other fossil fuels.

Taken together, the five thematic areas illustrate how environmental and climate pressures are reshaping Europe's security landscape and why a comprehensive, integrated EU response is indispensable. In his report, Niinistö concludes that mitigating climate change and halting the degradation of nature, while simultaneously adapting to their wider consequences, are essential elements of the EU's preparedness and are directly linked to European security.⁵⁴ The European Scientific Advisory Board on Climate Change has stated that current adaptation efforts in Europe remain insufficient and fragmented.⁵⁵ The Advisory Board has set out five recommendations to move towards an effective, fair and transformational adaptation policy framework:⁵⁶

1. Mandate and harmonise climate risk assessments
2. Adopt a common reference for adaptation planning
3. Set the vision for a climate resilient EU
4. Embed fair and just climate resilience in all EU policies and measures
5. Mobilise public and private adaptation investment and establish a coherent approach to managing the costs of climate impacts

The EU is operating in an increasingly complex geopolitical landscape. The “Navigating Peace in a Changing Climate” report concludes that in the context of diplomatic and economic volatility, it becomes essential for the EU to uphold a broad and integrated understanding of security that relies on multilateral cooperation, sustainable development, humanitarian engagement, and its peace, security and defence instruments. Although the scale of the challenges is significant, the EU's commitment to mobilising its diverse policy tools provides a basis for meaningful and effective action in addressing the growing climate-related security risks.⁵⁷

Geopolitical Turbulence Changing the Landscape

Europe's geopolitical operating environment has undergone significant changes in recent years. According to the Global Peace Index 2026, there are now more active state-based conflicts than at any time since the Second World War,⁵⁸ and the number of refugees globally is at a record high.⁵⁹ After the Second World War, economic growth was seen as essential for rebuilding social contracts, and expanding economic interdependence helped reduce incentives for war and geopolitical confrontation.⁶⁰ The EU was designed for this environment, but the old system is rapidly fading: changing geopolitical dynamics include the rise of multipolarity, increased focus on national defence, competition for technological supremacy, growing reliance on economic tools for strategic influence, shifting resource dependencies due to sustainability transitions, and the incorporation of environmental change into strategic planning by major powers.⁶¹

⁵³ Lazard 2026, 79.

⁵⁴ Niinistö 2024, 33-34.

⁵⁵ The European Scientific Advisory Board on Climate Change 2026, 6.

⁵⁶ The European Scientific Advisory Board on Climate Change 2026, 4.

⁵⁷ Whitaker & al. 2025 4.

⁵⁸ Global Peace Index 2026.

⁵⁹ EEA 2025, 22; UNHCR 2025.

⁶⁰ Lazard 2026, 76.

⁶¹ Linnér & al. 2026, 4.

These geopolitical shifts have also exposed how deeply Europe's security is tied to structural dependencies, particularly in the field of energy. Russia's war of aggression in Ukraine demonstrated how deeply Europe had become reliant on Russian oil and gas, revealing the extent to which energy security and sustainability are fundamentally interlinked. In May 2022, the EU launched a plan, "[REPowerEU](#)", to phase out Russian fossil fuel imports.⁶² However, in September 2026, the European Court of Auditors revealed that the EU's plan for energy independence from Russia is struggling, while Europe's energy security is facing renewed threats from the turmoil in the Middle East.⁶³

Fossil fuels have historically driven geopolitical tensions and alliances.⁶⁴ As the green transition advances and demand for renewable energy increases, new strategic dependencies are emerging around critical minerals and rare earths.⁶⁵ The EU is currently heavily dependent on imports of critical raw materials from third countries. For example, 63% of the world's cobalt, used in batteries, is extracted in the Democratic Republic of Congo, 97% of the EU's magnesium supply is sourced from China and 100% of the rare earths used for permanent magnets are refined in China.

Combined with the growing global demand due to the shift towards a digital and green economy, this dependency makes the EU's supply chains vulnerable.⁶⁶ The "[European Critical Raw Materials Act](#)" (2023) is intended to ensure a secure and sustainable supply of critical raw materials and to reduce the EU's dependence on single-country import sources.⁶⁷ In the Act, the EU has set priorities and 2030 benchmarks, focussing on building European capacities and improving resilience, promoting a more sustainable and circular critical raw materials economy and supporting an EU-wide governing structure.⁶⁸

However, aligning the green transition with environmental and societal values is far from straightforward, and the shift generates notable tensions. The technologies required for decarbonisation rely heavily on a wide range of minerals, and the extraction of critical minerals often generates significant local, social and environmental impacts. These pressures are visible also within the EU. These tensions have already materialised in concrete disputes, for example, across the Nordic region. Political debate has concerned environmental risks and the social license to operate.

In Northern Sweden, there are mining projects that have been planned or are taking place in the Sámi Land, which has sparked tensions between the Sámi rights and mining (see Bryant 2026). In late September 2026, demonstrations were held in Finland against a mining project planned for the protected Viiankiaapa string bog. Viiankiaapa is safeguarded both under the EU Natura 2000 network and Finland's national mire reserve programme, and it is one of the last remaining natural string bogs in Europe. The European Commission has selected the proposed mine as one of the strategic projects due to its importance for securing the EU's supply of critical raw materials. The mine would primarily extract copper and nickel, but also cobalt.⁶⁹ This illustrates how geopolitics and environmental considerations are deeply intertwined in the green transition, requiring policymakers to balance and weigh their decisions from environmental, social and strategic perspectives simultaneously.

⁶² European Commission: REPowerEU.

⁶³ European Court of Auditors 9.9.2026.

⁶⁴ Dalby 2026, 25; Linnér & al. 2026, 5.

⁶⁵ Linnér & al. 2026, 5.

⁶⁶ European Commission 2023.

⁶⁷ European Commission 2023.

⁶⁸ European Commission 2023 (factsheet).

⁶⁹ Juntti, Maija-Liisa & Tynkkynen, Jyri, 26.9.2026.

The interaction between environmental pressures and geopolitical dynamics becomes even clearer when examining how geopolitical shocks affect economies and societies. Russia's invasion of Ukraine demonstrated how rapidly geopolitical acts can spill over into national economies: market volatility increased, inflation accelerated and interest rates rose. Similar dynamics have followed tensions between the United States and Iran, where geopolitical uncertainty has repeatedly affected global financial conditions and transmitted volatility across regions. Higher interest rates place additional pressure on heavily indebted states. These economic constraints can lead to cuts in public services and social welfare, which may deepen societal polarisation and erode trust in institutions. As a result, external geopolitical tensions can become internal security risks and thereby affect social cohesion and create vulnerabilities within the broader framework of comprehensive security.

More broadly, economic instruments have become central tools in geopolitical competition and shape the security environment in which the green transition takes shape. Their importance, including sanctions, trade policies, and investment flows, as tools of geopolitical strategy is growing.⁷⁰ As an example, the EU has imposed extensive sanctions on Russia. Following the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the Union adopted massive and unprecedented restrictions, building on the sanctions first introduced in 2014 after the illegal annexation of Crimea. Another example are the tariffs. The U.S. President Donald Trump has set tariffs for dozens of countries, which have had consequences in international markets, such as repeated stock swings. Beyond measurable market effects, unpredictability can erode trust between states and hinder international and multilateral cooperation.

As geopolitical competition intensifies, its effects are also visible in Europe's shifting security priorities. The rising defence spending and growing nationalism are reshaping Europe's security priorities. The war of aggression against Ukraine has changed Europe's security priorities, spurring widespread increases in defence spending.⁷¹ The increase of defence spending was also accelerated by Trump's demand for NATO countries to spend five percent of their national GDP on defence. This growing emphasis on traditional security risks diverting political attention and financial resources away from environmental and sustainability priorities. At the same time, states turning inward weakens the foundations of multilateral cooperation and constitutes a security challenge as geopolitical tensions hinder the international collaboration needed to address climate change and environmental degradation effectively.⁷²

Keynote: How Multilateral Environmental Policy Supports Peace and Security in Turbulent Times

David Donoghue, Former Irish Ambassador to the UN and co-facilitator for the SDGs and the 2030 Agenda, Ireland

The first keynote of session 1 will be held by David Donoghue, co-facilitator of the Intergovernmental Negotiations on the 2030 Agenda, Ireland. As Ireland's Ambassador to the United Nations, Donoghue was one of two co-facilitators, or co-chairs, for the global negotiations at the UN in 2014-2015 which succeeded in adopting by consensus the Sustainable Development Goals and the wider 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Their responsibility was both to lead the negotiations and to prepare and present successive drafts of the agreement until that consensus was achieved. Donoghue's colleague was the Ambassador of Kenya, chosen from the global South as he was chosen from the global North.

⁷⁰ Linnér & al. 2026, 6.

⁷¹ Linnér & al. 2026, 6.

⁷² Niinistö 2024, 34.

This was the first time the world had negotiated and agreed on a single integrated agenda spanning the three dimensions of sustainable development: the economic, the social and the environmental. There is a careful balancing of all three dimensions in the 2030 Agenda as a whole and in each of the 17 SDGs. The SDGs and the 169 targets (or sub-Goals) are based on a recognition that making progress in any one area depends on a multiplicity of factors and interconnections. A holistic approach is needed which recognizes the complexity of the underlying issues and moves beyond simplistic analyses based on 'silo' thinking.

The environmental policy objectives of the 2030 Agenda do not stand in isolation from the other sections of the Agenda, nor do the objectives relating to peace and security. All are deeply interconnected and interdependent. I will show, for example, how the failure to make sufficient progress on SDG 13 (climate action) - or indeed the wider Paris Agreement - is fuelling conflict and instability and undermining, therefore, what is promised in SDG 16 (peace and security).

Donoghue will also look at EU environmental policy and the impact it is having in terms of implementing relevant parts of the 2030 Agenda. In addition, he will consider the outlook for a post-2030 development agenda.

Keynote: The Environmental Crisis as a Shared European Security Risk

Emma Hakala, Leading Researcher, Finnish Institute of International Affairs, Finland (online)

The second keynote will be held by Emma Hakala, Leading Researcher, Finnish Institute of International Affairs, Finland. This presentation will examine how environmental change has become a central security challenge for Europe, and what this should entail in terms of governance and practice. Environment-related security risks affect food and energy security, water resources, infrastructure, public health, ecosystems, and economic stability across Europe. How well do we recognise these risks now, and what more should be done to improve our preparedness for them?

First, a three-part framework of direct, cascading, and transition risks linked to the environment will be outlined. Direct risks refer to the immediate impacts of environmental change, such as heatwaves, floods, droughts, and ecosystem degradation. Cascading risks emerge when environmental pressures interact with political, economic, and social factors, creating cross-border consequences like disruptions to food systems, supply chains, critical infrastructure, thus undermining sustainable development. Finally, transition risks are associated with efforts to achieve climate neutrality. While decarbonisation is essential for long-term security and resilience, rapid systemic changes may create new dependencies, particularly regarding critical raw materials, strategic technologies, and social acceptance of climate policies.

In this presentation it will be argued that improving anticipation, preparedness, and cross-sectoral coordination needs to be a shared European effort. Research, foresight, and international cooperation are essential for understanding increasingly interconnected risks and ensuring that environmental security becomes an integral part of broader resilience and security planning. These aims are also integrally linked to enabling and advancing sustainable development, globally and in Europe.

Keynote: Building Europe's Resilience in an Unstable World

Serafin Groebner, Seconded National Expert - Circular Economy, European Environment Agency, Denmark

Climate risks in Europe — water scarcity, extreme heat, floods, drought — are no longer isolated events; they cascade across agriculture, infrastructure, energy and health, with mounting economic and social costs. The presentation will use evidence from the EEA's Europe's Environment 2025 report to make the

case that a stable climate and healthy environment are not a cost, but the foundation of Europe's security and prosperity.

It will argue that investing in resilience pays a triple dividend — protecting lives, generating economic returns, and delivering wider environmental and social benefits — and point to the policy levers already available to Europe, from nature-based solutions to EU strategies on water resilience and preparedness. The overall message: in an unstable world, resilience isn't optional, it's the basis for Europe's future security, competitiveness and prosperity.

Junk Kouture at the ESDN Conference

Troy Armour, CEO and Founder Junk Kouture, Monaco

Junk Kouture provides young people with a platform to explore sustainability through creativity, innovation and circular thinking. From its beginnings in Ireland sixteen years ago, Junk Kouture has grown into an international community of young people and educators. At the ESDN Conference, CEO and Founder Troy Armour will share how this community empowers young people to become active participants in shaping a more sustainable future, building confidence and future-ready skills through real-world creative experiences.

The Junk Kouture exhibit brings this work to life through a selection of designs created by students from across Ireland. Each design reflects the students' own ideas, learning and creative process, exploring circularity and the UN Sustainable Development Goals while demonstrating how discarded and repurposed materials can be reimaged through different techniques and approaches to design. Delegates are invited to take a closer look, discover the stories and thinking behind the designs, and speak with the Junk Kouture team to learn more about the programme, community and how they are engaging young people in creativity, circular thinking and sustainability.

Chapter 2: Exchange Space 1: Building the Foundations for Long-Term Resilience

This chapter focuses on the Exchange Space 1 that will be taking place during the conference and provides introductions to the topics and presentations that will be given at each table. The purpose of the Exchange Spaces is to allow participants the chance to exchange with their peers from other countries on good practice cases. Table leads will present their cases for 10-15 minutes, leaving about 30 minutes for more in-depth discussions with participants. Each table will include an example of different topics around the Just and Green Transition, Circular Economy, Citizen and Stakeholder Engagement, and Environment, Climate and Biodiversity.

There will be two rounds and speakers remain at their tables while everyone else switches tables for the next round.

Topic 1: Just and Green Transition

Table 1: Beyond Emissions: Delivering Climate Action through a Just Transition Lens

Ali Sheridan, the Just Transition Commission, Ireland

Achieving climate targets is essential, but emissions reductions alone cannot tell whether the transition has been successful. A just transition asks us to consider how the benefits, costs and opportunities of climate action are distributed across society; whose voices shape the decisions being made; and whether the transition strengthens communities, livelihoods and public confidence along the way.

Drawing on Ireland's experience and the work of the Just Transition Commission, this roundtable will explore what it means to put a just transition at the heart of climate policy and implementation. It will consider how we can broaden understanding of successful climate action beyond emissions, the role of meaningful engagement and social dialogue, and what Ireland's emerging experience might offer other European administrations. Participants will be invited to share their own experiences and consider what a genuinely just transition would mean in practice in their national contexts.

Table 2: Spain – National Strategy for Sustainable Development

Alba Villamor, Deputy Assistant Director, the Ministry of Social Rights, Consumer Affairs and 2030 Agenda, Spain

Spain's Sustainable Development Strategy 2030 provides the overarching framework for addressing the country's main economic, social and environmental challenges, including climate change, social inclusion, territorial cohesion, energy security, resource efficiency and the promotion of a fair and just transition towards a sustainable and resilient economy.

Within this framework, Spain's Sustainable Development Strategy places the energy transition at the centre of its efforts to build a more inclusive, resilient, and low-carbon economy. A key pillar of this approach is the Energy Poverty Strategy, which aims to ensure that all citizens have access

to affordable and reliable energy services while protecting vulnerable households from rising energy costs. By combining social protection measures with energy efficiency improvements, the strategy seeks to reduce inequalities and guarantee that the benefits of the energy transition are shared widely across society.

At the same time, Spain is fostering the creation of Energy Communities, empowering citizens, local authorities, and businesses to participate directly in the generation, consumption, and management of renewable energy. This community-based approach complements the country's ambitious agenda for renewable energy expansion, which includes increasing solar and wind capacity, reducing dependence on fossil fuels, and accelerating progress toward climate neutrality.

Together, these initiatives support sustainable economic growth, strengthen energy security, and promote greater public participation in the transition to a clean energy future where no one is left behind.

Table 3: Wales – Just Transition Framework

Robert Morgan, Head of Decarbonisation, Welsh Government - Climate Change and Environmental Sustainability, Wales

Against a backdrop of mounting pressure on climate commitments and a shifting geopolitical landscape, it is more important than ever for governments to pursue climate action in a way that is fair: sharing the benefits widely, mitigating risks wherever possible, and ensuring that communities have a meaningful role in shaping and benefiting from the transition.

Join a discussion on Wales' emerging approach to delivering a Just Transition, exploring how it is being embedded in climate decision-making and what it means in practice. The discussion will highlight Wales' [Just Transition Framework](#), which draws directly on the Well-being of Future Generations Act, alongside a practical example of what a just transition can look like in action.

Robert Morgan is Head of Decarbonisation at the Welsh Government, where he works with Ministers, officials, and organisations across Wales to advance climate action. His work includes net zero planning, just transition analysis, and international cooperation. Robert has held a range of roles across the Welsh Government, including leading the implementation of the Well-being of Future Generations Act. He has also advised on budget policy, Brexit negotiations, and the Welsh Government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic. He is an Alumni Fellow of the University of Cambridge's Centre for Science and Policy.

Topic 2: Circular Economy

Table 4: Ireland's Circular Economy Strategy

Bernie Kiely, Principal Officer - Circular Economy Division, Department of Climate, Energy and the Environment, Ireland

Ireland's Circular Economy Strategy sets out a bold vision for a more resilient, sustainable and innovative Ireland. At its heart is a simple but transformative idea: rethinking how we use resources by designing out waste, keeping products and materials in use for longer, and creating new value from what we already have. Circularity offers a practical route to reducing emissions, strengthening resource security and building a more competitive economy.

The opportunities are already taking shape across Ireland, from reuse and repair initiatives to innovation in construction, manufacturing, agriculture and technology. By embracing circular practices, businesses can reduce costs, unlock new markets and create high-quality jobs, while communities benefit from stronger local supply chains and new enterprise opportunities. Circularity is reshaping how we live, work and do business. Ireland has an opportunity to decouple economic growth from environmental impact and build a more climate-resilient future. The Circular Economy Strategy provides the framework to make that vision a reality.

Table 5: Circular Economy Stakeholder Platform

Maria Nikolopoulou, President – Sustainable Development Observatory, European Economic and Social Committee, Spain

Have you tried asking the AI, where should you look if you wanted to get relevant information on events, strategies and projects on the circular economy in Europe? Its first suggestion is the Circular Economy Stakeholder Platform! It is meant to be a one stop shop where people can connect and stay tuned on circular economy news and updates.

The discussion will approach this unique joint initiative of the European Economic and Social Committee and the European Commission, which is coordinated by 24 members from different civil society organisations. Not only will you learn more about how it works and what it can offer but also the challenges and opportunities of this kind of structure.

Topic 3: Citizen and Stakeholder Engagement

Table 6: The Most Sustainable Way of Building Engagement - Should It Be from the Ground Up or Top Down?

Niall McGuirk, Coordinator, Coalition 2030, Ireland

Does building any sort of effective campaign require a bottom-up foundation. This allows us to cultivate a sense of ownership and belonging to any campaign. It also leads to shared responsibility. However, does this allow decisions to be made quickly? Or is a quicker more effective campaign led from the top with carefully agreed steps being laid out from the beginning? Does the top-down level ensure legitimacy within Government circles?

Join us as we discuss both options and discuss various ways to engage citizens to give them the opportunity to work through solutions to support our efforts.

Table 7: ESDN Youth Workshop 2026 Policy Notes

Martina Doubková, ESDN Youth Member, Czechia & **Pedro Sereno**, ESDN Youth Representative, Portugal

Strengthening long-term economic resilience -increasing the ability to deliver sustainable and inclusive growth (circular economy and a resilient labor market)

Martina Doubková, ESDN Youth Member, Czechia

Economic resilience, in times of disruption arising from transition stress, whether driven by decarbonization, technological change, AI, or geopolitical supply shocks, is becoming a key priority for European policymaking. The actions proposed in the following section focus on two areas that are particularly important for building long-term economic resilience.

Firstly, pursuing circular economy principles can help reduce Europe's dependence on primary materials, in general, by using what is already in existence within Europe by recycling materials, using them longer, and finding other uses for materials that would otherwise be discarded, which can strengthen economic resilience by reducing Europe's dependence on resources from outside its borders, and thereby minimize its exposure to supply disruptions and vulnerability to volatile global markets.

Fast fashion, for example, is particularly (but not exclusively) relevant to young people due to its connection to identity and self-expression. While shifting from fast fashion to second-hand clothing is a step in the right direction, it does not necessarily reduce overall consumption. Building greater resilience therefore also requires changing consumption patterns and enabling young people to contribute through more conscious and resource-efficient purchasing habits.

Secondly, labor market resilience in the face of the growing impact of AI and robotics on economic restructuring and the potential displacement of jobs in certain sectors is also an important aspect to consider. A resilient economy requires a workforce that can adapt to technological change, acquire new skills, and transition into emerging areas of employment. This is particularly relevant for young people who are entering a labor market increasingly shaped by AI and automation.

Resilience 2.0 treats resilience as a supply-side project: secure the supply chains, the critical resources, the key industries. That is procurement, not resilience. It says nothing about what a society can produce without importing, who owns it, and whether people can move when their work changes, and those questions decide which generation pays for a transition, and which one collects the return.

Developing a coherent global vision for Europe - asserting Europe's position as a strong, stable, and trusted worldwide partner, based on a clear strategic concept

Pedro Sereno, ESDN Youth Representative, Portugal

Europe is at a crossroads of its own making. For decades, Europe could claim — often with good reason — a form of moral high ground: democracy, human rights, environmental ambition, social protection, solidarity and rule-based governance. These are not secondary features of the European project. They are written into its treaties and have shaped the way Europe presents itself to the world.

The difficulty is that Europe increasingly struggles to live up to the model it has spent decades promoting. Power politics has returned, economic dependencies have become geopolitical leverage, and Europe is being tested not only by systemic rivals but also by partners and allies whose interests do not always coincide with its own. At home, slower productivity growth, high energy costs, demographic pressure and an investment gap estimated by the Draghi Report at €750–800 billion per year have turned competitiveness into an existential question.

This exposes an uncomfortable contradiction: Europe fears that defending its standards will make it less competitive yet compromising them has not necessarily made it more powerful.

The transatlantic tariff settlement made this tension visible. Faced with US pressure, Europe prioritized predictability and de-escalation, accepting a 15% tariff ceiling on most EU exports while removing remaining tariffs on US industrial goods, even if safeguards were later added. The episode raises a broader question: how willing is Europe to use the economic weight of its Single Market when pressure comes from an ally?

The same dilemma exists at home. Europe does need to simplify. Fragmentation and regulatory complexity impose real costs on businesses and weaken the Single Market. However, simplification can easily blur into retreat when substantive standards are weakened in the name of competitiveness. Cutting unnecessary bureaucracy is sensible. Competing by progressively lowering the standards Europe once presented as a strength is not. Otherwise, Europe risks becoming less distinctive without becoming more competitive.

Meanwhile, strategic dependencies remain acute. Europe still relies overwhelmingly on China for several critical raw materials. The lesson from Russia should be clear: dependencies that look efficient in normal times can become strategic liabilities overnight.

On the other hand, Russia also proved that Europe could act. After the invasion of Ukraine, the EU rapidly reduced its dependence on Russian gas and moved towards a legally binding phase-out. That adjustment came at a significant cost: the energy crisis exposed European consumers and businesses to sharply higher prices, while some countries temporarily increased coal use to secure supply. In addition, it also laid bare the risks of excessive dependence and reinforced the case for diversifying supply, accelerating renewables and strengthening Europe's own energy resilience. When urgency, political will and solidarity align, dependencies once treated as unavoidable can be broken remarkably quickly.

This is the resilience Europe now needs: not the absence of costs or difficult trade-offs, but the capacity to absorb them and adapt. Not self-sufficiency and not isolation. Strategic autonomy should mean retaining enough economic, industrial, technological, energy and political capacity to make our own choices — and enough resilience to withstand the consequences when others dislike them.

Europe does not lack power. It has the economic scale of its Single Market, regulatory influence, technological capabilities, trade leverage and strong alliances. What it too often lacks is the willingness, cohesion and institutional capacity to use these assets strategically.

Europe has teeth. It is simply too often reluctant to bite.

The question is, therefore, not whether Europe possesses power, but whether it has organized itself to use it.

A coherent global vision should begin with one objective: preserving Europe's capacity to make its own choices. That freedom of action rests on five mutually reinforcing foundations: economic scale, strategic diversification, institutional capacity, credible values and democratic legitimacy.

Topic 4: Environment, Climate and Biodiversity

Table 8: "There Is No One-Size-Fits-All Approach": Using Behavioural Insights to Shape Climate and Environmental Communications

Mary Frances Rochford, Programme Manager, Environmental Protection Agency, Ireland

This session explores the Environmental Protection Agency's experience in building and applying behavioural insights to support climate engagement and environmental action. Drawing on lessons and findings from the *Climate Change in the Irish Mind* project and Ireland's Food Waste Prevention Programme, it will examine how behavioural evidence can inform more effective communications, influence public engagement, and support positive environmental behaviours.

Table 9: Climate Action as a Litmus Test: Will the Climate Crisis Strengthen or Challenge Democracy?

Florian Eywo, Policy Officer, Federal Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry, Climate and Environmental Protection, Regions and Water Management, Austria & **Katja Hummer**, ESDN Advisory Board Member, Policy Officer, Federal Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry, Climate and Environmental Protection, Regions and Water Management, Austria

The objective of the table is that participants will analyse the psychological drivers behind the resistance to green transformation in Europe. The session will explore why resistance above all to climate action often goes hand in hand with questioning public institutions and democratic processes, and how this cycle can be broken through broad social alliances and positive incentives.

Thematic Pillars & Key Questions for the Panel

1. The Psychology of Defence Mechanisms (Beyond Environmentalism)

Status quo: Climate change scepticism or denial is partly attributable to a lack of acceptance of credible scientific information, caused by the deliberate dissemination of disinformation. Furthermore, climate action policies frequently challenge people's traditional lifestyles and cultural self-images.

Question: *How can we communicate climate change in a way that stops people from tuning out in frustration and instead motivates them to take action?*

2. The crisis of trust: From climate protest to hostility towards institutions

Status quo: Rejection of reform objectives is often an expression of a deeper-rooted mistrust of state institutions. This is increasingly leading to calls for authoritarian, supposedly 'simple' solutions.

Question: Why do necessary reforms lead to a rise in authoritarian tendencies amongst the population? How can we convince the sceptical section of the population and win them back?

3. Breaking the cycle: Positive examples & best practices

To be discussed:

- Financial benefits: Local value creation through renewables, where citizens benefit directly from falling electricity prices locally, rather than a focus solely on costs and sacrifice.
- New forms of democracy: Representative citizens' assemblies selected by lottery demonstrate that: When people work out solutions outside their political 'filter bubbles' under moderation, acceptance of the transformation increases fundamentally.
- Inclusion of marginalised groups: Projects that specifically place traditional identities (e.g. craftsmanship, rural culture) at the heart of modernisation, rather than branding them as 'outdated'.

Key terms

Behavioural economics / social psychology: Analysis of cognitive barriers, loss aversion and the mechanisms of trust in the system

Democracy research / sociology: political alienation, populism and the emergence of authoritarian attitudes

Economy & Structural Change: jobs transformation and social security

Local Government Practice / Regional Development: involvement of all political levels of public administration

Chapter 3: Exchange Space 2: Building the Foundations for Long-Term Resilience

This chapter focuses on the Exchange Space 2 that will be taking place during the conference and provides introductions to the topics and presentations that will be given at each table. The purpose of the Exchange Spaces is to allow participants the chance to exchange with their peers from other countries on good practice cases. Table leads will present their cases for 10-15 minutes, leaving about 30 minutes for more in-depth discussions with participants. Each table will include an example of different topics around the Just and Green Transition, Circular Economy, Citizen and Stakeholder Engagement, and Environment, Climate and Biodiversity.

There will be two rounds and speakers remain at their tables while everyone else switches tables for the next round.

Topic 1: Just and Green Transition

Table 1: Just Transition in Agriculture and Land Use

Niamh Garvey, Senior Policy Analyst, National Economic and Social Council (NESC), Ireland

The National Economic and Social Council provided advice to government identifying interventions to support a just transition in the areas of agriculture and land use in Ireland. Interventions were clustered under four key areas: inclusive processes, enabling people to benefit from the opportunities of transition, sharing and mitigating the costs of transition as well as anticipatory and recursive governance processes to coordinate action.

A wide range of innovative place-based initiatives highlight examples in practice of how environmental objectives can be pursued in tandem with social and economic objectives, with important lessons for scaling learning from best practice.

Table 2: Nordic Toolbox for a Just Green Transition

Maja Brynteson, Research Fellow, Nordregio, Sweden & **Axel Eriksson**, Communications Advisor, Nordregio, Sweden

Nordregio's toolbox for a just green transition highlights six priority areas for enabling a green transition and offers policy memos from four socially at-risk groups. It offers guidance for policymakers to navigate challenges and provides insights from those affected.

Learn about good practices, practical tools and examples on how to take action for not just a green transition, but for a just green transition.

Table 3: Renewable Energy & Climate Adaptation from SDGs to beyond 2030, Resilience and Energy Independence

David Perejil, Director-General for the 2030 Agenda, Ministry of Social Rights, Consumer Affairs and 2030 Agenda, Spain

Drawing on the vision of Spain's revised Sustainable Development Strategy, approved in February 2026, this panel will explain how renewable energy can accelerate the implementation and localisation of the Sustainable Development Goals as the world approaches the 2030 deadline. The discussion will explore how locally driven energy transitions can strengthen climate resilience, support sustainable territorial development, and help communities adapt to the growing impacts of climate change, contributing to more cohesive, inclusive and sustainable societies.

With a focus on energy independence, climate adaptation and human rights, the panel will explore how renewable energy and locally driven solutions can contribute to a just transition that leaves no one behind. From sustainable territorial planning, climate adaptation actions and environmental conservation actions to innovation, circular economy and clean energy deployment, participants will discuss pathways to strengthen energy security, reduce vulnerabilities to external shocks, and advance resilient development beyond 2030, placing people, communities and environmental sustainability at the centre of a shared vision for future prosperity. Also, the participants will know how a proposal of SDGs aligns with other visions of resilience, strategic autonomy, geopolitical stability and energy independence.

Topic 2: Circular Economy

Table 4: Implementing Romania's Circular Economy Strategy: Governance, Monitoring and Digital Tools

Ileana Luminița Bălălaşu, ESDN Advisory Board Member and Director, Prime Minister's Office - Department of Sustainable Development, Romania

Romania will present its experience in developing and implementing a comprehensive policy framework for the transition to a circular economy. The presentation will provide an overview of the National Circular Economy Strategy, the National Action Plan and the governance structure established to ensure policy coordination, stakeholder engagement and effective implementation across sectors. It will also introduce the national monitoring framework, which enables the systematic assessment of progress through a set of indicators and supports evidence-based decision-making, transparency and accountability.

The presentation will further showcase Romania's digital one-stop-shop platform for sustainable development, highlighting its dedicated Circular Economy section as an innovative tool for communication, monitoring and knowledge sharing. The platform provides public access to the National Strategy, the Action Plan, monitoring reports and an interactive dashboard tracking implementation progress against key indicators. It also brings together good practices, funding opportunities and training resources, supporting capacity building and facilitating the exchange of knowledge among public authorities, businesses, academia and civil society. The presentation will conclude by sharing key lessons learned and future directions for strengthening the implementation of circular economy policies.

Table 5: North Rhine-Westphalia Circular Economy Strategy

Julian Lauten-Weiss, Circular Economy Expert, Ministry of the Environment, Nature and Transport of the State of North Rhine-Westphalia, Germany

North Rhine-Westphalia adopted its regional circular economy strategy in July of this year as a response to increasing climate impacts and fragile supply chains, elevating circularity to an

economic transformation and resilience agenda. The strategy aims to make circularity the new standard and to position the state as a forerunner, in line with European Union and national frameworks.

Implementation will be focused on key sectors for the region such as construction, chemicals, and technology, while also addressing enablers such as data, skills, and logistics. Further priorities include adjusting the regulatory framework to reduce uncertainty and generating demand for circular solutions through public procurement. Targeted funding programs, strong regional stakeholder networks, and partnerships with municipalities in the state as well as other regions in Germany, Europe, and globally turn ambition into projects.

Some key success factors during the strategy development process included involving all state ministries to create shared ownership and building on regional strengths to achieve systemic effects. Broad engagement with stakeholder groups helped, while expert synthesis and public consultations added focus. A concise document with a clear scope aligned with existing sustainable development ambitions helps build credibility and move quickly from planning to action.

Topic 3: Citizen and Stakeholder Engagement

Table 6: ESDN Youth Workshop 2026 Policy Notes

Jorina Kaminski, ESDN Youth Network Member, Switzerland & **Filip Lepieš**, ESDN Youth Network Member, Slovakia & **Daniel Wood**, ESDN Youth Network Representative, Wales

Reimagining education - coupling education reform with future-oriented labor market and social policies

Jorina Kaminski, ESDN Youth Network Member, Switzerland

While recognizing that unequal access to quality education and persistent educational inequalities remain among Europe's most pressing challenges, this topic focuses specifically on reimagining what and how young people learn. Developed by youth representatives from across Europe, it does not question the importance of the foundational knowledge (traditional subjects like maths, languages, history and sciences), but proposes new ways of teaching it alongside civic, digital and practical skills needed for youth's present and future. The paper concludes with promising practices illustrating how this vision can be translated into action.

In a world of intense labor markets and rapidly changing technology, the only constant is change. We need to reshape our education systems to keep up with the pace. According to Eurostat, in 2026 15.5% of young people under the age of 25 are currently unemployed, which makes a total of 2.987 million young people struggling to enter the labor market (Eurostat, 2026). Ipsos, a global market research firm, writes: "Less than 1 in 2 young people considers themselves well prepared to enter the job market (48%)". With this data in mind, we are keen to propose structural changes within the education system as well as updates regarding the content of curricula.

Education must serve as a foundational pillar in preparing young people to navigate the uncertainty of tomorrow and recognize the value of civic engagement in their communities as a first step toward building robust, cohesive societies. The goal is a dynamic educational framework

that not only adapts flexibly to global crises but actively empowers young people to become valuable contributors to resilient communities.

Strengthening democracy as a common good: countering polarization, supporting community building and safeguarding democratic standards

Filip Lepieš, ESDN Youth Network Member, Slovakia

Democracy is not a permanent or self-sustaining condition. Democratic institutions, public trust, and meaningful civic participation require continuous protection and renewal, particularly at a time when the digital transformation of public life has changed both how democracy is practiced and how it is contested. Across Europe, political debate has shifted decisively into digital spaces, creating new opportunities for participation and access to information, but also new vulnerabilities to manipulation, polarization, and disinformation. These pressures do not originate from a single source: they combine external interference, domestic political dynamics, and structural features of the digital environment itself.

This note argues that a resilient European democracy rests on three interdependent pillars: defending democratic institutions and public trust against threats from every direction, adapting the digital information environment so that it serves rather than undermines informed citizenship, and renewing democratic legitimacy by making young people genuine actors in political life rather than its passive subjects.

Democratic resilience, for the purposes of this document, can be understood as the capacity of a democratic system to absorb pressure, correct itself, and retain public legitimacy, without suspending the rights and freedoms it exists to protect. This capacity is now tested under conditions unlike those democracies faced a generation ago: algorithmic curation mediates much of what citizens see and believe; generative AI has sharply lowered the cost of producing convincing false content at scale; and foreign and domestic actors alike exploit the same digital mechanisms to deepen existing social divisions. Threats that were once treated separately (i.e. cyberattacks, disinformation, political extremism, institutional erosion) increasingly interact through a shared digital public sphere, making them harder to address in isolation. Responding to this requires a comprehensive approach that treats external interference and internal vulnerability as two facets of the same challenge, rather than as separate policy domains.

Sustainable and inclusive well-being

Daniel Wood, ESDN Youth Network Representative, Wales

One key challenge today is how to ensure sustainable and inclusive well-being while also advancing the green transition. Healthy societies underpin sustainable growth: access to public services, preventative healthcare, fair work, and inclusive green mobility are fundamental pillars of a future for all. Divided into four subtopics , this policy note addresses current challenges in these four areas and proposes policy avenues of action.

Table 7: Our Future, Our Voice: Putting Citizens at the Heart of the Future Generations Act

Jenny McConnel, Sustainable Development Advisor, Office of the Future Generations Commissioner of Wales, Wales

The Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act was the first legislation in the world to place a duty on public bodies to safeguard the well-being of future generations. Under the Act, public bodies, including local authorities, health boards, national parks and others, must carry out sustainable development – taking action to improve economic, social, environmental, and cultural well-being now and for the long-term. It sets out five ways of working needed for public bodies to achieve the seven well-being goals. This approach provides an opportunity for innovative thinking, reflecting the way we live our lives and what we expect of our public services.

This session will explore the establishment of the Act, including how citizen engagement helped its development. Drawing on practical examples and learning, we will consider what good involvement looks like in practice, as well as some of the challenges of moving beyond high-level consultation and towards genuine participation. The session will explore how public bodies can create the conditions for people and communities to have a stronger voice in shaping the decisions that affect their lives and their futures.

Topic 4: Environment, Climate and Biodiversity

Table 8: Building Resilience in an Irish Context

Stephen Flood, Resilience Team Lead, Irish Climate Change Advisory Council, Ireland

This exchange space presentation will consider what it means to build climate change resilience in an Irish context, recognising that Ireland is already experiencing more frequent and intense climate-related pressures including flooding, coastal change, heat stress, drought risk, biodiversity loss and disruption to communities, infrastructure and essential services. It will place resilience alongside Ireland's wider climate policy landscape, including national adaptation planning and the transition towards a climate-resilient, biodiversity-rich and climate-neutral society. The focus will be on closing the gap to climate resilience: how towns, rural areas, coastal communities, public bodies, businesses and households can prepare for uncertainty while protecting people, livelihoods and ecosystems.

The talk will frame resilience as a shared responsibility that demands integrated thinking, collaboration and long-term planning. Effective climate resilience depends on connecting scientific evidence, local knowledge, public engagement, planning, investment and governance across sectors such as agriculture, water, health, transport, housing and the natural environment. It will consider how adaptation choices can avoid locking in future vulnerability, support a just transition, and strengthen communities in the face of climate impacts. By grounding the discussion in Irish experience and institutions, the talk aims to show that building resilience is not only about responding to climate change, but about shaping a safer, fairer and more sustainable future for Ireland.

Dr Stephen Flood has over 16 years' experience in climate change, environmental policy and social science research. Stephen currently leads the Resilience Team at the Irish Climate Change Advisory Council Secretariat and is a Visiting Scholar at ICARUS, Maynooth. He has worked in senior research roles in Wellington, New Zealand, UCC in Cork, and Maynooth University. He is a co-chair for the Adaptation Working Group of the International Climate Change Council Network, is a member of Irish Royal Irish Academy's Climate Change and Environmental Sciences (CCES) Committee and is an Irish delegate on the OECD's Working Party on Climate Change.

Table 9: Connecting Climate, Nature and Communities - Building solutions together

John Barimo, Manager, SDSN Ireland, Ireland

What happens when we reconnect climate action with our sense of the places, ecosystems, and communities that sustain us? As Europe considers environmental security and the foundations of long-term resilience, this Exchange Space invites us to explore the connections between climate change, biodiversity and nature loss, and the wellbeing, resilience, and flourishing of communities. John will draw on his experience as an integrative ecologist working with coastal ecosystems which includes mangrove and coral reef restoration in tropical environments. John will open a conversation about what we can learn from natural ecosystems that have evolved to adapt, interact, integrate, and regenerate. His work in education for sustainable development increasingly focuses on helping people in developed environments recognise, and sometimes rediscover, their own connections with the natural world.

But this is not simply a conversation about ecology but also about how we build solutions together. John's perspective has been shaped by decades of experience living and working in and around Indigenous communities, where relationships between people, place and nature can offer important perspectives for rethinking sustainability and resilience. At the table, participants will be invited to share their own experiences and explore practical questions: How can we move beyond treating climate, biodiversity and social resilience as separate challenges? How can education and community engagement help bridge the gap between people and nature? Can built environments be less impactful, or even catalyse ecosystem regeneration. And what might become possible when communities, researchers, artists, policymakers, and practitioners work together to design solutions that strengthen both ecosystems and the people who depend upon them? Join the conversation and bring your experience, questions and ideas.

Table 10: EU LIFE Programme – Corncrake LIFE

John Carey, Ecologist, National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS), Ireland

The LIFE programme is the EU's funding instrument for the environment and climate action. Created in 1992, it has co-financed thousands of projects. In Ireland, the LIFE Programme has often been most successfully applied to exploring solutions to the biodiversity crisis and creating pathways for long-term resilience. The National Parks and Wildlife Service will present their most recently completed LIFE project- Corncrake LIFE. This unique project aimed to restore the population of one of Ireland's most charismatic and threatened farmland birds species- the Corncrake (*Crex crex*).

Having suffered a catastrophic decline since the 1970s, the bird population fell to as low as 150 pairs. Significant changes in agricultural practices and difficulties relating to the protection of land for nature under the EU directives were just some of the challenges the project faced. Despite this, the project delivered over 1500 hectares of managed land and increased the population by almost 50% in five years. The table will see how the project achieved its deliverables and what obstacles the future sustainability of such programmes face once project timelines come to a conclusion. As the biodiversity crisis looms, and nature restoration comes to the fore in European policy, how can we ensure long-term solutions for nature and the people who rely on it?

Chapter 4: Moderated Discussion: Expectations for the SDG Summit 2027 on Post 2030

In September 2024, the Summit of the Future adopted the Pact of the Future. The Pact covers a broad range of themes, including peace and security, sustainable development, climate change, digital cooperation, human rights, gender equality, youth and future generations, as well as the transformation of global governance. The Pact illustrates how the international system could respond to the 21st-century challenges.⁷³

Action 12 in the Pact of the Future calls nations to plan for the future and strengthen the collective efforts for the full implementation of the 2030 Agenda by 2030 and beyond. In addition, it invites the High-Level Political Forum to consider in September 2027 how nations will advance sustainable development by 2030 and beyond, as a priority and at the centre of their work.⁷⁴ By this, the Pact of the Future mandated the 2027 SDG Summit to initiate the formal deliberations on the post-2030 framework. This creates a window of one and a half years to build the momentum.

The adoption of the SDGs in 2015 was a major step that is difficult to repeat. Also, there are new questions which need to be considered in the post-agenda discussions. In recent years, there has been an increasing body of research that highlights the need to critically reassess the concept of sustainable development and the SDGs. For example, Dr. Markus Vogt has argued that the SDGs lack a coherence between the social and the ecological components as well as a naming of power conflicts (see [Vogt 2022](#)). These raise questions whether the current understanding of sustainable development and the SDGs are sufficient to address global sustainability issues.

The path beyond 2030 will not be an easy one. The world is in a very different situation than before, and achieving the goals set earlier would require even more ambitious and fundamental transformations. These developments highlight that the post-agenda framework would need to be more transformative and the global community more coherent in their actions. It remains uncertain to what extent the global community can deliver such change under current conditions. Europe, however, holds an advantage in the unity it has built over more than seventy years.

⁷³ United Nations 2024.

⁷⁴ United Nations 2024, 11.

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