

Key Messages

From mid-2024 to mid-2025, ECF and Future Impacts hosted a series of forward-looking conversations with more than 240 experts from across Europe on the future of EU enlargement and its implications for climate action to 2035.

The project aims to shed light on this underexplored topic and foster shared reflection within and beyond the climate action community.

Key cross-cutting insights from this process:



EU enlargement has recently gained increased attention as short- to mid-term goal, amid growing political and public support. The process now stands at a critical juncture, with global volatility and instability underscoring the need for a clearer European vision.



Scenarios highlight how enlargement and reform can influence the EU's climate progress.



Enlargement choices shape EU cohesion and climate progress. All scenarios present benefits and trade-offs, from the strain rapid enlargement could place on EU governance and cohesion to the risks posed by stalled enlargement weakening the Union's influence. A growing EU may struggle with integration unless a renewed sense of unity is fostered, while an overemphasis on short-term crises—such as defence and security—can sideline internal reform and slow long-term progress on climate action.



MORE IS LESS

As defence drives European integration, simplified enlargement expands the EU without reform, making consensus on key issues harder to achieve.

PACEMAKERS & STRAGGLERS

Under policy-based integration, a multi-tier EU expands the common market through staged accession.



DEADLOCK

With enlargement abandoned, the EU struggles to advance toward net zero, as trust and cooperation erode and democratic backsliding deepens in some member states.



REFORMED RESILIENCE

A reformed, enlarged EU overcomes obstacles and gains momentum toward climate neutrality, driven by grassroots demand and global cooperation.



CLIMATE ACTION IN THE EUROPEAN UNION OF 2035

ENLARGEMENT PERSPECTIVES

Amidst global volatility, the European Union, a global leader in climate action, stands at a pivotal junction between two major agendas: the **strategic expansion of its membership** and the **implementation of its ambitious climate goals**. Both policy initiatives carry **significant implications for European citizens**, both current and future, and for **security and economic prosperity**. Within this context, from mid-2024 to mid-2025, the European Climate Foundation conducted a foresight process, led by Future Impacts, to **explore key uncertainties** related to these topics, develop plausible **alternative scenarios**, and **identify actions** that can be taken today **to improve long-term climate outcomes**.

Key Messages

Exploring the scenarios and their trade-offs reveals key insights at the intersection of enlargement and climate action:

- 1 Enlargement is viewed as likely—if not necessary—for ensuring European security.
- 2 Enlargement is very likely to benefit global climate action.
- 3 Effective and relatively swift EU reform is essential for successful enlargement.
- 4 A positive impact of enlargement on climate action depends even more heavily on EU reform.
- 5 Enlargement will not be successful without (strong) political will.
- 6 Democratic backsliding and rising authoritarianism currently undermine support for both the EU and climate action.

Given this, what steps can we take today to promote positive climate outcomes and reduce the risks of negative ones?

Actions that support climate action across all scenarios:



Reimagining the EU's foundational logic is essential to drive the necessary reforms.



Making climate action a core, non-negotiable priority is critical for safeguarding citizens' wellbeing and maintaining the EU's leadership in climate innovation and economic growth.



Political leaders must demonstrate that climate action is essential to security and economic stability, especially as current geopolitical tensions risk sidelining it.



Enabling specific policy and implementation mechanisms is crucial.

THANK YOU

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We extend our heartfelt thanks to all.



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