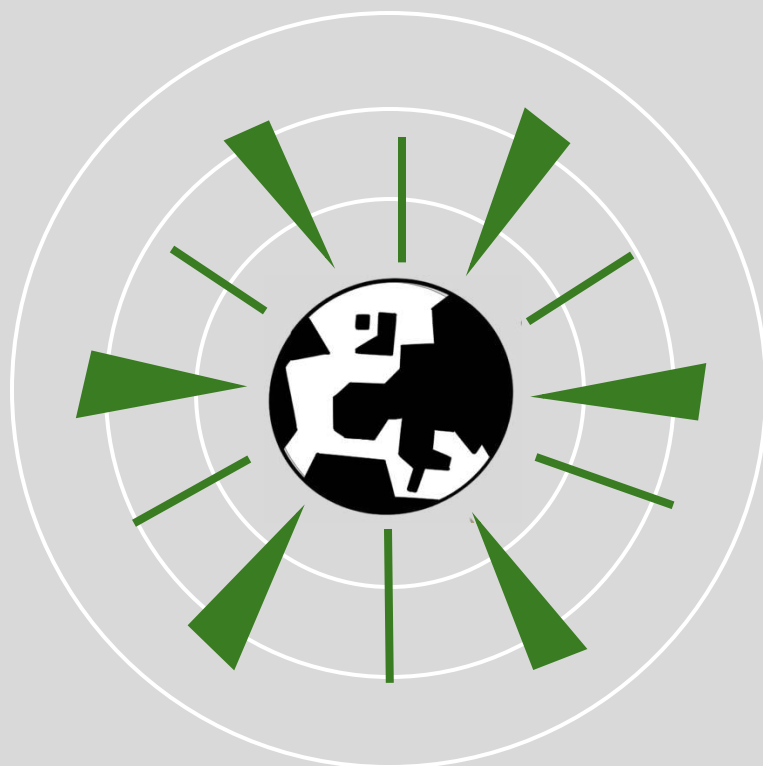


CLIMATE ACTION

in the European Union of 2035

ENLARGEMENT PERSPECTIVES



A FORESIGHT STUDY

AUTHORS

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FOREWORD BY LAURENCE TUBIANA, CEO OF ECF

Europe stands at a turning point. War on our continent, democratic rollbacks, and accelerating climate impacts are reshaping the ground beneath our feet. At such a moment, we cannot afford to drift or to improvise our response. We must anticipate. We must equip ourselves with the clarity and imagination to see what lies ahead. This report is part of that effort.

Foresight is sometimes dismissed as abstract, but in reality it is a practical tool. It helps us prepare for shocks, recognise opportunities, and build resilience. It allows us to link what can too easily be seen as separate agendas – climate, security, prosperity – and see the connections that are shaping Europe’s future. I am proud that the European Climate Foundation has invested in strategic foresight as a service not only to our own work, but to the wider community we are privileged to support. Over the past year, more than 240 contributors from across Europe – including from candidate countries – have taken part in this process. That breadth of engagement is itself a valuable achievement, helping to build a shared vision of Europe’s future.

The findings presented here are clear. EU enlargement and climate action are deeply intertwined. Enlargement can strengthen the Union’s security and extend the reach of its climate ambition – but only if matched by effective reform. Without reform, the risks of fragmentation and paralysis grow sharply. Political will and public support will determine which path Europe takes. The scenarios in this report show that the future is open. But the choices we make now will be decisive. Above all, climate action must remain at the heart of Europe’s project, not sidelined by short-term crises.

Ukraine’s remarkable resilience has shown that Europe’s future depends on defending freedom and democracy while investing in a sustainable recovery. Rebuilding Ukraine is both a moral responsibility and a strategic opportunity: to green Europe’s economy, strengthen its security, and renew its unity. If enlargement is matched by solidarity and reform, it can anchor this renewal and shape a Europe that is safer, more prosperous and more democratic.

This report is not the end of a process but the beginning of a wider conversation. It is intended as a tool to think ahead, to stress-test assumptions, and to support those across civil society, government, and beyond in making the choices that will shape Europe’s future.

KEY MESSAGES

Over the last 12 months, 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 through 2035**. The project aims to shed light on this underexplored topic and foster **shared reflection within and beyond the climate action community**. Below are the key cross-cutting insights from this process:



1. EU enlargement has recently gained increased attention as short- to mid-term goal, amid growing political and public support.

Momentum has accelerated since 2022, driven largely by Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine and the **framing of enlargement as a security measure**. Although some initial support has waned, the process now **stands at a critical juncture**, with global volatility and instability underscoring **the need for a clearer European vision**.



2. Scenarios highlight how enlargement (or non-enlargement) and reform can influence the EU's climate progress.

They range from "More is Less" (Blue Scenario), where **defence drives integration** with simplified enlargement but **little reform and weak climate ambition**, to "Pacemakers and Stragglers" (Grey Scenario), **an enlarged multi-tier Europe with varying speeds of climate action**. In "Deadlock" (Red Scenario), **neither enlargement nor reform advances and climate action stalls**, while "Reformed Resilience" (Green Scenario) envisions **enlargement alongside deep EU reform**, with **strong bottom-up climate action** seen as essential for security and economic security.



3. 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**.

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.

Enlargement strengthens the EU's geopolitical resilience by expanding stability, democracy, and rule of law to neighbouring regions vulnerable to external influence. Integrating candidate countries reduces security gaps that **authoritarian powers or disinformation campaigns** could exploit. Conversely, leaving candidates in an 'eternal waiting room' weakens the EU's soft power and security, opening the door to forces which aim for regional destabilisation¹. Aligning security, energy, and defence policies across a broader area enhances the EU's **collective ability to address emerging threats and crises**.

2

Enlargement is very likely to benefit global climate action.

EU enlargement would likely benefit climate action by extending the reach of the EU's ambitious climate goals and measures to a larger territory. However, this **assumes the EU will maintain its climate ambition**—an assumption that cannot be taken for granted amid shifting political priorities and growing focus on short-term economic growth, security and Europe's rearmament.

3

Effective and relatively swift EU reform is essential for successful enlargement.

The success of enlargement and its positive impact on climate action **depend on effective, timely EU reform**. Meaningful climate progress across an enlarged EU requires deep reforms, particularly to unanimity rules, qualified majority voting (QMV), and the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), especially if Ukraine joins. Although challenging, these **reforms are both necessary and achievable**. Failure to pursue them **risks greater internal conflict and complicates future EU governance**.

4

Positive impact of enlargement on climate action depends more heavily on EU reform.

If enlargement is accompanied by successful reform, **it could lay the foundation for a stronger, revitalised EU and enable more ambitious climate action**—benefiting a larger group of countries and citizens, with positive global ripple effects.

5

Enlargement will not be successful without (strong) political will.

Such fundamental change **relies on strong political will and public support**. Prioritising short-term stability or neglecting EU values² risks weakening the EU's long-term standing by undermining the bloc's institutional and legal foundations. Recent developments, like the "coalition of the willing" in support of Ukraine, present an **opportunity to advance transformational reforms**. Ignoring public voices and civil society or failing to support those affected by the EU's green transition risks backlash, disapproval, and challenges to political legitimacy.

6

Democratic backsliding and rising authoritarianism currently undermine support for both the EU and climate action.

A strong focus on shaping public opinion through **direct citizen engagement and clear communication of the tangible benefits** of both climate action and enlargement is essential. This effort must also **confront the rise of right-wing authoritarian forces and democratic backsliding**, key forces shaping many other outcomes. Without public support, the EU's goals—be it ambitious climate action, enlargement, or EU reform—cannot be achieved.

GIVEN THIS, WHAT STEPS CAN WE TAKE TODAY TO PROMOTE POSITIVE CLIMATE OUTCOMES AND REDUCE THE RISKS OF NEGATIVE ONES?

Here are key areas of action that will support climate action across all scenarios:

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

The EU's reliance on regulatory power is challenged by global volatility, climate change, and rising nationalism, highlighting the need for a more unified and inspiring approach. Strengthening enforcement, prioritising innovation and sovereignty, and fostering collective optimism around climate action could renew the EU's global influence and internal unity. This renewed vision must transcend national interests and promote solidarity and shared goals.



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. However, shifting political priorities risk sidelining this focus, so sustained commitment is essential. True progress requires addressing both internal policies and the external impacts of EU resource use on neighbouring and global partners to ensure ethical responsibility and enhance global security.



Political leaders must demonstrate that climate action is essential to security and economic stability, especially as current geopolitical tensions risk sidelining it. The EU's strategic autonomy provides a unifying vision that links shared climate action to resilience and prosperity for both member and candidate countries, fostering collective optimism. Strong leadership is vital to making climate action central to policy debates, highlighting its proven benefits for economic growth, health, and security, while addressing the risks tied to enlargement and non-enlargement.



Enabling specific policy and implementation mechanisms is crucial. Key actions include involving candidate countries in EU climate initiatives, tailoring climate policies to accession countries, identifying mutual opportunities, facilitating effective citizen engagement, ensuring direct benefits from climate action, and strengthening civil society leadership. Beyond strong political leadership, these efforts require collaboration among policy-makers and civil society to effectively link climate action and EU enlargement.



PROJECT BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

Amidst global volatility, the European Union (EU), 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**. This report presents the main findings of the project.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This project was shaped by the insights of over **240 contributors** from more than **140 organisations**, who generously shared their time and expertise—with many carving out time in demanding schedules to participate in (multiple) workshops. **We extend our heartfelt thanks to all.**



We are also **grateful to our partner organisations for their support**: the **Open Society Foundation Western Balkans** and the **European Fund for the Balkans** for hosting workshops, the **Centre for European Reform** for contributing accompanying policy and reform papers, and 89up for their communication support. Thank you.

To the **European Climate Foundation**—who initiated, funded, championed and guided this project—**thank you for your steadfast commitment to a better European future.**

WHY THINKING ABOUT EU ENLARGEMENT IN THE CONTEXT OF CLIMATE ACTION MATTERS

Europe and the world are navigating a **period of overlapping crises and constant change**³, including **geopolitical instability**—highlighted by the volatility of the U.S. administration, Russia’s war on Ukraine, and conflicts in the Middle East. At the same time, **escalating climate change impacts** like heat domes and flooding, which have more than tripled since the 1950s⁴, combine with a **global decline in democracy amid rising authoritarianism**⁵. As pressure mounts for urgent climate action, the European Union (EU), still a global leader in this area, stands at a pivotal junction between two major agendas: the strategic expansion of its membership and the pursuit of ambitious climate goals.

EU enlargement—the integration of new member states—has long been a strategic goal to promote stability, democracy, and economic prosperity across Europe. **Historically, the EU has repeatedly expanded and deepened integration, often in response to major turning points** such as the Balkan wars. In **late-2023, the EU renewed this focus with the adoption of a new enlargement package, setting a clear goal and real prospect of new members joining by 2035**⁶. This development, **driven in part by the war in Ukraine**, carries significant implications for EU policy in areas such as energy, foreign policy, agriculture, fiscal policy, institutional reform, and more.



Security imperative for enlargement

Russia’s 2022 invasion of Ukraine made enlargement a **“geopolitical imperative”**⁷, initially injecting new urgency into the process. However, this momentum is now somewhat fading⁸. As the perceived threat from Russia becomes normalised⁹, public support for enlargement is levelling off¹⁰, narrowing the window of opportunity and leaving **the process “at a critical juncture”**¹¹. In candidate countries, enthusiasm among decision-makers is waning amid slow progress and a resurgence of anti-EU sentiment¹². For many, EU membership is no longer seen as inevitable—especially when framed as an all or nothing offer¹³—and some increasingly view countries outside the EU as their primary allies¹⁴.



The EU’s appeal

Overall, however, EU membership remains highly attractive to many. In the words of the President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, “[t]he dream of Europe extends to the Western Balkans, to Ukraine, to Moldova and beyond”. Public support for accession remains strong in candidate countries¹⁵—highest in Albania, where up to 83% view EU membership positively—and trust in the EU is high¹⁶. The **promise of a “community of destiny”, rooted in shared identity, values, and solidarity continues to resonate widely**¹⁷.

A key driver of public support for joining the EU is the **proven track record of delivering economic benefits to new members**. The bloc has acted “as a **‘convergence machine,’** helping low- and middle-income countries

become high-income countries¹⁸, with per-capita income gains averaging more than 30% in the 2004 new member states in the two decades after accession¹⁹. The impact is already visible in Western Balkan candidates, where **the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA) has yielded significant net gains** in key economic sectors²⁰.



The enlargement process

However, the revised accession process introduced in 2020, which places greater emphasis on fundamentals such as rule of law, fundamental rights, democratic institutions and public administration reform²¹, **has yet to be effectively implemented**. While economic incentives are offered, **meaningful progress on democratic values is not enforced**. The accession criteria remain **overly focused on institutional reform**, often resulting in funds not reaching civil society²².

As a result, progress in the candidate countries has been **undermined by democratic backsliding and nominal reforms**²³. Corruption, economic underdevelopment, weak democracy, state capture, and clientelist networks between political and economic elites persist²⁴. Unless strong economic and political actors, such as independent anti-corruption bodies and market regulators, are established alongside political and economic reforms prior to enlargement, there is a significant risk that enlargement could dilute the EU's core values²⁵.

With the enlargement engine currently idling, some view the Growth Plan for the Western Balkans as Europe's **last chance to remain relevant**²⁶ and revive momentum. If the EU develops the political will to rigorously enforce conditionality and significantly boost civil society engagement²⁷—redirecting funding to support a more organically rooted reform process^{28, 29}—it could simultaneously **promote economic development, political stability, and security** in the region at the scale needed to make enlargement a success.



The complexity of EU decision-making

Solutions have yet to be found for other obstacles to enlargement. The **veto powers of individual member states continue to undermine the credibility and predictability of the EU accession process**³⁰. This may call for an alternative transitional system³¹—such as staged accession—where progress through individual stages is not subject to binary approval votes³². This **gradual integration would also have greater chances of political support** among many of the parties currently in the European Parliament, in particular some of the ascendant right-wing parties³³.

A **wholesale reform of the EU's decision-making processes**—most notably a shift to qualified majority voting (QMV), where decisions require support from a specified percentage of both member states and the EU population—is widely viewed as essential for successful enlargement and shared defence³⁴. The latter is a prerequisite for the former, especially as the bloc's Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) gains importance among waning U.S. security guarantees. Yet, if unanimity remains the rule, the **CFSP risks paralysis**³⁵. Overall, however, making QMV the norm remains contentious. Many parties in the European Parliament oppose major changes³⁶, and several national governments, particularly from smaller Eastern

member states, fear **losing influence to larger member states** and are unlikely to support reform without the **introduction of “safeguards”**³⁷.



Budget reform

Enlargement would also require **increasing the EU budget**, either by expanding or restructuring funding³⁸, or **reducing funds available to existing members**³⁹, for example through comprehensive reforms of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP)⁴⁰. Here, the debate is further complicated by broader discussions on future budgets, including **tensions between fiscal conservatives and advocates of common debt**, Eurobonds for national investments, carbon taxes, and other new revenue sources.



Influence of foreign actors

Foreign actors also affect enlargement. While the **influence of the U.S., China, and Türkiye** (despite Türkiye being a candidate country)⁴¹ **is growing**, Russia’s influence on the Western Balkans—rooted in strong historical ties, soft-power, energy investments⁴², money laundering, and illicit capital flows⁴³—poses a significant threat to regional stability. **Russia is already seen as waging a hybrid war against the EU**, weaponising issues of sovereignty, poverty, and information⁴⁴, with the potential to escalate further⁴⁵.



Enlargement and climate action

EU enlargement systematically extends environmental and climate laws to new member states through binding legal alignment, technical assistance, and monitoring. This impact begins even before accession: as members of the European Environment Information and Observation Network (Eionet), Western Balkan states already collaborate with the EEA⁴⁶, providing vital data to identify critical issues and shape effective policies⁴⁷. The EU also plays a major role in strengthening environmental laws in the candidate countries⁴⁸. **Enlargement will enhance the EU’s enforcement capacity**, halt the export of harmful environmental practices by EU businesses to neighbouring states⁴⁹, and boost economic potential through EU-supported net zero transitions⁵⁰.

Historically, **enlargement has sometimes lowered the EU’s overall climate targets**, e.g., by causing overcompensation in the ETS⁵¹, despite new member states raising their climate ambitions⁵². The Western Balkans Growth Plan requires at least 37% of funds to support climate action, presenting **significant opportunities for sustainable growth**. However, experience with the EU’s 2020 green agenda for the region reveals **persistent gaps in capacity and political will**⁵³.

At the same time, the EU has positioned itself as a global leader in climate action, committing to ambitious goals under the European Green Deal, including climate neutrality by 2050. The Green Deal, now complemented by the Clean Industrial Deal, outlines the blueprint for a green transition that will fundamentally transform European economies and societies, requiring rapid and effective implementation to

meet its goals. While the **EU's climate policy remains robust and the bloc is almost on track**⁵⁴ (by other statements fully⁵⁵) to meet its 2030 target of reducing emissions by 55% from 1990 levels, **sustaining momentum is challenging** due to weaker political commitment compared to the past decade.



The implications of softer climate ambitions for EU enlargement

Currently, however, there are signs that the EU may reduce its climate ambition. The European Commission's "simplification omnibus"⁵⁶, based on its Competitiveness Compass⁵⁷, **reduces sustainability reporting requirements for businesses** and has been criticised for "hollowing out" previous rules, risking weaker reporting, disrupting sustainable finance⁵⁸, making it harder to attract transition capital⁵⁹, and undermining public and investor trust in the EU's climate agenda.

Additionally, the **new rules would exempt roughly 90% of imported goods from the Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM)**⁶⁰. (Set to begin in 2026, CBAM will levy certain imported (i.e., non-EU) industrial goods to offset differences between the EU's ETS carbon price and that of the producing country. Its goal is to prevent carbon leakage and encourage other nations to adopt carbon pricing⁶¹).

Furthermore, opening the EU budget to nuclear energy and natural gas by classifying them as renewable will make it possible to use EU funds—and potentially new financing instruments—to support innovations like Small Modular Reactors (SMR)⁶² as well as conventional nuclear power upgrades⁶³ with investments projected at around €241 billion by 2040⁶⁴.

These developments could have an impact on enlargement by **lowering the environmental entry bar** and relaxing the pace of candidate country investments in low-carbon energy systems, potentially **reducing political friction over adaptation and energy market reforms**. However, this increases the **risk of long-term lock-in effects** with regard to energy infrastructure renewal in candidate countries and could also **dilute the EU's regulatory credibility** and leadership on climate, lowering the bloc's normative pull.



The role of climate targets

Both enlargement and climate policy strengthen the EU's influence in its neighbourhood and on the global stage. As the EU considers admitting new member states—primarily from the Western Balkans and Eastern Europe—it faces the **dual challenge of maintaining political cohesion while advancing its climate commitments**. Integrating new members into the EU framework requires alignment not only with democratic and economic standards but also with ambitious environmental goals. This **intersection of enlargement and climate action brings both opportunities and complexities**, as the EU seeks to balance regional development with a unified climate strategy. Although this intersection was previously overlooked, it is now gaining broader recognition beyond an expert circle.

THE METHODOLOGY: HOW WE ARRIVED AT THE FINDINGS

Between mid-2024 and mid-2025, ECF and Future Impacts hosted a series of **forward-looking conversations with a wide range of experts** on the future of EU enlargement and its implications for climate action through 2035. The aim was to **shed light on this underexplored topic** and to foster co-creative reflection within the European climate community on advancing climate progress today. Rather than purely research-driven, the process focused on **open, direct and personal conversations** among experts, stakeholders and diverse groups within—and beyond—the climate action community.

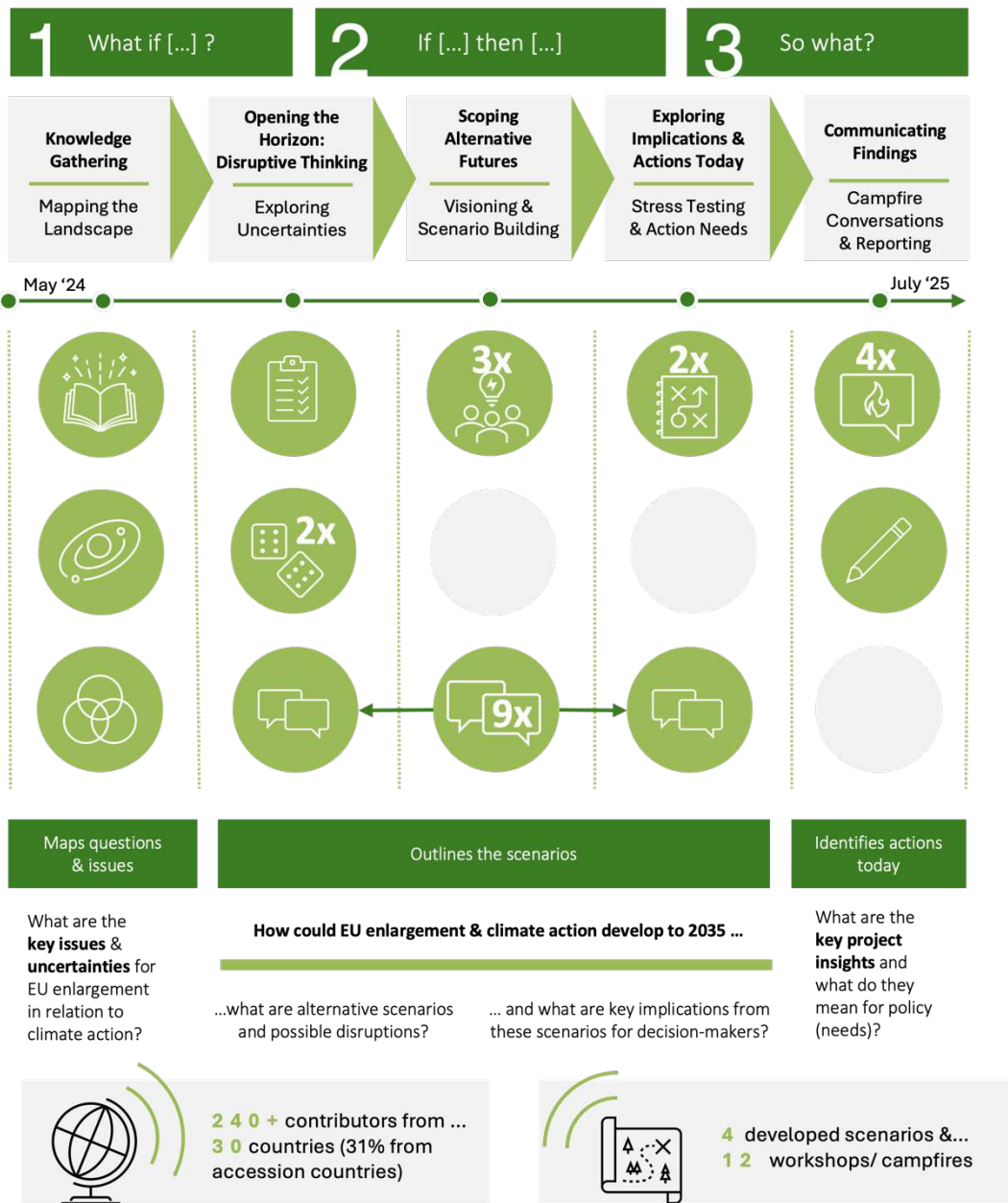
By **anticipating possible alternative European futures**, we developed scenarios **exploring key uncertainties around EU accession, reforms, and political priorities**, assessing their potential **impact on climate action**. These insights aim to equip the climate community with tools to form clear visions and **make informed, future-oriented decisions**.

This report draws on a year of foresight activities, including a **Delphi survey**⁶⁵, two **serious gaming sessions**, five **scenario-focussed workshops**, nine **expert interviews** and four **campfire conversations**⁶⁶. These involved over 240 experts from more than 140 organisations across Europe and beyond, with **31% from accession countries**.

The process began with **identifying high-impact key questions** via a **literature review** and Delphi ranking, which shaped **key factors for scenario development**. Alternative projections for these key factors were combined into **four explorative scenarios to 2035**. Experts refined these narratives through workshops, explored their **implications for climate action**, and **developed strategic actions**, which **were then stress-tested** to ensure robustness across different enlargement pathways.

Complementing this foresight work, the project also produced **four policy papers**⁶⁷ by the Centre for European Reform and established an ongoing ECF-hosted **community of practice to foster collaboration**. This community will remain active post-publication, supporting the climate action community in **implementing the insights and actions identified**⁶⁸.

Figure 1: Project Overview



FOUR SCENARIOS ON EU ENLARGEMENT AND THEIR IMPACT ON CLIMATE ACTION

A WORD AHEAD: WHAT SCENARIOS CAN TELL US ABOUT TODAY

*“When there is a sense of reality [...], then there also has to be something one could call a sense of possibility.”*⁶⁹

Scenarios are a core foresight methodology, widely used in corporate strategy, innovation, and increasingly in public policy and climate action⁷⁰. Notable examples include the Mont Fleur scenarios, which supported South Africa’s transition out of apartheid. Rather than predicting a single future, scenarios explore a range of plausible futures, helping to expand thinking beyond the limited “standard” visions many people hold. In foresight practice—unlike in artistic or purely academic contexts—scenarios focus on **identifying actions today that can promote desirable futures while preparing for alternative outcomes**, helping to prevent or mitigate the impacts of less favourable pathways⁷¹. This is the goal of the scenarios developed in this project.

While there are many additional benefits and positive side-effects of working with scenarios—including enhanced strategic thinking and shared understanding—the core aim of this project was to identify **what the climate action community needs to collectively reflect on regarding EU enlargement**. Specifically, we focused on how enlargement could unfold (or fail to), the implications of these futures for climate action, and what present-day actions could drive effective climate mitigation and adaptation in the EU⁷². This focus guided which scenarios the process explored in depth.

Importantly, the scenarios presented here are not intended to capture the full range of possible EU enlargement pathways in relation to climate action. There are other conceivable futures. Instead, the four scenarios illustrate distinct pathways—including non-enlargement—that would **significantly shape the trajectory of climate action**, for better or worse. Each scenario highlights the potential impacts and aims to challenge expectations and implicit assumptions. They reflect what the expert and stakeholder group identified as futures the climate action community should be prepared for.

While the scenarios themselves stop short of prescribing solutions or answering the “**So what?**” question, the broader process did address this. The following chapter presents the scenarios, actions and strategies identified to help ensure a **positive climate outcome within the context of EU enlargement**.

THE FOUR SCENARIOS AT A GLANCE - AND IN DETAIL

The Blue Scenario: More is Less

By 2035, the EU finds itself stagnating as enlargement, **propelled by pressing security concerns**, proceeds **without adherence to traditional accession standards**. Member states, **increasingly focused on their own national interests**, struggle to find common ground on crucial institutional reforms, policy coordination, and strategies for economic growth. Simultaneously, global shifts in power dynamics foster a **climate of isolationism and protectionism**, undermining international cooperation on both defence and climate initiatives. **Green policies falter amid inadequate funding**, and the EU's decision-making process remains sluggish and fragmented, dominated by national agendas. As **economic and security priorities overshadow environmental goals**, grassroots momentum for climate action dwindles, leaving the EU **unable to progress meaningfully on its green transition**.

The Grey Scenario: Pacemakers and Stragglers

The EU's enlargement strategy focuses on fostering economic growth through a carefully calibrated **staged accession process**, balancing development with integration. In this **multi-tier EU**, a leaner, more agile, and **environmentally driven inner tier** leads the charge in advancing ambitious green policies, which are eventually adopted by the outer tiers. This inner circle becomes a **magnet for green industries and environmentally conscious workers**, while more polluting sectors are pushed to the periphery, resulting in an **uneven ecological landscape**. Meanwhile, NGOs and civil society organisations **champion fairness and equity in the transition, amplifying public support** for enlargement and helping to sustain momentum for the EU's green transformation. On the global stage, despite a widespread international consensus on the urgency of climate action, the legacy of broken climate pacts and fragmented coalitions hampers swift progress as **new international treaties and alliances slowly take shape**.

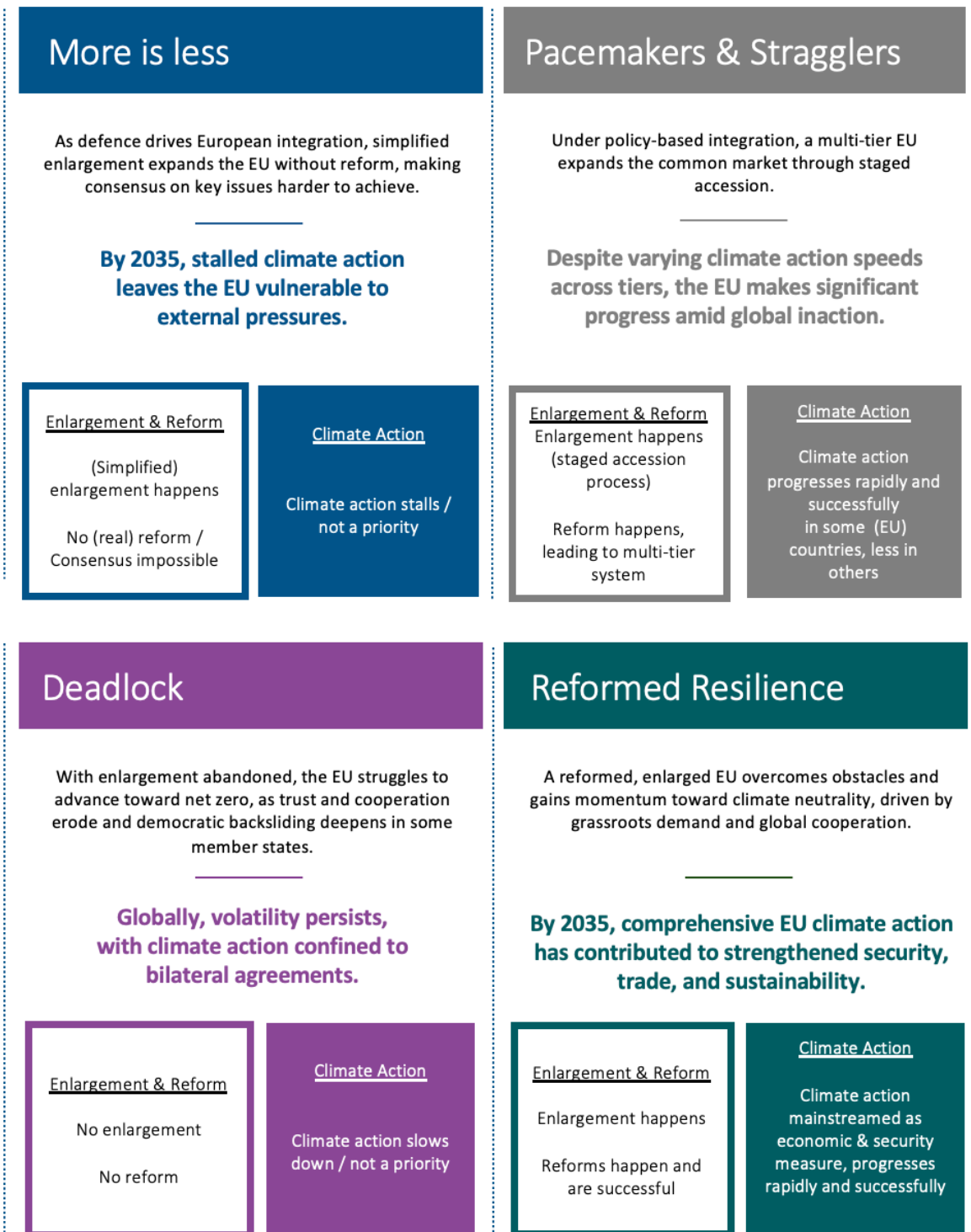
The Purple Scenario: Deadlock

By the mid-2030s, **rising nationalism and populism** have exacerbated divisions within the EU, as global powers increasingly bypass the bloc to strike **bilateral deals with individual member states**, further **fragmenting unity**. **Stalled institutional reforms** and a sluggish enlargement process erode the EU's global competitiveness and **diminish its attractiveness to prospective candidates**. The fallout from **trade wars and a conflict-weakened global economy** places immense pressure on the EU budget, curbing investments in the green transition. Although the urgency of climate action continues to grow, weak international coordination leaves countries to pursue **decarbonisation through isolated national policies and bilateral arrangements**. Within the EU, **trust among member states deteriorates**, undermining collective climate efforts, while the suppression of climate protests stifles public advocacy for stronger environmental policies. In this fractured landscape, **energy independence becomes the primary driver of decarbonisation**, overshadowing a once-promising vision for unified green progress.

The Green Scenario: Reformed Resilience

By 2035, the EU has undergone **successful reforms** that have **streamlined decision-making**, enhanced integration, and sharpened its policy focus. Following an early period of fractured cooperation, global efforts to combat climate change regain momentum, despite the absence of U.S. leadership. A **renewed commitment to EU enlargement**, paired with a more **transparent and structured accession process**, inspires institutional reforms across candidate countries, paving the way for **rapid expansion**. This enlargement invigorates both the green agenda and economic growth, thanks to a larger common market and broad financial reforms. At the heart of this transformation, robust support from NGOs and a surge in grassroots activism **propel ambitious climate action**, resulting in substantial environmental progress across the continent.

Figure 2: Overview of Scenarios



THE BLUE SCENARIO – MORE IS LESS



THE EU AT HOME AND ABROAD: PRIORITISED NATIONAL INTERESTS AND GROWING PARALYSIS

By 2035, the EU has welcomed **seven new member states**—Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Moldova, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia—**through a simplified, accelerated process**. These states leveraged the process to secure significant derogations, while neighbouring EU members extracted further compromises in return for not vetoing accessions.

Looking back, in the mid-2020s the international landscape shifted fundamentally, becoming **more transactional and less rules-based**. Following the change in U.S. government, a chilling effect descended on global relations. **Hostility, protectionism, and isolationism now dominated, national interests were prioritised over international cooperation, including defence**. Fragmentation deepened as other nations followed in the U.S.'s footsteps and withdrew from global organisations, alliances, and agreements.

As defence dominated the agenda, collaboration was limited to security as **member states failed to agree on economic growth priorities**, addressing challenges piecemeal or not at all. As national interests overshadowed European priorities, **policymakers prioritised short-term gains over long-term stability**, often yielding to external pressure. As a result, responses to tariffs and supply chain disruptions remained ineffective.

Internal EU relations rapidly grew more adversarial. Public resentment and competing social and economic interests led to the collapse of the Green Deal. Efforts by right-wing forces, often with U.S., Russian or Chinese backing, to loosen the bloc into a “community of nations” weakened the Union, **allowing foreign adversaries to exploit divisions**. With economic stagnation limiting contributions, debt financing became necessary to expand the budget. **Paralysis took hold** as decision-making centred on short-term gains, leaving **key reforms—CAP, the Clean Industrial Deal, regulatory streamlining, a capital markets union, and new trade agreements—stalled in debate**. Agreement could only be found with regard to large-scale rearmament programs financed by common debt.

Hence, defence emerged as the sole unifying driver of European integration and a key factor in limited economic growth. In the late 2020s, enlargement was prioritised to reduce the geopolitical “grey zone” between the EU and foreign powers, especially Russia. Calls to **fast-track accession for candidate countries** grew louder as other powers played a destabilising role in the Balkans.

In 2025, as **U.S. policy turned more adversarial and withdrew support for Ukraine** after heavily favouring Russia in its initial peace efforts, the EU failed to unite in bearing the full burden of ensuring Ukraine's independence. Ukraine held out briefly but, in a Russia-favoured peace deal, lost sovereignty, ceded territory, and was **barred from NATO and EU membership**. By decade's end, a rearmed Russia threatened renewed aggression, triggering waves of Ukrainian refugees. **Fair distribution efforts faltered**, while disinformation and populist campaigns eroded EU cohesion. Autocratic-leaning leaders defied EU rules, and the Union struggled to connect with its citizens. Green and pro-democracy movements initially persisted but gradually mostly faded amid suppression, politically motivated anti-NGO action, and a flood of misinformation.

CLIMATE ACTION IN 2035: INTERNAL CHALLENGES AND SETBACKS

The EU's **push for a green transition faced significant internal challenges** in an attempt to balance economic growth, energy security, and overall security. While China occasionally aligned with the EU, it became clear by the end of the decade that China's interests focused on boosting exports and establishing a monopoly on green technologies. Finding new climate allies among smaller nations proved to be difficult, and without U.S. leadership on climate issues, **global efforts stalled, delaying the maturation of key technologies.**

Even as green ambition ebbed, some progress was made in the EU, primarily motivated by the 'security dividend' inherent in climate policy. Decarbonisation was achieved in areas linked to energy security, reducing dependency on fossil-fuel-rich external actors to lower economic vulnerability. Most EU and "coalition of the willing" member state funds went into **scaling up existing technologies rather than developing new ones.** Beyond 2030, major clean technology breakthroughs occurred outside Europe as security concerns dominated funding. The Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) remained unreformed, shrinking farmer subsidies and widening power imbalances with processing sectors, especially in new member states, where land speculation and depletion accelerated.

As efforts to widen public-private partnerships failed, infrastructure upgrades stalled, leading to **failures as aging systems struggled with rising demand.** A grassroots push for green investments fractured into local initiatives, which, alongside industry players, took charge of a large share of energy infrastructure, creating a **fragmented decentralisation** with new challenges. **Some new member states advanced rapidly,** but replacing coal with natural gas led to fossil lock-ins and external dependencies. **Electricity markets remained mostly monopolised and reliant on fossil fuels** due to inadequate funding and discounted Russian imports, which maintained leverage over certain EU states.

Despite widespread recognition of the need to transition from fossil fuels amid worsening climate impacts, **public support for climate action remained limited.** Economic and security concerns took priority, fostering a "new Biedermeier" focus on home and family, in some quarters also driven by a right-wing push for traditional gender roles. Those **most affected by the transition received little support,** also leaving many less diversified or peripheral regions in deep recession by decade's end.

THE GREY SCENARIO – PACEMAKERS & STRAGGLERS



THE EU AT HOME AND ABROAD: STRATEGIC EXPANSION AND DIFFERENTIATED MEMBERSHIP

Throughout the 2020s, the **EU adopted policy-based integration**, forming a **multi-speed Europe** inspired by “enhanced” and “permanent structured cooperation.” Under Article 20 of the Treaty on the European Union, a “coalition of the willing” advanced a “core Europe,” much like the early Schengen and Eurozone models. Instead of being stalled by reluctant members, this **agile inner tier drove faster reforms** while sharing a common market, security, and environmental policies with the broader EU. Over time, **successful reforms spilled over to the two outer tiers**, driven by popular demand. The inner tier’s flexibility also helped the EU navigate trade wars and maintain stable supply chains.

Alongside the outer tier, **nine candidate countries** - Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia, Kosovo, Moldova, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia, and Ukraine - **joined the EU, forming an outermost tier**. To prevent market distortions, **balanced derogations delayed access to certain products until standards were met**. The Western Balkans' Common Regional Market, aligned with EU standards, had already **strengthened private sector support for accession** and fostered stability.

Globally, the **world remained fragmented but stable**. The U.S. withdrawal from global cooperation and its unpredictable stance toward former allies led to a geopolitical landscape shaped by shifting alliances, ad-hoc collaborations, and **regional initiatives**. Throughout the 2020s, multilateral coalitions maintained general order, but frequent smaller conflicts forced nations to **act cautiously at home and abroad**.

Having recognised a turning point, EU leaders were unable to agree to what extent they wanted to reimagine EU integration to create the Europe that was now needed. The initially envisioned deepened integration proved to be too ambitious a project, but the **EU shifted focus to expanding its common market, strengthening economic stability, competitiveness, and reducing external dependencies**. Enlargement to the east and Western Balkans became a **geostrategic priority to counter Russian and Chinese influence**. The Staged Accession Model (SAM) accelerated the process with increased funding and a clear roadmap, making **EU membership more attractive to candidate countries**.

The war in Ukraine ended in a stalemate. After its failed pro-Russian peace initiative, the U.S. disengaged, leaving the EU’s inner tier to bolster defence support until an exhausted Russia agreed to settle. **Ukraine remained sovereign, but even after ceding minor territory, the threat of renewed aggression remained**.

Following its accession, **significant EU funds supported Ukraine’s sustainable reconstruction**, allowing for some technological and green leapfrogging, with gradual market access for its agricultural products. However, as funding dwindled, outer-tier countries had less incentive to uphold rule-of-law standards. Shifting political alliances within these tiers enabled them to shield each other from sanctions. At the same time, the EU was more **successful in combating disinformation**, aided by new legal and technological tools in the early 2030s.

CLIMATE ACTION IN 2035: LACK OF A UNIFIED VISION

Despite a fragmented global landscape, climate diplomacy persisted. **While consensus existed on the need for progress**, for funding for emerging nations and for technological collaboration, early action was limited. Driven by the goal of expanding its market standards, the EU's inner tier—and later the broader bloc—worked to build **coordinated climate alliances focused on incremental progress, shouldering some of the responsibilities abdicated by the U.S.** This included expanded clean energy and climate partnerships with developing and emerging nations who increasingly realised their vulnerabilities. By 2035, several international projects were nearing completion, raising hopes for deeper cooperation ahead.

Climate progress within the EU varied. The **inner tier advanced rapidly**, driven by ambitious targets and strong civil society pressure against backtracking. However, without a unified vision, its urgency was not shared by other tiers, leading to frequent economic and social conflicts over environmental policy deadlines.

The outer tiers, constrained by limited funds and competing growth priorities, **struggled to implement green policies effectively.** Resources were spread thin, yet the EU as a whole became greener over the decade. “Dirty” industries shifted to the outer tiers, while **green industries and workers migrated to the inner tier.** Boosted by a tech-driven stock exchange, the inner tier attracted clean tech investment with moderate costs and high returns, **fostering green clusters and decentralised energy systems.**

Agriculture lagged in technological progress, even in the inner tier, where **weak EU policies slowed advancements.** While energy and mobility infrastructures in the inner tier were upgraded and future-proofed and the accession countries used the funds available to build primarily climate-resilient infrastructure, the rest of the **outer tiers remained limited to individual, EU-funded renewable projects.** **Accession countries also benefited from partnerships with inner-tier innovation hubs**, enabling accelerated progress in select areas, though opportunities remained scarce.

Climate action varied in pace and impact, with **differing levels of public support.** In the inner tier, fairness in the transition was a priority, driven by active NGOs and civic engagement, strengthening support for decarbonisation despite its challenges. In contrast, outer-tier populist leaders exploited fairness concerns to stall climate policies, while **foreign disinformation remained a strong influence.**

THE PURPLE SCENARIO – DEADLOCK



THE EU AT HOME AND ABROAD: INTERNAL DIVISIONS AND INSTABILITY

By 2035, the **EU's failure to act cohesively or implement internal reforms** has weakened its competitiveness and diminished its appeal to candidate countries. **Enlargement has stalled**, as member states increasingly wield veto power to extract concessions from accession candidates, discouraging reforms and **dampening interest in membership, while others made enlargement contingent on a deepening of the EU which was never enacted**. Meanwhile, both within the EU and in candidate countries, growing repression has restricted NGOs and civil society, further stifling democratic engagement. As global volatility became the norm, disillusionment spread, and the geopolitical imperative for enlargement appeared to become less urgent.

In the 2020s, Western liberalism and multilateralism faltered following political shifts in the U.S. Several democratic European nations saw **authoritarian actors and regimes emerge**, either temporarily or long-term, while a majority of member states shifted significantly to the right, embracing nationalist policies. With international legal frameworks weakened, quid-pro-quo trade restrictions harmed export-driven economies and drove inflation everywhere. **Competing interests obstructed cooperation** on migration, security, and environmental sustainability, complicating global responses to crises like environmental disasters.

This shift came at a difficult time for the EU. **Internal disagreements stalled major initiatives**, while global powers—especially China, the U.S., and, from 2030, India—along with regional players like Russia and the UAE, **bypassed the EU in favour of bilateral trade and investment deals, further fragmenting the Union** whilst alienating candidate countries' efforts to fulfil accession criteria. Populist leaders in key member states deepened divisions by **prioritising national interests**, courting external financing, and **blaming the EU for failures beyond its control**. Enlargement was postulated to be the wrong answer to the global situation and to overwhelm the Union.

The 2020s became a "lost decade" for many EU member states. The energy price shock from Russia's invasion of Ukraine **drove down living standards and triggered economic downturns**, especially in export-driven nations. Former key budget contributors sought to **renegotiate their financial commitments**, while **high interest rates and opposition to common debt shrank the EU's budget**. This limited green transition funding and weakened leverage over rule-of-law violations. Meanwhile, **sustained high spending on security and defence** further drained resources from long-term investments.

In the East, the protracted war in Ukraine remained a critical concern for EU states bordering Russia and Ukraine. While Russia's economic struggles and internal tensions weakened its war efforts, the **conflict persisted in cycles of escalation and stalemate**. With the U.S. having completely withdrawn after initial and lopsided peace-making efforts failed, the **EU continued to provide limited military aid to Ukraine** to prevent a complete Russian victory.

CLIMATE ACTION IN 2035: COST REDUCTION AS KEY DRIVER

By 2035, worsening climate impacts have made sustainability more urgent than ever, yet **global coordination remains minimal**. Most countries follow independent green policies, prioritising fossil fuel reduction. **International collaboration is transactional**, with smaller nations developing niche innovation hubs to secure technological breakthroughs, leveraging them in deals with major players like China and the U.S.

In the EU, **trust and cooperation among member states have eroded**. While the climate crisis is widely recognised as a threat—worsening migration, conflict, and health crises—there is **no unified push for action**. Crackdowns on progressive dissent have stifled peaceful protests and NGO lobbying, leaving only a few radical, secretive climate movements like "Occupy Fossil" with little mass appeal. A **relentless stream of negative news and disinformation** hampers even small-scale initiatives.

Innovation is business-driven and regionalised, with **green breakthroughs protected by private investors**, delaying progress and increasing costs. Green infrastructure investment remains focused on power generation to reduce external dependencies, while decarbonisation in sectors like construction and transportation has stalled. There is some cooperation with prior candidate countries in the Western Balkans on climate action, but positive outcomes remain limited, in particular because of the involvement of global powers. However, **businesses continue greening operations, primarily to cut energy costs**. In agriculture, despite the lack of full Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) reform, generational renewal and stricter national regulations have helped lower GHG emissions.

Despite limited vocal support for advanced environmental policies, certain aspects—such as energy independence and resource preservation—remain popular. While nationalist policies largely hinder decarbonisation, they have inadvertently driven some climate action. As climate impacts worsen, **public calls for sustainability grow**, but the **lack of a coordinated government approach** leaves those most affected by the transition in many cases without support.

THE GREEN SCENARIO – REFORMED RESILIENCE



THE EU AT HOME AND ABROAD: LEADING REVIVED INTERNATIONAL COLLABORATION

By the turn of the decade, the EU welcomed its first new member states, with others following shortly after. Forerunners Montenegro and Albania were soon joined by Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Moldova, North Macedonia, Serbia, and Ukraine, the latter entering just a few years after the war's end. Prior enhanced collaboration on security had built trust and advanced willingness on both sides, **encouraging key reforms in candidate countries** which were supported by EU capacity building and **clear communication on costs, benefits, and incentives**. Türkiye and Georgia, the latter long stalled by Russian interference, also made significant progress toward membership, while formal proceedings were opened with Canada and Iceland and the UK became an “associate member”.

In the mid-2020s, U.S. global engagement waned and became more erratic. Recognising that if “the centre cannot hold”, volatility and the risk of conflict will increase, cooperation on security and trade between other nations increased and **later expanded to climate action**. After initial hesitation and struggles, the EU found a common voice and purpose, and through internal unity and global action (re-)emerged as a global leader.

Within the EU, the need for increased security had triggered a political sea change. National interests still played a key role, but common purpose brought unity and “true collaboration”. Reform processes were accelerated **to strengthen foreign policy, trade, and leadership** in digitalisation, technology, and ethics. **Qualified majority voting was expanded to cover more areas, limiting unanimity to core national interests**. A “farmer-centric” Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) prioritised ecosystem services, while EU revenue shifted primarily to ‘true own resources.’ Clean industrial and agri-food deals slowly but steadily advanced the circular economy, **reinforcing strategic autonomy and net-zero goals**. The key role of civil society in this process, recognised and emphasised at the beginning of the accession overhaul, brought considerable public support and boosted the influence of grassroots NGO movements.

Enlargement and institutional reform thus strengthened EU unity and purpose. Expanded defence policies, including the European Defence Fund and European Peace Facility, which also evolved and were opened to non-EU nations, enhancing global influence. Reformed trade policies and stricter oversight prevented misuse of EU programs for national industrial policies, boosting credibility. **A more effective regime of sanctions and incentives (“action, not reaction”) considerably lowered rule-of-law violations**. Tougher AI and misinformation regulations, along with stricter oversight of social media—even foreign-based platforms—moderately reduced disinformation and foreign interference. By the late 2020s, **public protests against democratic backsliding** in both candidate and member states gained real support from EU policymakers.

The enlargement process became more participatory, with strong **funding for civil society, digital tools for citizen engagement, greater focus on communities, and inclusive decision-making**. This shift turned public hesitation into **majority support for EU membership** and counterbalanced rising nationalism in the candidate countries with a demand for democracy. A renewed sense of European unity emerged through expanded exchange programs, fostering cross-border engagement.

Russia's aggression, particularly against Ukraine, was contained by a **(near) unified European response**. After U.S. support dwindled, Europe stepped up significantly, while heavy losses, internal strife, and other previously hidden weaknesses forced a weakened Russia to accept a just peace, ending the war in the latter half of the 2020s. The **EU's leadership reaffirmed its role in revitalising global forums**.

CLIMATE ACTION IN 2035: GREEN TRANSITION WITH GLOBAL IMPACT

By 2035, the EU is both **more cohesive and much greener**. Strategic improvements to Global Gateway, better integration of private initiatives and NGOs, and expanded trade networks have **moderately strengthened the green technology base**. Following the U.S. exit from international collaboration, **global progress toward net zero initially slowed**. However, consensus on the need for rapid progress remained. By shifting collaborative efforts toward advanced research and investment rather than solely focusing on emissions reductions, **technology became a key lever of decarbonisation**, reducing dependency on critical raw materials, with additional and considerable innovation in efficiency and solutions coming from military research spillovers.

New civil society movements, emerging in response to growing societal polarisation, became **drivers of forward-looking politics** in the EU. Frustrated by being constantly on the back foot against right-wing dominance, progressive and centre forces united over the twin projects of enlargement and climate action. Involving traditional unifying forces like unions and religious associations, they played a key role in pressuring policymakers to reignite efforts toward climate mitigation and adaptation. As the sense of overwhelm weakened, a 'can do' spirit ushered in new momentum.

With **public funds limited**, financial market reforms and fiscal policy adjustments unlocked new investments. Private business had become sensitised to the fact that early climate action not only equalled a long-term licence to operate but also increased success on the market. The long-overdue **shift away from hidden fossil fuel subsidies**, finally enacted in the late 2020s, freed up national budgets and levelled market conditions. Private financing and international support contributed to Ukraine's slow but steady rebuilding, though **challenges remained**.

Within the EU, power grids were upgraded to fully integrate renewable energy, making **infrastructure more resilient and sustainable** and eliminating the risk of blackouts. Accession countries benefited from structured mentoring and support programs, which **dismantled fossil fuel monopolies and fostered integrated, renewable-focused energy markets**. Decentralised energy infrastructure has strengthened stakeholder buy-in, ensuring that many **citizens directly benefit from green progress**.

NGOs and civil society organisations played a crucial role in spreading easy-to-understand, factual climate information, verifying data, and rebuilding trust. This **push against climate (and other) disinformation** has moderately **increased public support for sustainability efforts** and increased the influence of non-populist,

pro-democracy actors. Across the EU, green mindsets are now widespread, particularly in business and agriculture. The **focus has shifted toward achievable goals, and community-driven action**. Policies centred on fairness have **reduced burdens on vulnerable groups**, with progress still to be made. A carbon fee dividend, or “climate income,” is now paid directly to consumers, helping to offset costs, while reskilling programs have reduced income loss during the transition for many.

Figure 3: Overview Of Key Scenario Characteristics

Aspect	The Blue Scenario: More is Less	The Grey Scenario: Pacemakers & Stragglers	The Purple Scenario: Deadlock	The Green Scenario: Reformed Resilience
Enlargement	Seven new member states, but with significant derogations, focus on security aspect	Nine new member states, staged accession model with policy-based integration, new outer tier	Enlargement process stalled, candidate countries turn away	Eight new member states, others make progress, new candidate countries
Reform	Reforms stalled in debate, standstill/paralysis	Deeply integrated inner tier with high pace of reforms which 'spill over' to outer tiers	No reforms enacted, national reforms impact agriculture	Accelerated reform processes in many areas, widespread introduction of QMV, CAP reform, industrial reform
Climate and environmental policies	Reduced ambition within the EU and globally, security dividend of decarbonisation crucial, no CAP reform, progress in environmental technology outside EU	Global climate action continues, EU with very ambitious inner tier takes leading role, 'dirty' industries migrate to outer tiers, agriculture lags	Reduced funding, no unified action, new technologies protected by private investors	Strengthened EU unity and purpose, advances towards circular economy, upgraded infrastructure, strategic autonomy & net-zero remains key objectives
Structures and budgets	Debt financing, lower contributions due to economic stagnation	Funding of reconstruction in Ukraine reduces transfers / funds available to outer tiers	Reduced national contribution, high rates of interest, lower EU budget	Financial market & fiscal policy reforms unlocked funds, end of fossil subsidies
Security	Defence as driver of European integration, Ukraine defeated, Russian threat	Coalition of the willing for Ukraine, limited/erratic support by U.S., Russia's war ends in stalemate	High spending on defence, Ukraine conflict persists, limited aid from EU	Russia's aggression fails, EU creates common defence open to non-EU nations, revitalised global forums increase security
Competitive-ness	Reduced EU competitiveness	Strengthened competitiveness, reduced external dependencies	Significantly weakened	Shared & unified economic strategy improves competitiveness
Policy coordination	Short-termism, transactional, lack of collaboration	Policy-based integration, long-term view of climate action, intense collaboration	External actors and authoritarian leaders fragment EU, prioritisation of national interests	New unity and consensus, policies closely coordinated with the EU & globally
Decision-making processes	Largely dysfunctional	Multi-speed set-up allows for greater unity, faster decision-making	Internal disagreements, paralysis	QMV accelerates decision-making, processes geared towards long-term impacts
Public support	Limited public support for climate action, economic concerns first	In inner tier, strong civil society backing for reforms and climate policy, much less in outer tiers	Only some aspects (primarily energy independence) of green policies supported, crackdown on progressive dissent	Key role for civic society baked into reform & enlargement processes, boosted influence of grassroots NGOs
External forces / international collaboration	Protectionism, hostility, occasional collaboration	Fragmented, yet stable global landscape, multilateral & regional coalitions	Global shift towards authoritarianism, nationalist policies	Multipolar collaboration, EU as a global leader
Fairness (in the sense of a "just transition")	Low fairness, little support for those affected most	High fairness in the inner tier, fairness concerns in outer tiers exploited to delay climate action	No support for people affected most by transition and climate change	Reduced burdens on vulnerable groups, carbon fee dividend paid to consumers

BENEFITS AND TRADE-OFFS IN THE SCENARIOS

The scenarios show that the events, actions, and decisions shaping each pathway have both benefits and drawbacks for the EU, its member states, accession countries and climate action. These trade-offs and benefits per scenario are detailed in the following section, with a comparative overview presented at the end of the chapter.

TRADE-OFFS IN THE SCENARIO “MORE IS LESS”

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

The key benefit of the “More Is Less” scenario is the rapid **acceleration of EU enlargement driven by the security imperative**. However, this comes at a cost: **accession criteria are diluted**, and **conflicts between national interests dominate** the agenda, narrowing the space for collective action and deeper integration. **Failure to reform** (fiscally, in migration policy, or in upholding rule-of-law principles) lets this dynamic continue unchecked and could **ultimately jeopardize the very goal of the fast-tracked enlargement process**: shared security.

Without reform, the **need for unanimity in key areas** like climate targets, budgetary issues, and foreign policy may persist, **risking paralysis**. The loss of strategic agility would leave the EU **less capable of responding to crises and diminish its global relevance**. A short-term focus on defence, security, and economic stability further **diverts resources from (green) innovation** and infrastructure, **eroding long-term competitiveness and strategic autonomy**. Sacrificing long-term policy goals also diminishes faith in EU leadership and institutions. Failing to support vulnerable populations compounds this effect, **reducing public-backing for long-term initiatives like climate action** and **accelerating the erosion of a shared EU identity**.

TRADE-OFFS IN THE SCENARIO “PACEMAKERS AND STRAGGLERS”

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

In the grey scenario, **spatial inequality between inner and outer tiers** increases, **weakening EU coherence**. As institutional and policy divergence grows, uneven rule enforcement **risks fragmenting EU identity**. The inner tier’s greater agility, particularly in climate action, may position it as a green leader, but at the cost of **less inclusive EU decision-making**. Also, diverging speeds across tiers will likely create functional asymmetries, **complicating governance**. Increased NGO and citizen involvement adds complexity but also strengthens overall public support, which can help offset these challenges.

The concentration of green industries in the “core EU”, coupled with the relocation of polluting industries to the periphery, **risks reinforcing a core-periphery divide**. This may result in both **pollution leakage** and the **rise of a “green elite”** detached from democratic accountability. Meanwhile, **non-green industries in the core may lose competitiveness**, creating a lopsided and **crises-prone economic landscape**. Finally, sustained public mobilisation and transparent communication of all climate action are essential. Without them, **public support might wane or even turn into backlash**, especially if **their benefits are not tangible or distributed equitably**.

TRADE-OFFS IN THE SCENARIO “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.

In the red scenario, national(ist) policies, such as bilateral agreements with foreign actors or failure to agree on an EU budget, **undermine cohesion, shared governance and solidarity**. This **erodes the EU’s global standing** and weakens its ability to influence international events. Avoiding or failing to resolve internal reform conflicts, results in **lost long-term competitiveness**. With no significant investment in green technology or infrastructure, the **EU falls behind in the global market**. As its appeal declines, candidate countries may become **less willing to pursue the reforms needed** to meet the Copenhagen criteria, especially if the risk of individual vetoes remains.

Furthermore, this **loss of attractiveness** also makes **neighbouring countries more susceptible to rival influence**, diminishing the effectiveness of EU security policies. Internally, growing doubts about the EU’s effectiveness could **further reduce consensus**. Climate action is taken up only by willing member states, leading to a **loss of scale and failed cross-border cooperation**. While, focussing solely on energy independence, rather than systemic climate solutions, **risks locking in continued carbon dependency** through narrow, short-term measures.

TRADE-OFFS IN THE SCENARIO “REFORMED RESILIENCE”

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

“Reformed Resilience” assumes rapid, wide-ranging reforms in EU policy-making, a development which might be considered as **infringing on member states’ national autonomy** and could trigger nationalist or **populist backlash**, especially from countries that feel sidelined by the Union’s dominant nations. Since these reforms primarily target

specific decision-making areas, **progress on other reforms, for example CAP, may lag behind public expectations.** Even the well-managed enlargement envisioned here would place tremendous **pressure on EU institutions,** requiring rapid adaptation and capacity-building in new member states. One possible outcome is the **under-servicing of existing portfolios.**

Enlargement would likely act as a catalyst for green growth in new member states, reshaping conditions for both public and private sectors as rapidly as previous financial reforms or the growth of the common market. However, some regions may struggle to **adapt at the necessary pace,** potentially sparking civic resistance. Here, the high degree of NGO and grassroots involvement could complicate governance, with unclear responsibilities on the ground or policymaking that prioritises public approval over substantive outcomes. Finally, a strong focus on climate action may cause **other issues, such as AI regulation or digital transparency, to be overlooked.**

Figure 4: Overview Of Trade-Offs in the Scenarios

Trade-off Categories	The Blue Scenario: More is Less	The Grey Scenario: Pacemakers & Stragglers	The Purple Scenario: Deadlock	The Green Scenario: Reformed Resilience
Enlargement vs. Standards of EU co-operation	Rapid enlargement in which EU governance suffers	Staged accession, but integration is slow-walked	Stalled enlargement reduces attractiveness; veto power dominates internally	Structured and effective enlargement, reformed decision-making
Cohesion vs. Nationalism	EU grows, but cohesion and integration weakened	Multi-tier model reduces inclusivity and legitimacy	Nations act alone, loss of shared governance and solidarity	Cohesion increased, but threat of national backlash
Institutional reform vs. Crisis management	Focus on coping with crisis, while efforts to avoid internal conflict hamper reforms	Successful reform of inner tier keeps pace with developments, but crisis management dominates in outer tiers	Stalled reforms leave EU structurally weak, ad-hoc reaction to events	Reformed decision-making, but slower progress in other areas
Long-term vs. Short-term strategies	Defence and security sideline climate action	Green gains in inner tier, overall climate ambition reduced	Energy independence focus, no systemic climate solutions	Climate takes centre-stage, but regional adaptation may lag
Shared vs. National policy	National agendas dominate; EU loses strategic agility	Integration of inner tier progresses, national agendas dominate outer tiers	Nations act alone, failure to collaborate	Some sovereignty trade-offs, but with stronger cohesion
Civic engagement vs. Top-down governance	Policies are strictly enforced, climate protests ignored, increasing civic pushback and distrust	Civil society involvement plays key role with risk of backlash	Activism suppressed while populism dominates, civic trust erodes	Grassroots action drives climate action, but governance may suffer
Budget vs. Transition financing	Budget constraints reduce cohesion, little support for groups affected by transition	Modest budget growth, inability to maintain transfers increases pressure on periphery	Recession reduces budget, no investment in green innovation, unfair transition	Financial reform unlocks funds, but distribution may create winners and losers
Global cooperation vs. Isolation	The EU's focus on internal issues leads to a loss of its leadership role, increasing global fragmentation	EU leads regionally and is involved in multilateral agreements, global progress slow	Protectionism prevails, EU isolated	Global alliances form with EU in leading role, U.S. at least temporarily absent

***Bold text** highlights significant trade-offs, whereas regular text indicates secondary effects.

STRATEGIC CLIMATE ACTIONS FOR TODAY - WITH ENLARGEMENT IN MIND

FROM FUTURE PERSPECTIVES TO ACTIONS: INSIGHTS FROM THE SCENARIOS

Figure 5: Actions Overview Image





Enlargement is viewed as likely—if not necessary—for ensuring EU security.

Looking across the scenarios, the **link between EU enlargement and climate action remains complex**. Nevertheless, clear conclusions emerged across the project. First, whether enlargement would benefit the EU, its democracies, citizens and climate progress, was sometimes contested, given the **significant demands it would place on existing structures and budgets** (see challenges highlighted in Scenario Blue). However, the vast majority of contributors **emphasised the potential benefits** and increasingly viewed enlargement as likely—if not necessary—for ensuring EU security (as reflected in the Blue, Grey and Green Scenarios).



Enlargement is very likely to benefit climate action.

Furthermore, most contributors agreed that EU enlargement would likely benefit climate action by **extending the reach of the EU's ambitious climate goals** and measures to a larger territory. However, this conclusion **assumes the EU will maintain its climate ambition**—an assumption that cannot be taken for granted amid **shifting political priorities** and growing focus on short-term economic growth, security and Europe's rearmament.



Effective and relatively swift EU reform is essential for successful enlargement.

One of the project's main conclusions is that **EU reform is essential for successful enlargement** (as shown in the more successful pathways of the Grey and Green Scenarios, and the challenges outlined in the Blue Scenario). Success, in this context, means an EU that functions effectively in its expanded form, **delivering tangible and widely perceived benefits** for both existing and new member states and their citizens.



A positive impact of enlargement on climate action depends even more heavily on EU reform.

Meaningful climate progress across an enlarged EU will only be possible with deep reforms— particularly to **unanimity rules** and **qualified majority voting (QMV)**, as well as a **major restructuring of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP)**, especially if Ukraine joins. While such reforms will be difficult to achieve, contributors consistently emphasised that they are both possible and necessary.

If enlargement was to be accompanied by successful reform, it could **lay the foundation for a stronger, revitalised EU and enable more ambitious climate action**—benefiting a larger group of countries and citizens, with **positive global ripple effects** (as illustrated in the Red Scenario).



Enlargement will not be successful without (strong) political will.

A fundamental change like the current enlargement project clearly depends on political will. Recent developments—like the “coalition of the willing” in support of Ukraine—highlight a **window of opportunity to strengthen political will** and advance transformational change.



Democratic backsliding and rising authoritarianism currently undermine support for both the EU and climate action.

Without public support, the EU cannot achieve its core goals—whether ambitious climate action, enlargement, or reform. Weak or wavering support slows progress, while **strong, widespread public backing accelerates change**. Yet, throughout the project’s many conversations and workshops, the **rise of right-wing authoritarianism and democratic backsliding** consistently emerged as central factors shaping many other outcomes. Coupled with misinformation spread through social media and Artificial Intelligence (AI), these forces **heavily shape public opinion**.

WHAT IS TO BE DONE?

This brings us to the **key question: So what?** What actions can be taken today to make desirable pathways more likely, or prevent or reduce the negative impacts of less desirable ones? Which high-level interventions can accelerate climate action in a potentially enlarged EU—while also benefiting the current Union? Bringing the above considerations together, it’s clear that action is needed on four levels to drive momentum towards an enlarged, climate-focused Europe:

- Reimagining the **EU’s foundational logic**
- Establishing **climate action as a core, non-negotiable, EU priority**
- **Demonstrating that climate action is essential to security and economic stability**
- Enabling specific **policy and implementation mechanisms** by policy and decision-makers and by civil society organisations



Reimagining the EU’s Foundational Logic

Some workshop discussions and expert reflections highlight the **need for fundamental changes in how the EU operates**. While this project does not aim to propose definitive solutions to such high-level challenges, identifying the key questions they raise can help spark essential debate.

1. *Is the EU's reliance on regulatory power the best it can do?*

Since its inception—rooted in post-war reconciliation and collaboration—the EU has evolved into a **predominantly regulatory body**. Its legal and administrative systems translate policy into national, regional, and local decisions, resulting in a **successful highly technocratic mode of operation**. However, rising global volatility, accelerating climate change, and a shift toward a more transactional culture of policy-making have put the **effectiveness of this approach into question**. The EU now appears to need more hard or hybrid tools to project power abroad. Domestically, uneven rule enforcement, driven by nationalist currents, and growing public disillusionment suggest that **a more inspirational, unifying refocus may be required**.

One path forward is to **double down on regulation**. Here, the EU's capacity and leverage, the so-called “Brussels effect”, is strongest. By **providing a stable, rules-based business environment** within a potentially expanding common market, the EU could enhance its global appeal. **Stricter enforcement of rule-of-law and fiscal standards** could also strengthen internal cohesion and renew a shared sense of purpose.

In the longer term, a **strategic focus on innovation and sovereignty**, particularly in the digital domain, could reignite a broader European movement. The EU is already moving towards stronger foreign and defence policies and exploring ways to **reduce dependence on others in key industrial sectors**. With a more balanced mix of economic, technological, and strategic power, and a clearer, more unified voice and foreign policy, Europe could **inspire as a global force for good**.

2. *What could lie at the heart of a renewed European vision?*

Since its early days, trade and industrial policy have been deeply embedded in the EU's foundations. They were seen as a way of **fostering interconnectedness and peaceful interactions between European countries**. Rooted in principles of international competition and comparative advantage, they have long shaped how member states interact—offering a seemingly **rational framework for cooperation**. Yet this model often fosters a culture of **negotiated economic advantage** rather than a **shared commitment to common goals**. While effective in stable times, it can quickly give way to national self-interest when under strain. There is an opportunity to reinvigorate the European project by refreshing its very **vision to inspire a renewed European belief in the EU as a positive force**.

A new European vision could instead be **grounded in a spirit of collective (realistic) optimism**—one that transcends narrowly defined national economic interests, recognises the systemic nature of current policy challenges and fosters genuine solidarity. Addressing the current climate crisis supports intergenerational justice, affirms global responsibility, and reflects strong democratic legitimacy, with a clear majority of **EU citizens strongly supporting climate action**⁷³, and could thus be a **pillar of such a new spirit**.



Establishing Climate Action as a Core, Non-negotiable, EU Priority

Against the backdrop of these big-ticket concerns, the specific policy and implementation actions outlined in the next section depend on **climate action remaining a core EU principle**. The effects of climate change are already being felt and threaten European citizens' wellbeing. In addition, the EU is a long-standing actor in not only developing climate policies and innovative implementation mechanisms, but also an investor in measures designed to deliver climate change mitigation and adaptation. As a result, the **EU has emerged as a leader in the field**⁷⁴ and is heavily invested in associated technology and business opportunities. These have the potential to make a **substantial contribution to the EU's economic prosperity**⁷⁵.

However, Europe's commitment to climate action is increasingly under pressure. **Shifting political priorities**—toward short-term economic growth, security concerns, and Europe's rearmament—mean that sustained **focus on climate cannot be taken for granted**. The hard truth is that even if a renewed vision sparks a revitalised European movement, efforts will be needed to **ensure climate action stays central to that movement**.

Moreover, it is insufficient for climate action to guide decision-making within the EU **if harmful activities are simply shifted outside its borders**. The EU's commitments to clean technology, emission reductions, a circular economy, and minimum labour standards can only be truly effective if the triple bottom line is applied to all its resource consumption. Without this, the **EU risks being green internally while offloading negative impacts elsewhere**. A broader perspective is essential to achieve genuine climate progress—one that **considers how EU policies and resource consumption affect its neighbours**, from candidate countries in central Europe to trading partners beyond, as well as global effects more generally. This is essential not only for ethical reasons and the long-term success of climate action, but also **to enhance global security**.



THE ROLE OF LEADERSHIP IN CONNECTING CLIMATE, SECURITY AND STABILITY

It is essential that political leaders take responsibility for **framing the climate action debate in a credible and convincing way**, focusing on **linking climate action to security and economic stability**.

Currently, geopolitical volatility means that **security and defence dominate policy discussions** and the enlargement conversation. This risks side-lining climate action priorities and budgets. Political decision-makers across all governance levels struggle to champion climate action and European unity effectively. This is problematic because **strong leadership is crucial to harness positive momentum toward climate action**.

The EU's goal of strategic autonomy highlights the importance of shared climate action, which significantly contributes to **resilience, safety and security**—benefiting both member states and accession countries. Achieving this requires **simple messaging combined with strong political will and brave leadership**.

Political leaders have an opportunity to set the tone by **championing ‘strategic autonomy’**. Doing so promotes a positive vision of the EU ‘as a resilient and forward-looking actor in an increasingly competitive global landscape’⁷⁶. This vision can help steer momentum towards desirable outcomes, and **foster a new spirit of collective, realistic optimism**.

Alongside this, a fundamental refresh of the enlargement conversation could emphasise the **proven links between stability, democracy, economic prosperity, and climate action**⁷⁷. In the context of enlargement, the debate must **openly address the costs and risks of both enlargement and non-enlargement**. Non-membership, for example, has allowed ‘low levels of economic development, captured states, eroding democracy, and growth of dependencies on authoritarian third countries’⁷⁸ to flourish—all of which threaten climate action.

Climate action needs to be a central lens in policy dialogues among EU institutions, member states, businesses, civil society, and the media. The key impetus to **make climate action an essential part of all these debates** must come from political leaders.

By drawing on a **fact-based discourse**, political leaders can foster a truly democratic debate around climate action. Evidence shows that ‘well-designed **climate policies can deliver stronger economic growth** than business-as-usual pathways’ and drive ‘progress on health, energy security and access, and poverty reduction’⁷⁹.



ENABLING SPECIFIC POLICY AND IMPLEMENTATION MECHANISMS

The foresight process identified several key action areas that could shape the future of climate action in the context of EU enlargement. Beyond strong political leadership, these specific actions involve different target groups, each playing a vital role in linking climate action and enlargement. The following sections outline these roles for policy and decision-makers, and civil society organisations respectively.

BY POLICY AND DECISION-MAKERS - ESTABLISHING SUPPORTIVE LEGAL AND INSTITUTIONAL FRAMEWORKS

For political leadership to be effective, **swift reform and at times unorthodox (inclusive) policy solutions are needed**. The EU must carefully coordinate institutional and policy measures to create the structural conditions that keep both member states and accession countries committed to shared climate goals.

Involving candidate countries in EU climate initiatives provides a valuable opportunity to build shared understanding around the policy levers that drive effective climate action.

As the EU moves forwards with clear and predictable climate targets, many of which will become legally binding for candidate countries, **early engagement is essential**. Translating these high-level targets into sectoral and technology-specific actions is complex. It requires well-designed, effectively implemented policies, supported by capacity to coordinate diverse tools and mechanisms across policy areas. In this context, **involving candidate countries in policy development and decision-making processes** becomes critical to **ensuring ownership and alignment**.

One effective way to strengthen buy-in and build capacity is to **intensify two-way dialogue** between the EU and candidate country policy-makers. Existing structures such as the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans, the Energy Community, and the Berlin Process provide solid platforms for coordination. These can be expanded by **offering predictable, performance-based participation for candidate countries in key mechanisms** like DG Climate committees, the EU ETS, electricity market governance, and other bottom-up initiatives. Such engagement would help **accelerate policy learning and the transposition of EU best practice** into domestic reforms in candidate countries.

As an initial step, candidate country **involvement in targeted, micro-level activities**, such as with the EU Agency for the Cooperation of Energy Regulators (ACER) or the Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM) should be increased. This would help **transfer technical knowledge, share good practices, and build familiarity with EU climate governance**. Proponents of fully integrating Western Balkan countries into the ETS, for instance, highlight the precarious state of their power sector. They argue that revenues from the ETS could eventually serve as collateral for investment in renewable energy⁸⁰. Moreover, gradual engagement in mechanisms like the ETS could support the development of a structured, merit-based roadmap, turning institutional participation into a strong incentive for reform⁸¹.

To support this broader agenda, policy-makers can act today by:

1. **Communicating a clear, compelling narrative on the benefits of climate action**, including increased economic opportunity, energy security, and regional soft power, to build domestic support for transition activities.
2. **Prioritising functional integration in key areas**, even when political integration may lag, to create forward momentum and avoid fragmented efforts.
3. **Establishing robust Monitoring, Reporting, Verification, and Accounting (MRVA) frameworks** in candidate countries, including local-level tracking, to ensure transparency, monitor implementation, and enforce climate obligations.

Notes on relevance for other actors: As architects of EU climate initiatives, EU policy-makers must lead efforts to deepen engagement. But success also depends on active involvement from counterparts in candidate countries and a wide group of civil society actors. Each particular mechanism operates within a specific context, requiring tailored engagement—whether from electricity market players such as grid operators or from local energy communities.

Adopting a tailored approach to each accession country's climate policies will be essential.

To maintain credibility, the EU must **uphold strict climate conditionality** in the accession process and **enforce standards** under the “Green agenda & sustainable connectivity” cluster (Chapters 14, 15, 21, and 27). Chapter 27, “Environment and Climate Change” is **particularly demanding for candidate countries** due to its complexity, high financial requirements, and the need for strong inter-institutional coordination⁸². Progress tends to be strongest in areas where the EU offers **focussed political support** and **engages in close, country-specific collaboration**⁸³. Broader analyses of international climate partnerships also show that **tailoring action plans to each partner country** is a key success factor⁸⁴.

Hence, EU-candidate country interactions should **go beyond the standard technical steps** of approximation, chapter opening/closing, etc. and **adopt a more bespoke, merit-based approach to climate conditionality in accession talks**. This includes carefully assessing gaps between legislative alignment and actual enforcement and analysing implementation across all sectors and levels of public administration. Developing a **systematic and comprehensive understanding** of an accession country's economic and energy profile, the dynamics of civil society engagement, and its capacity-building activities can help decision-makers **identify specific climate action needs and opportunities**. Establishing a climate task force in each accession country, working closely with the Directorate-General for Enlargement and the Eastern Neighbourhood (DG ENEST) and the Regional Cooperation

Council (RCC), offers a pathway towards **developing a shared understanding of what a tailored approach might look like for the respective country.**

Channelling and tailoring Technical Assistance and funding to specific candidate country needs can further help embed clear climate goals in candidate countries' policy-making approaches. Actively **supporting progress to align with EU standards** while **monitoring tangible outcomes** would be a key priority for such assistance. This can support a holistic needs assessment and the identification of ways to **create incentives for candidate country governments to engage.**

The mechanisms deployed need to deliver a **detailed understanding of needs and constraints while also garnering support**, such as from public authorities at different governance levels or businesses. The partnership principle as laid down in the European Code of Conduct on Partnership⁸⁵ provides a **suitable framework to embed a cooperative spirit in interactions between EU and candidate country** policy-makers and structure the engagement of key stakeholders. Embedded in the Instrument of Pre-Accession (IPA), it has already come to characterise discussions related to welfare policies⁸⁶. A thorough understanding of the **specific civil society dynamics in each accession country** can be harnessed to **translate the partnership principle into tangible interactions.**

To support this broader agenda, policy-makers can act today by:

1. **Establishing bilateral partnerships** between accession countries and specific EU member states to build long-term relationships and foster a shared sense of responsibility for progress.
2. **Developing joint mitigation and adaptation strategies** through close collaboration and knowledge exchange, particularly in areas like climate resilient infrastructure and water management.
3. **Prioritising climate cooperation as a stabilising force**, ensuring that engagement continues even when candidate countries face democratic setbacks. Instead of punitive approaches, sustained support should aim to empower citizens and institutions to re-engage with democratic values, acknowledging that this may require involvement in sensitive internal processes.

Notes on relevance for other actors: While the Directorate-General for Enlargement and the Eastern Neighbourhood (DG ENEST) will have a key role to play in facilitating and normalising such an approach, support from other European Commission Directorates is required. To make the approach effective, active participation from national, regional and local administrations, as well as civil society actors on the ground is essential.

Identifying concrete mutual economic opportunities linked to climate action in accession countries offers a key lever to build momentum towards climate action.

Successful climate action is closely bound up with **economic restructuring and a transformation of energy systems**. This brings important challenges and requires substantial investment, but the Green Agenda also offers opportunities for ‘economic convergence’⁸⁷. In the face of competition from other players (such as the Chinese Silk Road interest in the Western Balkans), **binding accession countries to EU climate goals therefore requires the identification of mutual economic benefits**. The New Growth Plan for the Western Balkans illustrates how the green transition might present opportunities for policy-makers to build regional cooperation.

Recognising that climate action must span borders and sectors, decision-makers will need to develop a **detailed understanding of individual countries’ market structures to identify the key levers driving transformation** in each accession country. The example of Ukraine illustrates how forces pulling in different directions need to be orchestrated: The country is a global agricultural powerhouse where large-scale agribusiness with strong dependence on the use of carbon-intensive fertilizers play an important role⁸⁸. At the same time, its considerable potential for renewable energy has already led to investments (including financial support from the EU) to take advantage of economic opportunities from exporting energy to the EU⁸⁹.

In particular, **opportunities for renewable energy ‘leapfrogging’**, that is instances where decarbonisation can potentially lead to the adoption of very different and more advanced models compared to current member states, hold **potential for mutual economic advantage**. Considering mutual advantages from innovation collaborations around climate goals will thus warrant particular attention by policy-makers. Examples include drawing on Western Balkan countries’ experience with reconciling hydropower with broader sustainability objectives, or the cooperative development of a genuine EU electrical grid with integrated storage capacity that offers cross-border connectivity⁹⁰.

Clearly, **substantial infrastructure investment will be needed**. Investment programmes would ideally support multilateral cooperation through dedicated EU development initiatives and bilateral relationships. The Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) will be a key instrument in this context to ensure that sufficient funding is available to support such endeavours. This might include a **role for EU financial institutions** such as the European Investment Bank (EIB) or the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD). Similarly, it would be worth **considering how EU funding could be deployed more effectively**, e.g., merging Cohesion and Accession funds to allow cross-border cooperation with the ability to deliver tangible change in key climate action areas of activity.

To support this broader agenda, policy-makers can act today by:

1. **Engaging regional leaders** to recognise the green transition as a unique economic opportunity, helping to build demand for climate action within accession countries' public administrations.
2. **Linking economic incentives with democratic progress** to ensure that institutions essential for public spending and investor confidence remain effective, funds are not misused, and social consensus is maintained.
3. **Aligning project scope and priorities** with available funding and administrative capacity, while creating strong framework conditions to attract private green investment.

Notes on relevance for other actors: Political leaders and European policy-makers can set the tone and create a supportive framework for emerging market opportunities. However, with the focus on maximising investment potential, success ultimately relies on strong buy-in from private sector entities.

BY CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANISATIONS - PROVIDING DISTRIBUTED LEADERSHIP AND FACILITATING CITIZEN ENGAGEMENT

For climate action messages to truly resonate and policies to be effective, citizens must actively engage with decisions that affect them and experience tangible benefits first hand. Civil society organisations such as NGOs and other institutions play a crucial role in fostering this engagement.

Civil society organisations can facilitate effective citizen participation grounded in a resilient information environment and inclusive of diverse communities.

Amid today's geopolitical and economic volatility, **securing public support is essential** to drive an enlargement process that builds lasting momentum for climate action. Depolarisation plays a key role: when climate action is perceived as the agenda of only one political side, it becomes harder to sustain public support, as communication between opposing narrative communities breaks down⁹¹. Thus, it is clear that 'Citizens' buy-in will be essential to ensure that Europeans feel a sense of ownership when it comes to making hard choices and co-determining the future of their continent' including 'pro-actively facing fundamental transformations'⁹². Citizen participation, drawing on a resilient information environment, therefore has a crucial role to play in facilitating democratic discourse and garnering bottom-up support for EU climate objectives.

Effective citizen participation requires **investment in appropriate infrastructures, competencies and capabilities**—in EU member states as well as candidate countries. With support from a renewed EU commitment

to democratic discourse⁹³, civil society organisations could expand citizen participation by **providing accessible information and expertise, especially to marginalised communities**. The media and academia can provide research, accurate data, analysis, assessments and projections for fact-based information on climate action and enlargement. However, they often lack the capacity and resources to ensure accessibility and credibility for different audiences. It is a plurality of civil society organisations with **credibility and reach into different segments of society** that can connect decision-makers, academia, the media and citizens—from grassroots activists to large NGOs.

Capacity development for citizens and civil society organisations, such as improving fundraising capabilities, fostering networking and inclusion of marginalised communities, and strengthening climate expertise in candidate countries, is **essential to support and build a resilient information environment that upholds information integrity**. This also needs to be backed up by an **appropriate legal and institutional infrastructure**. As of today, ‘EU legislation and common standards on [domains such as civil society and the media] are thin’⁹⁴. Instruments here might include insisting on the direct funding of civil society organisations, as well as pushing back against any attempts to intimidate or curb accountability, transparency, media freedom and pluralism.

Ramping up work to effectively **detect and respond to mis- and disinformation and better understand processes of opinion-making** is a further vital precondition of this action. Robust watchdog and communication activities in collaboration with a diversity of civil society actors can help **tackle any attempts at disinformation and establish new forms of opinion-building**.

To support this broader agenda, civil society organisations can act today by:

1. Proactively engaging marginalised communities and minority groups by **strengthening climate literacy initiatives** among these groups and encouraging their active participation.
2. Developing **strong national, regional, and local narrative and communication strategies**, linking environmental reform to economic growth, public health, and everyday quality of life to help mobilise broad societal support—even in the face of limited funding.
3. Communicating effectively to **tackle perceived double standards**, framing the green transition in terms of **security and resilience** and **acknowledging potential drawbacks openly** to foster long-term public trust.

Notes on relevance for other actors: Civil society organisations are best placed to lead in citizen participation, but political leaders must also set the tone, and policy-makers need to play an essential role in strengthening formal and inclusive participation mechanisms. The EU upholding conditionality around essential democratic guardrails so as not to forfeit the regulatory power that is required to protect a resilient information environment is a foundational requirement for civil society to come into its own with regard to effective citizen participation.

Civil society organisations play a crucial role in ensuring citizens directly experience the tangible benefits of climate action.

When identifying mutual economic opportunities from climate action between the EU and accession countries, it is important to **clearly show how citizens will directly benefit**. Targeted investments will need to **draw on co-operative approaches and close working relationships** with civil society actors with reach into diverse communities including local government, SMEs, energy communities and relevant think tanks. CSOs can play a key role in communicating the tangible benefits of climate action by **supporting and promoting visible improvements**, such as the creation of green public spaces, flood defences, or upgrading public transport, possibly financed through EU pre-accession instruments.

They can **champion the development of decarbonised local energy systems** that reduce household energy costs⁹⁵, cut emissions, and create local jobs, while **promoting models of community ownership**⁹⁶. CSOs can also **facilitate community involvement** in the phase-out of coal by leading inclusive visioning processes, supporting Just Transition planning, and ensuring that affected populations are part of designing and implementing green solutions that improve quality of life⁹⁷.

Increasing **support for citizens to make changes to their everyday practices** with a bearing on climate goals will also be important. Civil society organisations are well placed to help **design and deliver respective mechanisms and programmes**. These might include documenting success stories from existing member states, funding support programmes, public campaigns, and peer learning and knowledge exchange programmes. **Recognising the pivotal role employment plays** in facilitating a Just Transition, actively creating local jobs through, for instance, promoting and supporting community energy, improving urban management and generally working closely with trade unions and local SMEs to **secure support for changes in local policies** are further essential ingredients in making this happen.

Working closely with civil society actors means empowering them to **scrutinise and shape the fiscal and regulatory mechanisms** that determine how the **benefits of climate action are distributed**. This includes advocating for fair resource taxation, ensuring revenues support local and environmental goals, and promoting industrial policies that balance competitiveness with strong labour standards, rather than defaulting to deregulation or flexibilisation⁹⁸.

To support this broader agenda, civil society organisations can act today by:

1. **Leading and facilitating green community initiatives**, such as locally-owned PV installations, allowing citizens to directly benefit from the transition while strengthening public support and ownership of climate policies.
2. Collaborating with other stakeholders, particularly business leaders, to **align local and regional economic development with visible climate benefits** for citizens, such as improving local employment and environmental conditions (air quality, etc.).
3. **Creating (digital) platforms for citizen innovation**, such as crowdsourcing everyday solutions and co-developing projects with local institutions like schools, to help empower communities and generate locally grounded climate action.

Notes on relevance for other actors: Civil society organisations' play a crucial role in connecting with communities to ensure citizens experience tangible benefits from climate action. However, these efforts rely on an environment that enables benefits in the first place. This requires political leaders to create supportive conditions, thought leaders to provide analysis and expertise, responsive policy-makers to develop and implement appropriate legislation, and diverse public and private actors to carry out targeted actions.

To maximise the benefits of climate action in the context of enlargement, civil society leadership must be strengthened and supported.

Advancing climate action while upholding the European Green Deal's democratic commitments requires delivering an ambitious, interconnected programme of work. This will only be possible with **strong and trusted distributed leadership throughout society**. Yet, many leaders feel overwhelmed or even paralysed by the multiple challenges they face in a volatile environment. Leaders in the private sector⁹⁹ and wider civil society organisations such as foundations, NGOs, community organisations, etc. often lack some of the crucial capabilities needed to confront current challenges¹⁰⁰. Combined with rapid changes in the CSO environment and strong dependence on foreign donor support in the current candidate countries¹⁰¹, **leaders are struggling to powerfully champion climate action and European unity**.

Civil society leaders, beyond organised civil society groups and in all relevant societal spheres, need to develop the **skills, tools and expertise to provide effective climate leadership** and **set the tone for climate action in the context of EU enlargement**—in a situation of polycrisis. Crucially, this requires **innovation in democratic governance and representation**, particularly with a view to developing and embedding deliberative formats that rely on citizen engagement¹⁰². Key stakeholders such as experts in civil society organisations, think tanks and academia, social movements, grassroots and community leaders, as well as political foundations and parties are important actors in **championing an approach to sustainability transitions that considers whole socio-ecological**

systems, including not only their technological and legal aspects, but also their societal ramifications¹⁰³. All of these would therefore **benefit from proactively building their leadership capacity**.

Building bridges between key advocates for climate action and those focused on enlargement will be essential for **identifying common ground and developing shared agendas**. This approach can also **draw on previous experience** with measures to strengthen civil society in candidate countries in an attempt to ‘safeguard against the backsliding of reforms’, e.g. through the Civil Society Facility¹⁰⁴. Analyses suggest that an emphasis could usefully rest on **working towards harmonised messaging and joint actions** to further embed a role for civil society organisations in candidate country policy-making¹⁰⁵. A shift towards **transnational learning and exchanges between activists** from different enlargement rounds is a suitable means to truly empower leaders in civil society organisations to drive change¹⁰⁶.

Practically speaking, this might take the form of **participating in twinning programmes** at the local level or secondments that could **support mutual learning and generate momentum for reforms** in the context of EU enlargement. Similarly, **formal and informal education programmes and nurturing increased collaboration** including joint fundraising efforts among different actors all have a part to play in **fostering integrated leadership and advocacy** particularly for civil society actors. Ultimately, leadership must be embedded at all levels to link grassroots change in all key areas—from community energy to agricultural practices—to EU decision-makers. This is essential to prevent formal enlargement processes operating in isolation, which could weaken real political momentum for embedding climate action in candidate countries’ accession efforts.

To support this broader agenda, civil society organisations can act today by:

1. **Advocating for directing funds** toward civic actors in cases of democratic backsliding to ensure grassroots organisations remain operational.
2. **Building local capacity and skills** in policy analysis, climate negotiations, and campaigning, while providing resources and institutional support to local governments.
3. **Facilitating networking and coalition-building** by hosting regional forums and conferences that connect civil society organisations with policy- and decision-makers.

Notes on relevance for other actors: Civil society leadership is a key precondition for developing effective, innovative responses to today’s overlapping crises. In isolation, however, without wider leadership capacity—particularly from local and younger politicians and decision-makers—its impact remains limited. At the same time their leadership capacity is also under strain and must be supported.

OUTLOOK: WHAT'S NEXT?

Developing scenarios and identifying actions mark not an end, but the **start of a new phase** in foresight projects. This is especially true here, given the **high volatility of factors shaping enlargement and climate action**—such as ongoing U.S. and EU efforts toward a peace deal in Ukraine. This underscores the need for a close **monitoring of signals of change** and tipping points. The **scenarios presented here can be a tool for this monitoring** and should be regularly updated with new insights and developments.

Beyond monitoring, the focus must shift to **implementing insights** as well as **continuing and deepening the conversation**. The **actions outlined here offer a starting point for any organisation or individuals within the climate action community** to assess what they can contribute and take immediate steps on. Most identified actions will require **a concerted effort from many actors within and beyond the climate action community**. We hope to see further collaborative initiatives emerge, building on those already fostered through this foresight process. The community of practice hosted by ECF serves as a springboard for this ongoing engagement and cooperation¹⁰⁷.

ANNEX

OVERVIEW OF WORKSHOPS



 Delphi Survey July – August 2024 online	 Implications & Actions Workshop 05.03.2025 in Brussels, Belgium
 Delphi Campfire 10.07.2024 online	 Actions and Stress-Testing Workshop 15.04.2025 in Skopje, North Macedonia
 Foresight (Serious) Gaming Session 17.09.2024 in Cologne, Germany	 Campfire Conversation 1 06.05.2025 online
 Foresight (Serious) Gaming Session 11.10.2024 in Tirana, Albania	 Campfire Conversation 2 23.05.2025 in Skopje, North Macedonia
 Scenario Building Blocks Workshop 29.10.2024 in Cologne, Germany	 Campfire Conversation 3 03.06.2025 online
 Scenario Visions & Narratives Workshop 26.11.2024 in Paris, France	 Campfire Conversation 4 16.-18.06.2025 in Brussels, Belgium
 Scenario Outlines Workshop 12.11.2024 online	 10 Expert interviews online

CONTRIBUTORS AND WORKSHOP PARTICIPANTS



*Ages and genders assumed in most cases.

ABOUT FUTURE IMPACTS



Future Impacts has been designing and implementing future-oriented processes for organisations and businesses since its founding in early 2015. Its goal is to identify actionable strategies for forward-looking decision-making today, with a focus on sustainability, diversity and inclusion. Future Impacts carries out foresight projects for a wide range of clients, including major corporations, European and German government ministries, the City of Cologne's administration, research agencies such as EUDA, EIGE and FRA, and academic institutions. Future Impacts also serves as the German hub of the Millennium Project. Key publications include *Work 2050* and scenario studies on the future of the circular economy in Europe for EU-OSHA.

For more information, see <http://www.future-impacts.de>.

ABOUT ECF



The European Climate Foundation (ECF) is a major philanthropic initiative working to foster the net-zero transition and ensure a healthy, thriving planet for current and future generations. They support over 700 partner organisations to drive progress towards the goals of the Paris Agreement, promote practical policymaking in response to the climate crisis, and broaden political and public support for climate action. ECF strive for a positive, people-centred, and socially responsible climate transition in Europe and around the world.

For more information, see <https://europeanclimate.org/>

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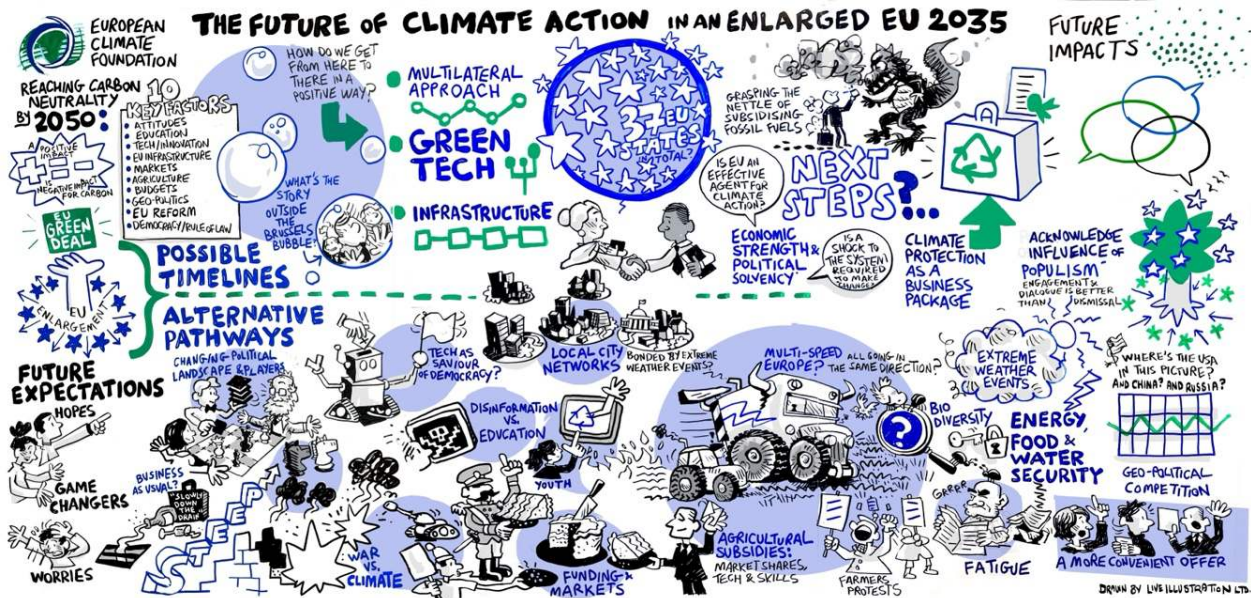
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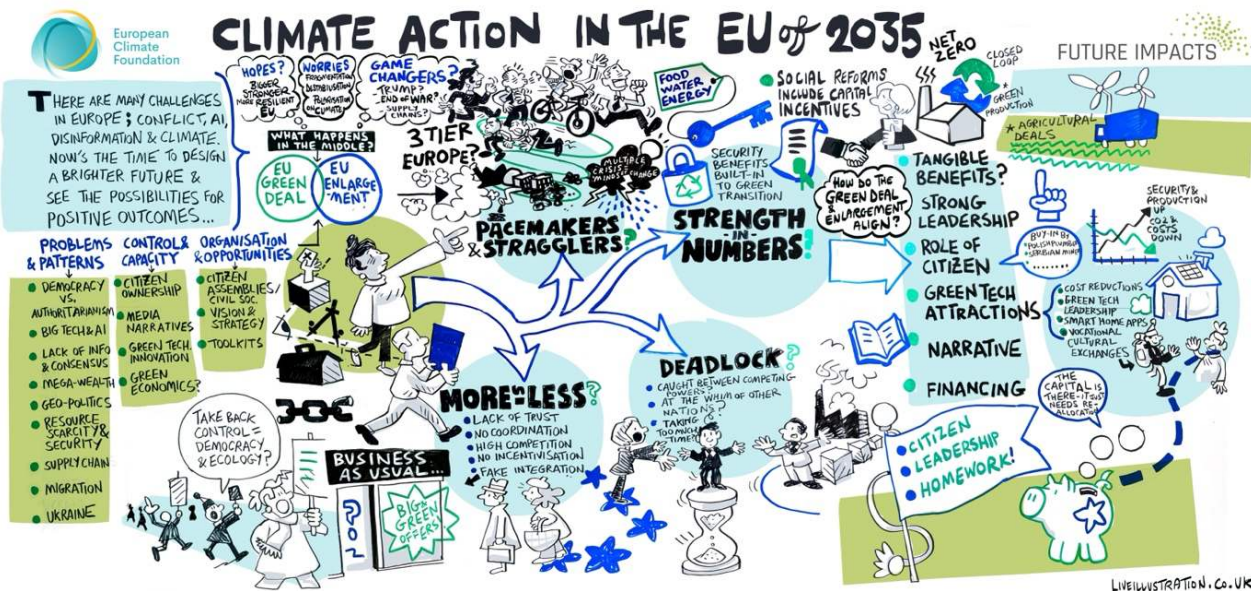
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LIVE VISUALISATION FROM THE SCENARIO BUILDING BLOCKS WORKSHOP, 29 OCTOBER 2024



LIVE VISUALISATION FROM THE SCENARIO VISIONS & NARRATIVES WORKSHOP, 26 NOVEMBER 2024



LIVE VISUALISATION FROM THE IMPLICATIONS & ACTIONS WORKSHOP, 5 MARCH 2025



LIVE VISUALISATION FROM THE ACTIONS & STRESS-TESTING WORKSHOP, 15 APRIL 2025



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¹⁰⁷ To join the group of experts and stakeholders interested in EU Enlargement and Climate Action, register here: <https://europeanclimate.org/eu-enlargement-climate-action/>



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