



Think 2030

Science-policy
solutions for a more
sustainable Europe

21.04.2026 Session brief

High-Level Policy Panel - Delivering Europe's Environmental Leadership through Competitiveness, Resilience and Strategic Autonomy

Paper realised with the collaboration of:



CELEBRATING 50 YEARS

WAVESTONE



Under the auspices of:



The [Think2030 Cyprus Conference – IEEP 50th Anniversary](#), held on 21 April 2026, brought together European decision-makers, businesses, policy experts and civil society leaders to explore how Europe can deliver on its climate, biodiversity and zero-pollution ambitions while ensuring strategic autonomy in key sectors such as food systems, water management, energy and industrial production.

These discussions took place as [the Institute for European Environmental Policy \(IEEP\)](#) marks its 50th anniversary as the Brussels-based think tank specialised in EU environmental policy. For five decades, IEEP has supported evidence-based and impact-driven policymaking, helping to shape Europe's environmental acquis and its global leadership in sustainability.

This brief summarizes the key takeaways from the titled "High-Level Policy Panel - Delivering Europe's Environmental Leadership through Competitiveness, Resilience and Strategic Autonomy" organised during the Think2030 Conference.

Lead: Institute for European Environmental Policy (IEEP)

Moderator: Philippa Nuttall, Editor of Sustainable Views at Financial Times

Speakers:

- Teresa Ribera, Executive Vice-President of the European Commission for a Clean, Just and Competitive Transition.
- Eva Yiasemidou, Presidency Coordinator, Cyprus Presidency of the Council of the EU.
- Janez Potočnik, Co-Chair of the International Resource Panel & Partner at Systemiq.
- Delphine Moralis, CEO of Philea-Philanthropy Europe Association.
- Cédric Baecher, Partner & Sustainability coleader at Wavestone.
- Ester Asin, Director of the WWF European Policy Office.

Key highlights

- **Environmental policy is now a competitiveness and security agenda.**

Climate and environmental policy can no longer be treated as a standalone domain. Resilience, strategic autonomy, industrial competitiveness, and economic security are increasingly dependent on climate resilience, renewable energy generation and sustainable resource use.

- **Sustainability must be treated as a value creation agenda, not a compliance obligation**

Beyond traditional performance metrics, companies are increasingly being judged on their robustness: their capacity to continue operating, adapt, and recover in the face of resource scarcity, geopolitical instability, climate impacts, and technological disruption. The most successful organisations increasingly view sustainability as a driver of strategic differentiation and business performance.

- **The European Green Deal provides direction and predictability**

The European Green Deal is a long-term strategic framework that provides stability and clarity for businesses and investors. Regulatory complexity is a challenge that merits careful attention but remains less damaging to Europe's competitiveness than deregulation and policy fragmentation generating uncertainty and higher costs while hindering investments.

- **Europe's challenge is implementation, not ambition. Europe's environmental leadership will depend on delivery**

The EU already has a strong strategic direction on climate and sustainability. The key challenge now is ensuring implementation, scaling solutions, addressing identified barriers, and translating long-term objectives into operational delivery across sectors and value chains. Europe's credibility now depends less on setting new ambitions and more on demonstrating effective implementation, coordination, and execution in a rapidly changing geopolitical environment.

- **Circular economy is central to Europe's resilience and reducing material dependency requires addressing overall resource consumption**

Reducing dependency on raw materials while improving resource efficiency and productivity emerged as major priorities. Advancing circular economy policies was framed not only as an environmental necessity, but also as essential for industrial resilience, supply chain security, and strategic autonomy. Long-term resilience will also depend on reducing Europe's material footprint. Clear targets and governance frameworks can help guide this transition.

- **Water management is becoming a strategic priority**

Water management and resilience is a flagship policy area, reflecting growing pressures on Europe's water systems, with a clear need for integrated governance, nature-based solutions, and cross-sectoral coordination linking legislation, finance, and implementation.

- **Social resilience and democratic legitimacy matter**

Resilience cannot be reduced to technological or economic approaches. Social cohesion, inequality, access to knowledge, and democratic participation were identified as critical dimensions of Europe's ability to manage long-term transitions and absorb future shocks.

- **Sustainability, digitalisation and AI are increasingly interconnected**

There are growing links between environmental, industrial, and digital transformation. Artificial intelligence remains both a major accelerator of sustainability transitions and a source of new governance and resource challenges requiring integrated policymaking.

Summary of policy session

Europe is entering a period in which climate change, resource scarcity, geopolitical instability, industrial competition, and social pressures are no longer separate policy challenges but interconnected dimensions of a broader systemic transformation. In this context, environmental policy is increasingly becoming a central pillar of economic resilience, industrial strategy, competitiveness, and strategic autonomy.

Against this scenario, the European Green Deal and related environmental policies are not positioned as constraints on economic growth, but as the framework through which Europe can strengthen long-term prosperity, reduce strategic dependencies, and reinforce resilience against future shocks. Climate adaptation, sustainable resource management, circular economy and industrial transformation are not peripheral environmental concerns but rather defining conditions for Europe's economic and geopolitical stability.

At the same time, the current phase of the transition is no longer primarily about defining ambition. Europe already possesses a broad strategic direction through the European Green Deal, climate neutrality objectives, circular economy frameworks, and adaptation strategies. The challenge now lies in implementation, delivery, and execution at sufficient speed and scale.

Environmental policy as a strategic economic framework

The panel reinforced the idea that environmental sustainability and economic competitiveness are intertwined. The costs associated with climate impacts, biodiversity degradation, pollution, water stress, and resource dependency are structural economic liabilities that undermine industrial stability, public finances, supply chain security, and social cohesion.

In this context, resilience is emerging as a defining organising principle of European policymaking. Reducing vulnerabilities to external shocks — including energy disruptions, raw material dependencies, geopolitical tensions, and climate impacts — requires embedding sustainability directly into industrial, economic, and financial systems. Beyond performance, companies shall increasingly focus on robustness, the capacity to operate and adapt in a context of resource scarcity, geopolitical instability, and an accelerating technological change.

The European Green Deal thus functions as a strategic economic framework providing long-term direction and predictability for investment and industrial transformation. Stable and coherent policy frameworks create the certainty necessary for businesses, investors, and public authorities to plan long-term transitions. Regulatory instability and policy fragmentation risk undermining Europe's competitiveness more than environmental ambition itself. Panel participants also warned that limiting sustainability to compliance remains one of the most significant strategic risks for European companies, as it disconnects environmental action from value creation and resilience.

The Cyprus Presidency's priorities on water resilience, climate mitigation, circular economy, and the bioeconomy reflect this broader strategic shift. Water resilience in particular is

becoming a central economic and security issue as climate pressures intensify across Europe. Addressing these risks requires integrated governance approaches combining regulation, financing, technological innovation, infrastructure planning, and nature-based solutions.

Circular economy and strategic autonomy

Resource dependency is increasingly recognised as both an economic and geopolitical vulnerability. Europe's current model of material consumption exposes industries and supply chains to growing external risks, including price volatility, resource scarcity, and geopolitical disruption. Improving circularity alone will not be sufficient without addressing the scale of Europe's overall material consumption. Reducing material footprints and improving resource productivity are increasingly seen as necessary conditions for achieving long-term environmental sustainability, strategic autonomy, and economic resilience.

Advancing circular economy policies is therefore essential not only for reducing environmental impacts, but also for strengthening industrial resilience and strategic autonomy. Reuse, recovery, recycling, and resource efficiency can reduce dependence on virgin materials, stabilise industrial inputs, and improve long-term economic security.

The transition toward circularity also requires stronger governance and investment frameworks capable of accelerating systemic change across value chains and industrial ecosystems. Achieving this transition may also require clearer objectives and indicators to guide policymaking and investment decisions. In this regard, it is important to develop measurable targets for resource use and material footprint reduction to complement existing climate and environmental objectives and provide greater strategic direction for businesses and public authorities. Market incentives, public procurement, financing tools, industrial policy instruments, and regulatory coherence all play a critical role in enabling the scale of transformation required.

At the same time, circularity is increasingly becoming a competitiveness strategy. More efficient use of materials and resources can improve productivity, reduce exposure to external shocks, strengthen supply chain resilience, and support industrial innovation.

Implementation and execution as the defining challenge

The defining challenge for the next phase of Europe's transition is implementation capacity. Ambition alone is no longer sufficient. The effectiveness of European environmental leadership will increasingly depend on the ability to operationalise policy frameworks, scale solutions, and deliver measurable outcomes across sectors and governance levels.

This requires moving beyond fragmented and siloed policymaking structures. Climate, industrial, economic, digital, trade, and social policies are increasingly interconnected and must be governed accordingly. Sustainability transitions are not solely technological transformations; they are also organisational, financial, and societal transitions requiring coordination across institutions, businesses, labour markets, and public authorities. Success

will increasingly depend on people, skills development, leadership capabilities, and the ability to build agile organisations capable of adapting continuously to changing environmental, economic, and technological conditions.

Execution capability is therefore becoming a key determinant of competitiveness. The capacity to deploy technologies, redesign value chains, integrate sustainability into core business models, and align investment with long-term resilience objectives will increasingly shape Europe's economic performance. As highlighted during the discussion, "From a business perspective, the key differentiator is no longer strategy but execution capability — the ability to embed sustainability into core operations, value chains, and decision-making processes."

Artificial intelligence and digital technologies also form part of this transition dynamic. While digitalisation can accelerate efficiency gains, industrial optimisation, and climate solutions, it also introduces new governance challenges related to resource use, energy demand, infrastructure, and social impacts. Greater alignment between sustainability, industrial, and digital policies is therefore becoming necessary. As noted during the panel, AI will act both as an accelerator of sustainability solutions and as a multiplier of pressures on energy, water and skills — making integrated governance essential.

Governance, expertise and stakeholder ecosystems

Delivering Europe's transition requires stronger governance ecosystems capable of supporting evidence-based policymaking, implementation, and long-term strategic coordination.

Think tanks, research institutions, civil society organisations, businesses, and philanthropy actors all contribute to strengthening Europe's policy capacity through technical expertise, foresight, innovation, stakeholder engagement, and public debate. Independent expertise and evidence-based analysis remain essential in managing increasingly complex and interconnected transition challenges.

At the same time, stronger cooperation across sectors and institutions is becoming critical. Effective implementation depends not only on regulation, but also on coordination between policymakers, businesses, financial actors, local authorities, and civil society organisations.

Philanthropy can play an important complementary role by supporting experimentation, long-term thinking, innovation, and collaboration beyond short political cycles. Civil society organisations also remain essential for democratic accountability, public participation, and maintaining legitimacy throughout the transition process.

Social resilience and legitimacy

Long-term resilience depends not only on economic and industrial performance, but also on social cohesion and democratic legitimacy. Environmental transitions that fail to address inequality, vulnerability, and distributional impacts risk generating political resistance, social fragmentation, and declining public trust.

Session Paper - Delivering Europe's Environmental Leadership through Competitiveness, Resilience and Strategic Autonomy

The transition therefore requires governance approaches capable of combining competitiveness and resilience with fairness and inclusion. Social policy, labour market adaptation, skills development, and access to opportunity increasingly form part of Europe's resilience agenda.

Managing systemic transformation in a period of geopolitical instability and climate disruption requires maintaining public legitimacy and democratic support. Resilience is therefore not solely a technical or economic objective, but also a societal and political one.

Conclusion

Europe's environmental leadership increasingly depends on its ability to demonstrate that sustainability, competitiveness, resilience, and strategic autonomy are mutually reinforcing objectives rather than competing priorities.

The transition underway is no longer solely an environmental project. It is becoming a broader transformation of Europe's economic model, industrial systems, governance structures, and geopolitical positioning. In this context, weakening environmental ambition would not strengthen Europe's competitiveness or security; it would deepen long-term vulnerabilities and strategic dependencies.

Europe's credibility will increasingly be measured by its capacity to turn environmental transition into a durable source of economic resilience, industrial strength, and democratic stability. Achieving this objective will require more than technological innovation and regulatory frameworks. It will depend equally on execution capability, workforce skills, organisational agility, and the ability of businesses and institutions to build robustness in an increasingly volatile operating environment.

The next phase of European leadership will therefore depend less on setting new ambitions and more on demonstrating implementation capacity, policy coherence, and the ability to deliver systemic transformation at scale through the following policy priorities.

- Environmental sustainability should be fully integrated into Europe's economic, industrial, and security strategies.
- Stable, coherent, and predictable policy frameworks are essential to support investment, industrial transformation, and long-term competitiveness.
- Circular economy policies should be accelerated to reduce strategic dependencies, strengthen industrial resilience, and support a reduction in Europe's overall material footprint. Resource productivity and material footprint reduction should be supported through clear objectives, monitoring frameworks, and policy instruments capable of driving systemic change across value chains.
- Water resilience, climate adaptation, and preparedness must become central components of EU governance and investment strategies.
- Implementation, delivery, and execution capacity should become primary priorities across European policymaking.
- Governance systems should move beyond siloed approaches and strengthen coordination across environmental, industrial, digital, economic, and social policies.
- Stronger cooperation between EU institutions, businesses, think tanks, philanthropy organisations, and civil society actors is necessary to support evidence-based policymaking and implementation.

- Social cohesion, democratic participation, and fairness must remain central to Europe's transition strategy to ensure long-term legitimacy and resilience.

About Think2030

Launched by IEEP and its partners in 2018, Think2030 is an evidence-based, non-partisan platform of leading policy experts from European think tanks, civil society, the private sector and local authorities.

By focusing on producing relevant, timely and concrete policy recommendations, Think2030's key objective is to identify science-policy solutions for a more sustainable Europe.

think2030.eu

#Think2030

For more information on this paper please contact:

Mattia Bonfanti, Head of Strategic Partnerships,
Institute for European environmental policy (IEEP)
mbonfanti@ieep.eu

