



**Think
2030**

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sustainable Europe

21.04.2026 Session brief

From risk to resilience in an age of systemic risk and polycrisis

A session brief unpacking current perception of resilience, the systemic nature of risk, and implications for policymakers.

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From risk to resilience in an age of systemic risk and polycrisis

The [Think2030 Conference Cyprus – 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 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.

As part of the Think2030 Dialogue, [the Institute for European Environmental Policy \(IEEP\)](#) organised a session titled "From risk to resilience in an age of systemic risk and polycrisis" and this session brief summarises the key takeaways from this session.

Lead: Institute for European Environmental Policy (IEEP)

Moderator: **Louis Durrant**

Speakers:

- **Séverine Hermand**: Senior Project Leader - Climate Adaptation and Climate Resilience, SWECO
- **Luc Bas**: Director, Belgium Climate Risk Assessment Centre (CERAC)
- **Christoph Heinrich**: Executive Director, Ecologic Institute
- **Martin Špolc**: Head of Unit, DG CLIMA
- **Lorenzo Benini**: Sustainability transitions expert & Team Coordinator - European Environment Agency (EEA)

Key highlights

- **Resilience has no single fixed definition**
A unified definition of resilience is an important common denominator, but more importantly is the need for flexibility in its implementation across scales.
- **Resilience is about trade-offs**
Policymakers must make strategic choices on where to focus resources and determine what level of risk is acceptable, rather than attempting to address everything simultaneously.
- **Climate risk is not uncertain, it is a certainty**
Climate risk is increasingly understood as highly certain, with projected global warming of ~2.8–3.3°C, reinforcing the need to plan for trajectories rather than hypothetical scenarios.
- **Shift perspectives to resilience and preparedness by design**
There must be a shift toward “resilience and preparedness by design”, embedding future climate conditions into policy across all sectors from the outset.
- **Resilience is systemic and transformation-oriented**
Resilience is increasingly understood as “bouncing forward”, requiring transformation of interconnected systems (energy, food, infrastructure, finance, health), not just returning to the status quo.
- **Critical upcoming policy frameworks**
The forthcoming European Climate Resilience and Risk Management Integrated Framework is expected to provide a shared reference trajectory, common risk language, and clearer coordination tools.
- **Social resilience is critical but under-addressed**
Social resilience is under-integrated, despite clear evidence that vulnerability and inequality shape exposure and impacts.
- **Persistent implementation gaps and low urgency**
Despite strong evidence, climate risks are not operationalised, partly due to lower perceived urgency than other threats.
- **Maladaptation?**
Maladaptation is recognised in theory but not yet embedded in practice, requiring stronger foresight and stress-testing across multiple futures.

Summary of the policy session

Europe is facing a polycrisis in which economic, technological, environmental, geopolitical, and social risks interact with accelerating climate change to produce cascading and compounding systemic effects. In this context, concepts such as resilience, preparedness, competitiveness, and security are priorities in the [EU 2026/2027 Work Programme](#). As well as reflected in initiatives such as the [EU Preparedness Union Strategy](#), the [Climate Adaptation strategy](#), and critically the [Integrated framework for European climate resilience and risk management](#) (expected later in 2026) all of which aim to embed resilience and preparedness “by design.”. This session brief summarises the key discussions from the panel at [IEEP Think2030 conference](#) on 21st April 2026 within this wider policy context. The session brief explores resilience through the lens of systemic climate risk and emerging EU governance frameworks, highlighting the need to move from reactive adaptation toward transformative resilience that is embedded across all policy domains.

The Challenge: Systemic risk in a polycrisis context

Climate risks are not contained within administrative or sectoral boundaries. They interact through shared drivers, vulnerabilities, and dependencies, generating cascading and compounding effects across systems. This systemic nature creates profound challenges for governance structures that remain siloed. Importantly, the panel stressed that climate risk is increasingly understood not as uncertain but as certain in their trajectory. Impacts are already materialising and are expected to intensify over time under projected warming pathways. However, governance systems and policy remain poorly equipped to manage cross-border and cross-sectoral risks. At present, responses remain predominantly reactive and recovery-oriented rather than preventive and transformative, with limited coordination across EU Member States despite the inherently transboundary nature of climate impacts.

Defining resilience to address systemic risk

While resilience has a well-established academic foundation in socio-ecological systems thinking there is currently no consensus around an operational definition that can be universally applied across sectors. Resilience involves trade-offs and choices: not all risks can be addressed simultaneously, requiring prioritisation based on time horizons, vulnerability, and acceptable levels of risk (as a function of exposure, sensitivity, and preparedness). Building on this, the panel distinguished between traditional “bouncing back” approaches and a necessary shift toward “bouncing forward,” where resilience involves not only mitigation, adaption to absorb shocks but transforming the unsustainable pathways that are driving that vulnerability. In this context, resilience can be understood as:

The capacity of interconnected social, economic, and environmental systems to anticipate, absorb, and adapt to systemic and cascading risks, while transforming the structures that generate vulnerability and maintaining essential functions.

Key gaps in current policy approaches

A central challenge identified in the panel is fragmented governance, with limited coordination between EU member states in addressing shared and cross-border risks. Member states often lack structured mechanisms to jointly address long-term systemic risks despite interdependencies. This is compounded by low interaction across policy domains, particularly energy, agriculture, finance, biodiversity and infrastructure, and the absence of a shared risk language or common framework for coordinating action. The panel also emphasised a persistent implementation gap: while extensive scientific knowledge, modelling, and risk assessments exist (including [EUCRA](#)), translating this evidence into operational decision-making remains difficult. Finally, current resilience strategies insufficiently integrate social vulnerability, despite clear evidence that risks are unevenly distributed. Failure to address inequality and social cohesion risks exacerbating future disruption and undermining resilience.

A new paradigm: Resilience and preparedness by design

Resilience and preparedness by design shifts the focus toward ex-ante risk management by embedding resilience and preparedness into all policies and decisions from the outset. This means ensuring that “any decision embeds the future climate conditions already today,” rather than responding after impacts occur. The discussion highlighted a shift away from adaptation as a reactive concept toward resilience as a proactive and forward-looking process, grounded in the recognition that climate change follows a relatively certain trajectory (with reference to ~2.8–3.3°C warming pathways). Importantly, resilience must extend beyond environmental policy and be mainstreamed across all sectors, including energy, agriculture, finance, infrastructure, and defence. This reflects the systemic nature of risk in a polycrisis context and aligns with the emerging “preparedness union” logic of cross-domain risk integration. Delivering this paradigm requires anticipatory governance, long-term planning beyond political cycles, and stronger alignment between public and private decision-making. It also requires clearer accountability structures, including the identification of “risk owners” responsible for ensuring follow-up and implementation.

An integrated climate resilience and risk framework

The anticipated [Integrated framework for European climate resilience and risk management](#) is a key policy package that will help to address fragmentation and strengthen coordination across member states. As highlighted in the discussion, a key limitation today is the lack of shared understanding of long-term risks across countries with interconnected vulnerabilities. The proposed framework would therefore establish a shared reference climate trajectory, providing a common basis for risk

assessment and decision-making across Europe. This would help establish a common 'language' to operationalise resilience, enabling both public and private actors to align their decisions with a consistent understanding of future climate conditions. Importantly, the framework is expected to be operational, supported by legislative elements and implementation mechanisms, including clearer assignment of "risk ownership" and follow-up responsibilities. It would also be complemented by practical tools, such as a proposed 'Climate Hazard Viewer' a digital tool designed to visualise future climate risks across Europe and show how impacts vary spatially under a shared climate trajectory. Alongside this, a potential 'Climate Navigator-style' decision-support interface was proposed to help policymakers, businesses, and other stakeholders navigate complex climate risk information and translate it into practical planning and investment decisions. These tools are intended to work within a broader ecosystem of climate risk platforms, supported by scenario-based modelling and sector-specific decision support systems, ensuring that shared climate data becomes usable across different governance levels.

Policy Priorities

The panel identified several key priorities to strengthen resilience in the face of systemic and cascading risks.

- First, future risk must be embedded in all decision-making, ensuring that policies, investments, and infrastructure systematically account for long-term climate and systemic risks. This reflects the shift toward "resilience and preparedness by design," where future conditions are integrated ex-ante rather than addressed retroactively.
- Second, stronger cross-sector and cross-border governance is required, as current coordination between member states remains limited despite the transboundary nature of risk.
- Third, resilience in policy must facilitate a shift from maintaining existing systems toward transforming them, addressing the underlying structures that generate vulnerability, aligning with the idea of "bouncing forward".
- Fourth, risk assessment approaches must better capture cascading and compounding risks, reflecting the interconnected nature of climate, ecological, and socio-economic systems.
- Fifth, the science–policy–practice gap must be addressed by improving how data and risk assessments are translated into actionable policy guidance.

- Sixth, social resilience must be more explicitly integrated, ensuring that inequality, vulnerability, and social cohesion are addressed to avoid disproportionate impacts and policy solutions can be tailored.
- Finally, opportunities to enhance transformative governance must be strengthened, including scenario planning, iterative learning, and institutional capacity for experimentation under perceived uncertainty.

Conclusion

Resilience in the context of systemic risk is not about preserving the status quo, but about preparing for increasingly certain disruptions while transforming the systems that generate vulnerability. As emphasised in the panel, this requires a shift from reactive to anticipatory governance, where future risks are embedded in present-day decisions. Achieving this transformation requires more connected and flexible governance structures and the integration of resilience across all policy domains, reflecting the cross-sectoral and cross-border nature of systemic risk. Without such a shift, Europe risks remaining insufficiently prepared for the accelerating and connected impacts of climate change and the broader dynamics of the polycrisis.

Further reading:

European Environmental Agency - [European Climate Risk Assessment \(EUCRA\)](#). Highlights 36 climate risks threatening Europe, many already critical and escalating toward catastrophe without urgent action, while providing a foundation for strategic policymaking.

IEEP & Ecologic Institute - [Systemic and complex risk governance for Europe's preparedness and sustainability](#). Aims to enhance our understanding of environmental risk drivers and transformative governance responses in Europe.

Centre for Climate Change Risk Analysis, Belgium - [Belgian Climate Risk Assessment \(BCRA\)](#). A national scale climate risk assessment that outlines 28 risks across five sectors, flagging urgent threats (heat, flooding, zoonoses, food) that could erode social cohesion and increase security risks if unaddressed.

SWECO – [Urban Insight cross boarder knowledge initiative 'Strategic urban resilience planning](#). Explores resilient societies through expert reports, analyses, and events, sharing solutions and insights to embed resilience in the built environment.

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.

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